Mali: Improving Learning in Public Schools

The overall objective of this Learning and Innovation Credit (2000-2003: US$3.8 million) was to further develop and assess the merits of bilingual education in Mali, in terms of financial and educational sustainability. The project was designed at a time when the education system was facing the following problems: (i) low enrollments, including gender and regional imbalances; (ii) poor learning results in primary schools; (iii) low efficiency in public education; (iv) poor accessibility to education for all children; (vi) proliferation of models for community involvement in schooling; and (vii) central management. To achieve its objective, the approach taken was to introduce a bilingual education model — “pedagogie convergente” — in six languages as the basis for introducing curricular revisions, producing textbooks based on the changed curricula, testing teaching and learning materials, testing student achievement at the end-of-project to determine the model’s efficacy, and building community partnerships to elicit local support for introducing the model at the primary education level.

Impact on the ground

• The main output indicator was that bilingual education was to be successfully introduced in six languages and used in at least 700 schools. At project end, about 1,256 public schools and 800 community schools were using the model, against only 300 at the start of the project. About 150,000 students of which 44 percent were girls were exposed to the model over the three-year period.

• The project helped to introduce systems and procedures to edit, produce, publish, and distribute books in six national languages on the basis of the revised curricula. Intensive 21-day district-level workshops were the primary instrument to achieve this objective. Supplementary funds were made available to finance the reprinting, publishing, production and distribution of books for the first three grades. Financial assistance also came from USAID, GTZ, the Netherlands, and the Inter-Government Agency for Francophone Countries.

• Books in national languages were generally produced locally and, at the basic education level, textbooks were provided free. In all, as of 2002, a total of 547,800 books and 80 titles (63 language titles, 17 mathematics titles) of didactic materials in 11 national languages (6 supported by the project, 5 already in use) had been produced by the workshops referred to earlier.
• Over 5,640 teachers were trained in the use of the *pedagogie convergente* methodology; they also received technical training in developing didactic materials. Trained teachers are now the champions of the new model as the primary approach to teaching.

• Capacity was enhanced in the Ministry of Basic Education (MBE) to: (i) develop multilingual training materials; (ii) organize in-service training; (iii) identify teachers to be trained; and (iv) develop a linguistic map of Mali to serve as a planning tool for deploying teachers.

• In 1999-2000, a communication strategy to gain support from communities and decision-makers was designed and adopted. It was transmitted to 49 sub-regions through 34 regional and sub-regional radio broadcasts. The partnerships built resulted in the institutionalization of School Management Committees (SMCs) in 4 pilot regions (Kayes, Mopti, Timbuktu and Gao), which had the lowest student completion rates, and in the development of school improvement plans.

• Best practices were identified and disseminated by the time the project ended. Informally, best practices (aspects of curriculum development, teacher training strategy, community partnerships in the pilot regions) were also being shared with traditional (non-project) schools.

### Lessons learned

• A LIL can help to test an ongoing reform process, in this case from both the educational and financial perspectives, and help the government assess the pace at which such reform could be implemented.

• Housing the Project Coordination Unit (PCU) in the Ministry of Education helps to foster communication between the implementing agency and the ministry. However, care must be taken to avoid the PCU being burdened with non-project bureaucratic duties.

• Bilingual education in multilingual countries improves school attendance, reduces drop-out rates, and has cumulative advantages for student learning. However, since the initial financial investment is significant, and the benefits not immediately apparent, the government’s continued commitment to an irreversible policy reform regarding bilingual education is essential.

• Introducing bilingual education in a phased manner helps to adjust central and local budgets for education

• Information campaigns should be an integral part of the introduction or wider use of bilingual education to sensitise the public, disseminate the positive results of a bilingual education policy and shore up support for the policy. Parents are perhaps one of the most important links in such campaigns with respect to girls attending school.

• A tested, well-functioning Education Management Information System needs to be put in place to gather the relevant data for analyzing the impact of the use of new teaching and learning methodologies and for providing the government with appropriate data to inform decision-making.

• The Malian experience has demonstrated that this kind of model can lead to increased educational coverage — over time, only four Malian national languages will help to reach over 80 percent of the primary education student population. Also, this leads to improvements in student learning among a significant student population.

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