

Indigenous Knowledge Goes to School *Potentials and Perils of Community Education in the Western Sahel*

For indigenous knowledge to have significant bearing on the future of West African societies, it must gain some currency in schools, the social institution officially chartered to organize learning, certify knowledge and train the next generation of citizens. And yet across the region education has been the sector least likely to embrace local knowledge or to regard indigenous science as a legitimate source of inspiration. Exceptions to the rule have mostly occurred in nonformal education and literacy programs, which are more frequently conducted in African languages and focused on local community needs.

New Ways of Schooling

Changes that have taken place throughout West Africa in the situation of formal primary education over the last twenty years, however, have begun to breach the wall that separated schooling and local society. They are at the same time creating a space for new curricula. Prime examples:

- Universal primary education remains an elusive goal. By reducing resources available for education and restricting public sector employment, the structural adjustment policies applied to West African countries beginning in the 1980s put a dent both in popular motivation for schooling and the capacity of the State to provide it. Gross enrollment ratios at the primary level, which averaged under 30% for Sahelian countries in 1980, progressed very little over the ensuing decade –nega-

tive growth in Mali, (-3%), barely 4% in Niger, and between 1% and 2% a year in Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Senegal. Coverage shrank in most rural areas.

- Governments have begun turning to alternate formulas and supply mechanisms to reverse enrollment trends, achieve coverage and/or increase relevance. These include community schools, increased support for nonformal education, and a variety of experimental programs.

- Traditional formal schooling has been subject to increased cultural competition and critique from other models: some centered on “appropriate development,” others on religious instruction, adult education approaches or African-language curricula. Reform of primary and secondary schooling is nearly everywhere on the agenda.

- Civil society is playing an enhanced role in educational supply. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), private foundations and local associations are increasingly authorized and encour-

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aged to create their own schools. Government is less and less concerned with exercising monopoly rights in the area of education, though it conserves key regulatory functions.

- The formal educational system itself is being decentralized to an unaccustomed degree, with greater discretionary powers being placed in the hands of regional inspectors and local educational councils.

It is this diversification in provision and search for cultural identity that has opened the door, however hesitantly, to new curricula and new sources of inspiration and has created new opportunities for the recognition of indigenous knowledge.

A History of Experimentation

In one sense, of course, the search for alternate forms of schooling is not new to West Africa. In fact, the very notion of “indigenous curricula” is heavily tainted with remembrances from colonial times, when terms like these were code words for distinguishing the kind of education judged appropriate

for rural or “native” populations from the kind reserved for an urban elite. Excess demand for formal schooling, however, or its perceived shortcomings led to a variety of alternative educational delivery models in post-independence Africa. The Harambee movement in Kenya is a prime example of the former: schools created by communities in the absence of State provision, though subsequently taken over by the government in many cases. The Serowe Brigades in Botswana and “*Enseignement moyen pratique*” in Senegal exemplify the latter: attempts to make school curricula relevant to local development by infusions of appropriate technology training, practical business experience and local cultural reference.

There are, though, some important quantitative and qualitative differences between the varied experiments in alternative schooling or community sponsorship launched over the early decades of West African independence and the situation obtaining today. In quantitative terms, alternative and community-based schooling has become, for the first time, a significant slice of the overall national system in a number of countries like Mali, Senegal and Burkina Faso. Such efforts were traditionally “pilot projects,” destined — it seemed — never to expand beyond their select locations. They have broken out of this enclosure to an increasing degree, accounting presently for nearly a quarter of all elementary schools in rural Mali and are projected to total 20 percent of those in Senegal in the next few years. Qualitatively, alternative education is no longer necessarily second class, though issues of equivalency with traditional diplomas and promotion schemes (discussed below) remain acute. The increasing legitimacy of instruction in African languages, gradual shifts in power toward local actors under slowly decentralizing regimes and changes in the employment prospects of school leavers have all eroded the hegemony of the single standard Western curriculum and opened space for different and complementary approaches.

The search for alternatives has taken a variety of forms — State-sponsored community schools; NGO-sponsored community schools; State-sponsored pilot or reform schools (generally traditional elementary schools selected to adopt one or more of the innovative methods of community schooling and to apply it within a formal educational framework); increased interest in Koranic schooling or hybrid Islamic-Western forms; and private or “wildcat” schools started by individuals or entrepreneurs, particularly in urban areas.

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The Community Involvement Model

In the Sahel as elsewhere around the African continent, community schools are premised on the notion of greater parental and community involvement in the governance and delivery of education. Local “ownership” of schooling is developed and expressed in several ways:

- *Financial participation:* Contributions to the construction and equipment of classes, to school operating expenses and to teacher stipends.
- *Administrative participation:* Involvement in decision-making concerning school administration and regulations.
- *Curricular participation:* An increased role for parents and community members in choosing and specifying curricula, in teaching classes and in assessing student learning.

Curricular participation is evidently the variety of community input of greatest relevance to the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in schooling, though financial and administrative participation may be necessary to make it effective. Among the measures proposed for achieving it in the case of outside-sponsored community schools are use of the local languages for instruction; adoption of local artisans as resources for instruction, either through their actual teaching of courses or visits by children to their places of work; recording and teaching of local history along with other subject matters; and inclusion of locally-inspired religious or moral education.

In addition, some of the NGOs and civil society institutions involved in sponsoring community schools are animated by an explicit desire to create new curricula more appropriate to the challenges of local development in 21st century Africa. The *Institut d'Education Populaire* in Kati, Mali, for example, has labored long and hard on the elaboration of an elementary school “Ciwara” program (the Bambara word for the antelope-head totem symbolic of Malian identity) focusing on the acquisition of “leadership” skills – in short, young people’s ability to play a decisive role in the development of their own communities.

In both Senegal and Mali, moreover, the civil society partners involved in support for community schools tend to be associations with parallel involvements in other sectors of local development, like natural resource management, health and agriculture. CEWIGAP in northern Mali (“Community Education, Water and Income Generating Activities”) and organi-

zations like Tostan and ANAFA in the Djourbel region of Senegal, for example, combine their school sponsorship with a variety of other projects. This cross-breeding creates increased opportunities for introducing local development topics into the curriculum of elementary and secondary schooling, along with local sources of related knowledge.

Difficulties of Implementation

Unfortunately, a great deal is still more said than done in this realm. The indigenous knowledge elements in the community school model tend to be those least frequently implemented, for they require the most imagination and energy, not to say willingness to break with existing norms. In fact, there is a general tendency for schools of this sort to become simply low-cost if not low-quality replicas of existing primary schooling, due principally to the resource constraints that they face.

- *Human resource constraints:* Teachers generally have minimal training and may have limited previous education. In some models, literate villagers or parents are selected by the community itself to undergo a few days of training; in another, volunteers paid by donated funds are recruited from among unemployed school leavers and assigned to villages.

- *Financial constraints:* Community education models are designed to be inexpensive, a solution to the prohibitive costs of generalizing the existing school infrastructure. They count, to the extent possible, on local materials and funds, and these are often scarce. Areas where communities are expected to pay teachers often experience particular problems.

- *Technical constraints:* Building an alternative curriculum takes experience and insight that are often in short supply. The biggest challenge is reconciling local content with a program of studies that enables some, at least, to continue to further formal education should they desire to do so. This synthesis, called “pédagogie convergente” in Mali, depends to a great extent on finding a way to teach the international language used in secondary and higher education from a basis of literacy in the local or national language, and doing so with the assistance of teaching personnel who themselves often do not have a mastery of the former. The effort typically takes such energy that little is left for developing the indigenous knowledge inputs into the curriculum.

▪ *Political constraints:* The success of community schools is partly contingent on the possibility of building institutional bridges to subsequent formal schooling, what are called “passerelles” in the Franchophone countries. This terrain tends to be heavily guarded by the proponents (and products) of traditional primary and secondary education. Ironically, as provision of alternate education is expanded and delegated to local associations and NGOs, there is often increased stasis on this political front, because local associations feel less “empowered” to challenge the existing educational constabulary on this terrain than might ministerial representatives or large international organizations.

Concerns for Quality

“Quality” and “equity” are keywords in the debate about the future of community schools in Sahelian West Africa. The former invokes the criticism most often leveled at the movement: education is made available to new communities and students, but *what* education? Can poorly supervised teachers who are unable to handle the lingua franca of the formal system and schools without textbooks or amenities offer children anything worth having? And doesn’t this sort of provision pose as much of an equity problem as it resolves — by creating a two-tiered system, where the rural and urban poor get only the caricature of a “real education”?

These days proponents of community schools are very aware of the issue, and internal evaluations within organizations sponsoring schools tend to focus increasingly on quality concerns. At the same time, proponents typically have two rejoinders that at least serve to broaden the debate. First, what exactly is meant by “quality”? Do community involvement, literacy in the local language, incorporation of cultural contents and direct relationship to development concerns in other sectors figure in the definition, or are standardized test scores and passage rates to secondary school the only criteria? Second, in respect to equity, what are the tradeoffs between local gender equity and increased parity between city and countryside? Community schools do at least have on av-

erage a distinctly better record of female participation than their formal sector counterparts.

Education by all?

Both the community school movement and the attempt to give indigenous knowledge a place in local schooling therefore face formidable obstacles. Community schools nonetheless constitute one of the most massive opportunities for greater recognition of indigenous knowledge to have arisen so far in Sahelian West Africa and already have several major accomplishments to their credit. As evaluation surveys in both Senegal and Mali reveal, they are generally well appreciated by consumers — that is, parents and local authorities — principally because of their use of African languages and their potential congruence with local culture.

The recent move toward NGO and local association sponsorship has also meant a closer link with other realms of local development where indigenous knowledge is both needed and used. And the movement constitutes a sizeable wedge for reform of schooling in general — as witness the number of times that its example has been invoked in the “Estates General” (or national assemblies on education) convoked by Sahelian countries in recent years to address issues of educational reform. Community education in fact embodies one potential form of “Education *BY* All,” a strategy” critically needed to complement increasing emphasis on “Education FOR All” — and it represents a venue within which indigenous knowledge might come into its own.

At the same time, the perils and potentials of the community school movement illustrate the kinds of policy changes that will be required to achieve the systematic promotion of indigenous knowledge in contemporary West Africa.

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