

# Learning on the streets of Dakar

In the heart of Dakar, "school in the service of street children", as it is labeled by its founders, is barely visible from the street. In fact very few passers-by even know of its existence.

The "school in the service of street children" is squeezed in among private houses and stores. Its five-classroom structure, dedicated to underprivileged children, was built only last December, on land donated by the non-governmental organization "Enda Third World". Before that, in the bustling rue Tolbiac where retail shopkeepers from all over the Senegalese capital come to buy their wares, classes were held outdoors on the sidewalk.

"Pupils sat on straw mats, because we had no tables or benches, much less a luxury like an electric lamp. After sundown we were forced to light candles to conduct evening classes," said the Director who described how, in those days, pupils were exposed to the blistering sun and gas fumes from the exhaust pipes of passing cars, their voices often drowned out by the vociferous shouting of drivers and the deafening roar of speeding cars.

The school was in fact bathed in the tumultuous atmosphere of a busy traffic hub from the time it was set up in 1990 until last year when solid walls were finally built and classrooms equipped thanks to gifts from anonymous donors, assistance from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the sale of a wide variety of crafts produced and donated by local artisans. According to the Director, the school's operating budget and indeed survival is ensured by NGOs. A second chance for learning The school now counts 108 pupils from nursery school to about 4th grade, and seven teachers all volunteers, who, "in exchange for their devotion to education," said the Director, "receive only a modest monthly remuneration". The teachers themselves explain that their main objective is to give these children the kind of instruction which will be useful for their further schooling and, in the long run, enable them to earn a decent living. Thus, the teaching staff in this informal institution in the rue Tolbiac prepares pupils for integration with the state school system, by initiating them to reading and writing skills, in order to provide them with a solid base on which to pursue their studies. "At the beginning

of each school year, the staff of the Tolbiac school help parents of school-age children to enrol them in the formal school system", the teachers say, explaining that their school also welcomes children age 7 to 15 who are not enrolled. These are generally orphans, children abandoned by their parents or in difficult circumstances who were unable to enter school at the proper age, and are getting instruction close to what they would have received in the formal school system. This is the case for Ousmane Sy, 17, who has been attending school in the rue Tolbiac for the last three years. Speaking in his father's shoe repair shop where he can now help with the business, he says, "I write down the names of clients and their orders, and can keep the accounts whereas, two years ago, I couldn't even write my name." Realizing children's dreams Every Friday, after high prayers, the talibes, students attending the Koranic school in Dakar and its suburbs such as Pikine and Guediawaye, go to the rue Tolbiac to learn French (the official language of Senegal) and notions of hygiene. The school also gives free literacy



classes in local languages to young boys who were unable to attend French-language schools and girls working as domestic servants.

And, for those who seek additional instruction, the school offers courses in English, Arab literature and Wolof. Absa Diallo is not a maid. She has a stall in the central-Dakar market. At 25, she could barely write her name. "Now, I no longer

need to ask for help to run my business," she said. "Over the last six months, in fact, I have started to expand my activities within an association I set up last year with colleague friends in the market". The Director, who hopes that the school will soon be recognized on the level of any other institution under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, has only one aim: "to help our children realize their dreams and to fight illiteracy."

## Kenya makes great strides in early childhood education

Nation Newspapers, Nairobi, Kenya Although Kenya's efforts towards achieving education for all by the year 2000 may not be realized, there is every evidence that major strides have been made to boost enrolment and participation levels. One sector that has registered great achievement is early childhood education; a fact attributed to collective efforts by the government, United Nations agencies, local and international non-governmental organisations. According to the permanent secretary in the ministry of education, Mr Wilfred Kimalat, the number of children enrolled in the ECD centres has risen by 32 per cent in the last eight years. Similarly, the number of ECD centres increased from 16,329 in

1990 to 23,977 in 1998 with a corresponding increase in the teaching force. So, while there were only 6,213 pre-school teachers in 1990, to date the number stands at 37,752, out of whom 16,000 are trained.

The improvement in enrolment, though not yet 50 per cent of all eligible pupils as targeted by EFA, is commendable in the region. "The progress that has been achieved in this sub-sector still remains the highest amongst other African countries," says Mr Kimalat, adding that the greatest success has been witnessed in the pre-school teacher training programme.

Basically, the training of pre-school teachers is carried out at regional level by District Centres for Early Childhood Education (DICESEs). The two-year in-service training aims to equip teachers with knowledge and skills that meet the children's intellectual, physical, social, emotional and spiritual needs. The programmes for the DICESEs are developed at the National Centre for Early Childhood Education, which is based at the Kenya Institute of Education in Nairobi. Additionally, there is an Islamic Integrated Education Course, which is a special programme for those who teach in Islamic schools. Started in 1994, the course for "Maalims" (teachers) integrates formal education and Islamic teaching. The teachers eventually teach in the Muslim schools commonly referred to as Madrasas and Dugsis. Other than these, there are several training programmes managed by different organisations like the Kindergarten Headmistresses Association and the Child Developer Programme, among others. Top calibre teachers for the pre-schools are trained at Kenyatta University, the country's leading training institution for educationists, which has been offering a bachelor's degree in early childhood education since 1995. The achievements made in the early education sector are largely attributed to the close partnership that exists between the government, parents, donors and communities. So, whereas the government provides a co-ordination role, the parents and communities are left to make decisions on the kind of programmes they want. And the donors only come in to provide funds and logistical support. The long and short of it is that the

communities claim ownership over the ECD centres, thus they are ready to take responsibility and manage the institutions themselves. They are willing to send their children to the centres, provide some money when required and even provide their labour during the construction of classes. The aim of pre-school education is to socialise children and prepare them for entry into the formal education. According to Mrs Mary Njoroge, the co-ordinator of the ECD programmes in Kenya. "It has been noted that good foundation during the formative period of a child will normally result to increased achievement in primary education." Currently, the Kenyan government is running a multi-dollar ECD project, which is funded by the World Bank at a cost of US\$35.1 million. The five-year project has five components, namely: improved teacher performance; community capacity building and mobilisation; community support grant and transition from pre-school to primary schools. Despite the achievements made so far in early childhood education in Kenya, there are some teething problems that have to be solved. Chief among these is funding. Since the government's overall expenditure on education has been declining in recent years, non-priority areas like early childhood education have had their budgets whittled down by a bigger percentage. Another problem facing the sector is quality of education. Whereas many teachers have been trained so that they are able to offer quality education, there is still a big percentage of untrained staff. Added to the fact that the teachers are generally poorly paid, their performance sometimes falls below expectation. Further, there are disparities in enrolment, especially in terms of regions, with the marginal areas in the northern frontiers of the country registering low participation rates compared to other areas. Overall, Kenya stands out in the region as a success story in regard to early childhood education. If the pace is maintained and enhanced, then the new century will see half of the country's children aged between 0-5 get access to pre-school education.



## Hunger Takes Learning Hostage

Several districts in Kenya are struggling against famine and every day pupils drop out due to hunger.

It was 3 o'clock in the afternoon, but Syombuka Mwema and her sister Veronica had not eaten since morning. They were in school for the morning session but walked out in the afternoon, unable to concentrate as hunger pangs started biting. And they weren't even sure of getting something to eat for dinner. At Thome Primary School in Kitui District, Maria Mutiso nearly missed sitting a national examination, the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE), were it not for the teachers, who contributed money to provide her with meals to sustain her during the exam period. KCPE is taken at the end of the primary school cycle. It determines who will go on to secondary level and ultimately higher education. Kenya's education system is structured into eight years of primary schooling, four of secondary schooling and four at university level. Some tertiary colleges such as teacher training institutions operate on a three-year basis. The cases above abound in Kitui District in Kenya's Eastern Province and threaten to slow down enrolment in schools, thus diminishing all hopes of achieving the education for all goal. Kitui is only one of the twenty-one districts in Kenya faced with famine and every day pupils drop out due to hunger. Other affected districts include Turkana, Mwingi, Mbeere, Maralal, Garissa, Wajir, Kwale, Marsabit, Isiolo, West Pokot, among others. In many of these, head teachers expressed alarm not only over high dropouts but also declining academic standards. Premature close of schools because of poor harvests due to a lack of rain, many families who depend on farming are faced with starvation, and asking children to attend school regularly is expecting too much. In Mwingi District, where some 500 pupils had dropped out of school before the end of the third term, the district education officer, Mr Silvester Shiundu, warned last

October that many of his schools were threatened by premature closure. Although the total number of pupils who have dropped out of school due to famine cannot as yet be ascertained, reports on the spot are chilling. Food is scarce and when available, expensive, with the result that many families can provide only one meal a day. According to some headteachers in Kitui district, other pupils were forced to drop out to take care of their siblings when the parents went in search of food or to look for jobs to supplement the family income. The headteacher of Thome Primary school, Mr Maurice Makau, said this was the case for many of the twenty-one pupils who dropped out from his school to look for employment as herd boys.

Children may also have to miss school to assist in domestic chores such as fetching water which is scarce and often to be found only at long distances from their homes. Although the short rains fell in November, it had been months without real showers. The farms, the livelihood of most people in this area, were bereft of anything. Animals were dying for lack of grass and water. Most water points had dried and people had to squeeze the water from small holes in the sandy river bed.

At Kwa Vonza Primary School, the number of pupils has dropped by about 20 per cent, from 320 in January to 265 by the end of 1999. "If the famine continues as severe as it has been this year," said Mr Daniel Nzilu, the headteacher, "we may not have any pupils next year." Lack of concentration "Some children come to school on an empty stomach and stay the whole day without eating", said Mr Makau. "It is simply pathetic.

Certainly, they cannot concentrate in class, which means they are not likely to do well in the exams. "Expanding enrolment is therefore difficult to impossible. At Thibo Primary School, there were only 7 candidates sitting the exam and the number will probably not increase next year.