Chapter 2

Mali, 1992–2003[2]: The First Experiment[*]

Deborah Glassman and Mamadou Millogo

The village of Niamou, Mali, site of a Save the Children community school.

Photo credit: Michael Bisceglie

More than a million unschooled children

In 1962, educational reform in Mali mandated schooling for all children. Yet 30 years later, barely 2,000 primary schools existed for the 12,000 villages in this largely rural country. Only about 500,000 of the 1,533,000 7- to 12-year-olds in the country went to school. The overall enrollment rate of 32 percent, when disaggregated, showed that only 26 percent of school-age girls were in school.[3] Enrollments varied between rural and urban, poor and less poor, and the north and the south. Insufficient numbers of classrooms meant that student-teacher ratios of 100:1 were not (and, indeed, are still not) uncommon.[4]

Save the Children US (SC) came to Mali in 1986 in response to the Malian government's request for urgent relief. A series of droughts in the mid 1970s and '80s had driven large numbers of Dogons from the Bandiagara Cliff and the area around Mopti to Sikasso, a cotton-growing region that also serves as a corridor for migrant labor traveling to Côte d'Ivoire directly to the south. Children were dying in large numbers. In response, SC initiated a child survival program based broadly on the UNICEF GOBI model (Growth Monitoring, Oral Re-Hydration, Breast-Feeding and Immunization).

To manage this program, village committees were created. These, in turn, led to adult literacy programs in a few villages where volunteers and village leaders were trained to read and write their mother tongue so that they could participate in, and manage, the development activities in which SC was engaged: food security, water and sanitation and micro-finance. The centers used a curriculum of health and agriculture as the basis for their training. They were manifestly interesting to children who watched their parents learn to read and write.

The success of the village-managed health and literacy programs coalesced around the need for schooling.

"Though it was nighttime, there were lots of children, especially boys, looking in at these lessons through the windows. The lessons were a curiosity because in most villages there was no school at all."[5] The success of the village-managed, NGO-sponsored health and literacy programs coalesced and converged around the need for schooling for children in the rural villages of southern Mali.

Launching community schools in Sikasso

In the Sikasso region, where infrastructure was generally poor, enrollment rates were particularly low. In 1991, the gross enrollment rate in Kolondieba district, where SC built its first community schools, was around 14 percent—8.5 percent for girls.[6] Schooling in the district was concentrated in urban areas: of the 29 primary schools serving children in 207 villages, 24 were located in five administrative centers.[7] The government provided virtually no education for village children.

The SC school program in Mali was inaugurated in response to a concatenation of international, national, and local events. In 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand, the international community had designated Education for All as a goal for the year 2000. At the time, the Malian government was investing heavily in secondary and higher education and "was pointed to as a paragon of inefficiency and wasted resources." [8] In 1991, Moussa Traoré's regime ended in a coup d'état. When Alpha Oumar Konaré took office, he became acutely aware of the difficulty of responding to popular expectations for more basic education while at the same time maintaining support for higher education.

Village children in Mali.
Photo credit: Sara Carpenter

A new Ministry of Basic Education (MEB) was created, indicating a belief in the need to expand basic education and make the school system more responsive. The minister worked to "bring the school back into the community and to bring the community back into the school,"[9] one of many educational reforms and innovations that were to stud the next decades. USAID, to support the government's efforts to decentralize basic education in this newly

"democratic"[10] African nation, supported Save the Children's[11] community school program.

By 1988, SC had built government schools in four villages using concrete building blocks, government-trained teachers, the national curriculum and a traditional teaching methodology. Government primary schools in Mali, like those in other former French colonies, bore the stamp of their heritage: the French language, a French curriculum, textbooks published in France, the sequence and numbering of classes, diplomas based on year-end exams, the Baccalauréat. If the plan was to provide greater access to rural populations, it quickly became apparent that the construction costs and time required to build the schools would prevent the achievement of EFA goals by the year 2000—always an explicit objective of the endeavor.[12]

A new Ministry of Basic Education was created, indicating a belief in the necessity of expanding basic education and of making the school system more responsive.

Villagers take the lead

SC, therefore, proposed sharing roles and responsibilities with the villages: building a one-room classroom; defining a shorter, more relevant curriculum taught in the local language; selecting, training, and remunerating teachers from the villages; selecting equal numbers of girls and boys to go to school according to a calendar based on the harvest and planting seasons and on children's chores; providing schoolbooks and materials; and training village management committees to supervise the enterprise and the schools. These proved to be fruitful innovations.

SC drew on the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) model that took a community-management approach and significantly increased enrollments, particularly those of girls. In its Kolondieba pilot schools, SC made three basic assumptions about the capacity and value of community par-participation in education:

The costs of primary education could be drastically reduced without significantly reducing quality.

Each community, with proper training, could contribute the financial and human resources to provide highly relevant primary education for its own children. Community participation in, and engagement with children's education is a fundamental and often unmeasured index of the success of these schools.

Moreover, the political climate in Mali was conducive to decentralizing education and developing a dynamic, government-NGO-community partnership.[13]

Girls in Blakala classroom.

Photo credit: Michael Bisceglie

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SC sought to engage with communities so that they could participate actively in defining and providing an education that they found appropriate and relevant, even if the government did not or could not. SC also made gender equity a high priority, proposing that equal numbers of boys and girls be enrolled—something which was not typically the case in Mali, where girls often stay home to help their mothers with household chores and women's crops. SC discussed in detail with community members the reasons why their daughters were less frequently enrolled in school, and more often removed from it, in order to devise a more "girl-friendly" school.

Gradual changes in attitude about educating girls are illustrated by an incident that took place one hot afternoon in Kolondieba. An SC vehicle passed a farmer pulling a heavily laden cart packed with newly picked cotton.

"You have a heavy load. Where are you taking it?"

"To the agent who will buy the crop."

"Can you not find someone to help you?"

"But I already have someone. My daughter," he says, pointing to a small eight-year-old girl by the roadside.

"But she is very small and your cart is very big. How can she help you?"

"She is a pupil at the school in our village. She will tell me whether the agent is cheating me. She can write and she can count."

Girl pounding maize.
Photo credit: Michael Bisceglie

Access was the obvious mission of the enterprise, but quality was also an essential goal. The curriculum's objectives were to prepare villagers to better live in their environment; to achieve gender parity in enrollment; to be flexible regarding children's ages; to serve a determined number of children; to conduct triannual enrollments; to maintain viable student-teacher ratios; to employ recently literate, somewhat schooled teachers attuned to village needs; and to practice child-centered pedagogy using the local language and materials produced for the local context. Many, if not most of these objectives meet the criteria of quality education.

Criticized by some as "poor education for poor people," village schools in fact provided access to local schooling at affordable fees, and overcame most of their shortcomings (or short cuts), such as low-cost classrooms, poorly qualified teachers and fewer materials. "What is given up to assure lower costs, i.e.,

higher teacher qualifications and more elaborate materials, is made up for by an environment of higher community, teacher and student commitment."[14] Communities' engagement in managing these schools reflected their desire to have their children educated and to be involved in that education despite their own lack of schooling. It also reflected their confidence in the model.

Selecting villages

The villages in which SC sought to undertake community school collaboration were selected according to a number of criteria, including a minimum number of children and distance from existing schools. Initially, a "school map" helped determine which villages had at least 60 school-age children, (the initial cohorts also included older children) located at more than "walking distance"

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from public primary schools. (In remote villages, this can mean up to two hours each way.) *Medersas,* or Koranic schools, were not included. SC staff visited the potential villages to engage in a Participatory Rapid Appraisal with the traditional leaders, to determine why the children did not go to public schools and whether the village wanted a school. Above all, a consensus had to exist in the village to build and manage its school.

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In 1992, 20 villages were visited. Three of these, and later a fourth, appeared particularly favorable to starting a school. (The fourth school, located in a poorer village, ultimately failed.) Villagers wanted schools in their villages because distance was a strong disincentive to school attendance, especially for girls who were vulnerable if they walked long distances to school, and because boarding children elsewhere was expensive.

School Management Committees

Traditional village leaders were asked to designate representatives for a five-member School Management Committee (SMC) that included two women and two literate people. The SMC structure was based on the Bambara tradition of *tons*, task-oriented community organizations guided by traditional leaders.

The site chosen for the initial classroom was often a temporary shelter so that the SMC and other villagers could determine where to situate the "permanent" classroom, with technical advice from SC.

Building took place at the end of the rainy season (October, November) using local mud bricks. SC provided doors and roofs.

Bohi village school committee meeting.

Photo credit: Christine 'Spee' Braun

Classrooms were outfitted with student desk/benches (two students per bench), a blackboard and chalk. In 2000, "flip charts" made from salvaged cement bags, wall maps and a "library" or box of books, most in Bamanakan, were added. SC provided all school supplies until 1998 when it began to gradually reduce its contribution. In 2002, parents became responsible for purchasing pens, notebooks, and slates.

The SMCs compiled a list of all 6-, 7-, and 8-year-olds to be enrolled, respecting the SC rule of parity between boys and girls. In the larger villages, an initial cohort of 60 children was chosen for the first single-classroom schools, divided into two groups of 30 (half boys, half girls) for two sessions, morning and afternoon.

Calendar

The village school annual calendar followed the agricultural seasons. School opened in October, after the maize harvest, and closed at the end of May before the onset of the rainy season, so that children could help plant and harvest. The three-hour school day allowed children to do their chores (primarily girls' household chores and babysitting) and therefore did not disrupt daily life.

Classroom in Blakala, Mali.

Photo credit: Michael Bisceglie

Boys plowing a field.

Photo credit: Michael Bisceglie

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The day was divided into two sessions for two teachers. Reducing the contents of the curriculum to basic lessons that could be covered in three-hour sessions gave the school a better chance of surviving because the interruption of village life was minimal. On the other hand, a school year of six days per week, 28 weeks per year, with no holidays and no student or teacher strikes made it possible to cover the curriculum effectively, and even to add grades 4–6 in 1996.

Teaching in the local language

From the outset, SC decided that classes would be conducted in Bamanakan, the most widely spoken language in Mali and in the Sikasso region, rather than in French, which many Malians learn to speak in school as a second or third language. The choice had significant implications: children could understand what their teachers were saying in the classroom from day one, and learned more quickly for not being forced to learn in a foreign language. SC also developed its own materials in Bamanakan.

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Curriculum

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The initial three-year curriculum was developed and adapted from the adult literacy curriculum, with its focus on agriculture and health, and was designed to meet the local needs of a rural setting and an agricultural economy.[15] It grew out of a regular consultative process between SC field staff and local development committees—the lowest level of local government representing the traditional village leadership. The curriculum was organized around village life, agriculture and natural resource management, health and basic business skills, in addition to the "three Rs," history, geography, and observation of nature. Functional literacy and numeracy skills were combined with life skills and with knowledge that would enable village children to make better use of local resources and improve their health and their ability to function effectively in the village setting and in the commercial world.

Each teacher received a teaching guide in Bamanakan for the subjects taught in the local language: civics, agriculture, natural science, history, geography, health and math, as well as a reader created by SC for its curriculum.

In addition to structured learning materials, teachers and students use local materials such as leaves to teach medicine, cement bags for flip charts and clay for pottery. They also use local human resources: for example, the village chief teaches the history of the village.

A student leads the class.

Photo credit: Michael Bisceglie

Each school has two classes, one of young children (6–10 years) who might still have the possibility of joining the formal education system after three years in the community school, and one of adolescents (11–15 years). They would not normally enter the official school system, but they would be able to participate in village health, agriculture, and credit committees upon graduation from the community school.

Selecting, training, and supervising teachers

SC's child-centered, active approach to pedagogy seeks to develop pupils' imagination and creativity; to engage students in speaking, rather than relegating them to the more common "choral response" role where the authority of the teacher goes unquestioned and where learning involves mere memorization by rote.

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Initially, teachers were drawn from the villages. SC took a pragmatic approach by selecting neo-literates (mostly men) who usually had at best 6th grade educations but whose understanding of their communities offset their lack of education. Interested candidates were tested and trained by SC staff, with support from the Ministry of Education (MOE), for four weeks during a period of three months (July, August, and September). The month-long training program included child psychology, pedagogy, reading, writing, basic mathematics, health, agriculture, civics and local history. It specifically taught teachers to be sensitive to girls. Initial training was reinforced by annual, two-week refresher sessions; when teachers moved to higher grades, they again received two-week, specialized training from local ministry staff.

In 1996, dissatisfied parents requested more schooling for teachers. They wanted their children to be able to take the CEP, the national sixth grade leaving exam, and become civil servants—an expectation that was no longer realistic but was a vestige of a previous era. Since the CEP was administered only in French, French and the fourth grade were introduced, and fifth and sixth grades were subsequently added. SC worked with the national ministry to expand the curriculum,[16] drawing it closer to the national curriculum and providing a means for village school students to go on to junior high school if they were able. The calendar and approach remained innovative and local. Intensive French was progressively introduced as an optional class in third grade. Today it is introduced in the second grade.

Teaching in French in Mali.

Photo credit: Michael Bisceglie

Teaching French and adding grades 4, 5, and 6 meant hiring and training teachers who could speak French, which usually meant going outside the village to recruit them. More skills—francophone teachers typically had 9th grade educations—raised salaries, and required a different kind of teacher management. Trained teachers stayed with their classes as they progressed through the grades, while new first and second grade teachers were recruited and trained on an ongoing basis.

Training required reinforcement and supervision. Local teacher supervisors from the *Centre d'Animation Pédagogique* (CAP) provided pedagogical supervision and received remuneration from SC. Later, as the network of schools grew, another level of management was required. Scaling up was possible thanks to the dynamic partnerships established among the SMCs, the *Académies Educatives* (regional education authorities responsible for the CAPs), USAID, and implementing local NGO partners. The numbers of local NGOs who managed the relationships on the ground between the teachers, SC, and the CAP[17] grew from four to as many as 16 as the network of schools grew.

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These partners benefited from the capacity building, institutional development and technical and financial assistance provided by SC.[18] With different degrees of success, they oversaw the village schools in their areas, serving as a link among all the administrations involved. As they demonstrated more skills, the NGOs became involved in strategic planning. From 2001–2003, in preparation for the end of USAID funding, local NGOs became entirely responsible for their part of the project, having developed a plan for supervising teachers in the area where they worked and for promoting relationships with the CAPs and the communal councils.

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Costs

Costs were low. A typical, government-built, three-room, cement schoolhouse cost approximately US $10,000 to build and outfit with student desks, a blackboard, and a teacher's desk.[19] By contrast, "schools built from local materials could be constructed at about a fifth of the cost of the prevailing concrete model. Not only did this make the construction of a school financially affordable by a typical village, but it also made the school seem less of a foreign body within the community."[20]

Similarly, "Teachers were paid FCFA 3,500 (US$12.80) per month out of school fees and a general village association contribution, compared to national

salaries of about FCFA 30,000 (US$110)."[21] The largely symbolic salaries were supplemented by support in kind—cereals, labor, and other services. SMCs collected 100 CFA per student per month, but encouraged communities to raise 1,000 CFA per household, regardless of the number of pupils in a family, to make the school a community-wide concern.

Table 2.1: Costs of running a village school [22]

Category	$ per school year	$ per student per year	% total cost
School startup	423	7	13
Development (5 years, allowing for curriculum updating and revitalizing community support)	173		
Capital costs (10 years, or estimated lifespan of a school building)	250		
School operations	1471	25	45
Teacher salary	103		
Materials and supplies	1254		
Maintenance	105		
PTA operations	9		
School support	911	15	28
Teacher (ongoing in-service training)	123		
Inspection (by MOE)	28		
Committee/PTA training	263		
Committee/PTA monitoring	497		
NGO development	13	22	< 1
Startup	4		
Operations	8		
Supervision	1		
PVO management (SC management costs not allocated elsewhere, business costs, and costs of maintaining institutional identity)	417	13	
Totals	$3,235 per school	$54 per student (based on 60 students per school)	100

Source: Save the Children US Sahel Office

Families with no children in school, like taxpayers who do not benefit from the schools in their local communities, did not want to pay. SC proposed that the village association that managed cash crops earmark 2 percent of cotton revenues to cover recurrent school costs, including teachers' salaries.

Most villages accepted, and the revenues provided a major source of funding until the cotton crisis in 2000.[23] Alternatives such as collective field, market gardening, and per capita gain taxes were used to support the schools after that.
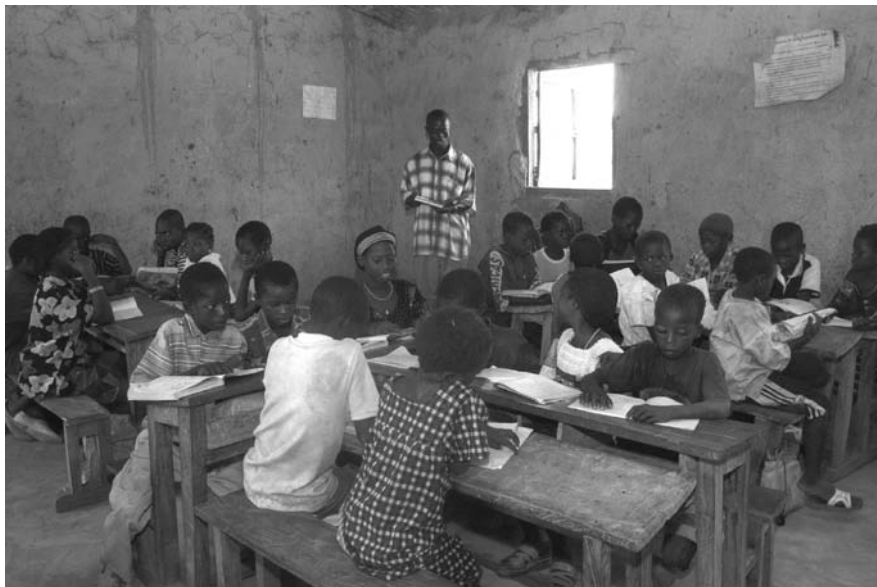

School children in Blakala, Mali.

Photo credit: Michael Bisceglie

Expansion, evaluation, improvement

Three years after they were introduced in Sikasso, SC village schools were flourishing. "In its third year of operation, the project had grown to become the main provider of formal education in grades 1 through 3 in Kolondieba district."[24] The four initial schools of 1992–1993 had served 240 pupils and 16 teachers had been trained; the following year, 22 schoolrooms were serving 1,320 pupils in 22 villages and 44 teachers had been trained. In 1994–1995 there were 36 village schools

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with 2,160 children and 72 teachers. In 1995–1996, there was a leap to 114 schools and 6,840 children in 110 villages.[25] The estimated cost for teachers of 1,000 to 1,200 CFA per month was based on the numbers of teachers and pupils projected for school year 1999–2000, and a 7-month salary of 8,000 to 8,750 CFA.[26]

School children at work in a classroom at the Blakala school.

Photo credit: Michael Bisceglie

In 1997, five years after it had initiated funding, USAID wanted to know what was working and what needed to be improved, and to assess and compare the costs of the alternative schools it was supporting with government schools.[27] USAID's report noted that while it was relatively easy to recruit students, the first schools experienced high dropout rates, especially among teenagers. A 13 percent dropout rate meant 32 dropouts, 27 of whom were boys who migrated to work outside the village or girls who got married; the rest left because they could not pay the fees.[28] Today's dropout rates are far lower at 2.4 percent.

Student achievement had not yet been systematically evaluated but there were plans to do so. Promotion rates were far higher than in government schools, because village schools do not fail any students, and they teach in Bamanakan. The USAID report noted the introduction of French in third grade and that students were doing "at least as well as students in the regular state schools."[29]

It was clearly a positive thing for children to attend school in their own villages, eliminating the risks and costs of their going elsewhere for school. Education was perceived to be relevant; parents felt involved in school

management; and the relationship between the school and the community was sufficiently strong to have "changed the basic paradigm under which primary education is provided in Mali."[30]

The USAID evaluation made powerful claims for the impact of SC's model beyond Kolondieba, stating that the "appearance on the Malian scene of a successful village school model has helped alter the trajectory of education sector reform."[31] Given the success of the model, USAID Mali made a "decided effort" to have the MEB overcome its reluctance to recognize non-official schools, since the ministry had imposed standards that prevented communities from establishing schools. USAID lobbied hard to promote what became a legal framework for non-government schools, enabling them to be officially recognized.

The relationship between the school and the community was sufficiently strong to have changed the basic paradigm under which primary education is provided in Mali.

This was a "first step in establishing a mechanism whereby the state can provide funding for non-governmental schools."[32] The USAID view was that "village schools have illustrated that quality basic education can be delivered in buildings that are locally constructed, with teachers who are less qualified and not civil servants, in languages other than French, and in a management environment determined and directed by private citizens (not MEB officials)."
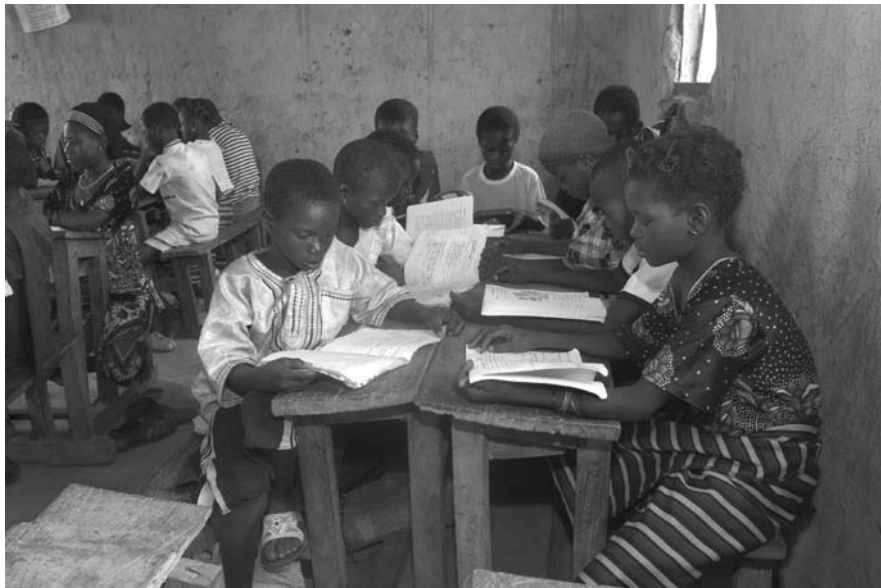
Blakala classroom, Mali.

Photo credit: Michael Bisceglie

Impact on government policies

The resulting sectoral policy led to the government's *Nouvelle École Fondamentale* (NEF) project that introduced "local language in grades 1 through 3; a consolidated number of subjects; local recruitment and training of teachers; and greater community involvement in school management—all strategies drawn from the village school model."[33]

How would civil servants, reluctant to lose their job security or salaries, welcome local language teaching and different curricula?

However, USAID was concerned with some critical issues. If NEF incorporated "many of the lessons from village schools into its definition" and if the new schools were to be bilingual, could existing schools be converted? How would civil servants, reluctant to lose their job security or salaries, welcome local language teaching and different curricula? The USAID evaluation was prescient about the problems that PRODEC, the decade-long (1999–2009) education reform program that supplanted NEF, would face.

The USAID report also addressed the changes facing village schools that added French to their curriculum. Where would they find the teachers and how would villages react to curricula that were less focused on their needs? Would the village model be considered second rate? Would it change in order to conform to the standard model? There was also some concern about a segmented primary education system in Mali, divided along rural and urban lines, the latter financed by the state and the former financed by the villages: an inherently inequitable provision of basic education.

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The only solution, it was argued, was to "develop a mechanism through which the state would funnel resources to village schools—without subverting the essential element of community control, oversight and management of the schools— in order to equalize disparities between villages in different regions of the country."[34] This has been done to some extent, but the prescient concerns remain relevant today. USAID provided another five years of support, 1997–2002, and the SC schools continued to spread and to be evaluated by the MOE.

Preparing for national exams

Pupils educated in the village schools had acquired new skills and could participate in new ways.

SC strengthened some of the weaknesses pointed out in the mid-term evaluation (1997–2002),[35] such as teacher training and supervision and student testing. The expansion of the curriculum and the expectations of parents meant that pupils needed to

take the CEP exam. To prepare them and to assess their achievement, SC investigated testing techniques. In 1999, a consultant was hired to begin designing and evaluating a test, and in 2000, SC and MOE staff were trained in testing and began to develop test materials for teachers to prepare pupils to take exams in unfamiliar formats. Teachers were subsequently trained to design and administer tests and were taught to define short-term goals that pupils could demonstrably acquire (*objectifs pédagogiques opérationnels*).
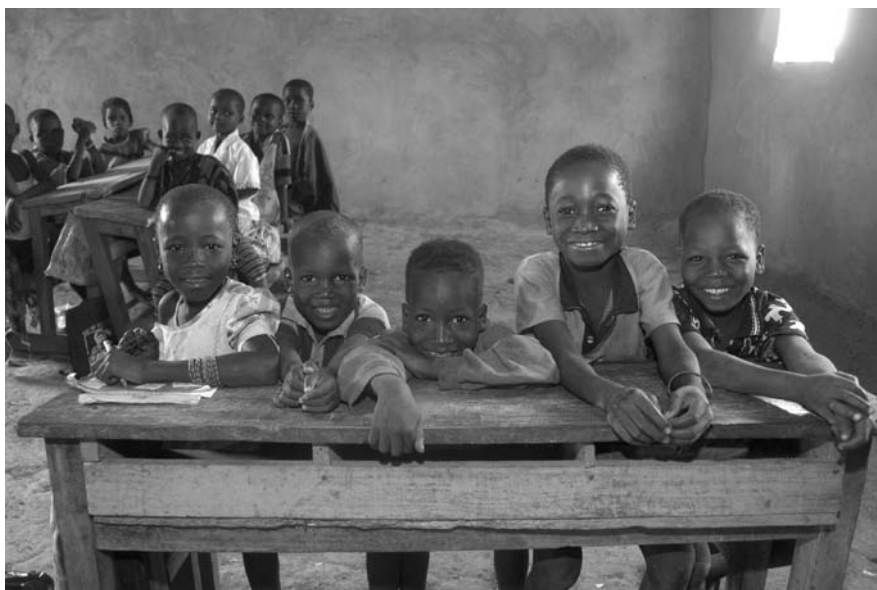
School children at the Blakala school.

Photo credit: Michael Bisceglie

SC was also interested in knowing whether pupils were contributing more to their villages as a result of having gone to school. At the end of 1999, it therefore conducted a study to verify levels of out-migration as one measure of effective schooling. The study confirmed that pupils educated in the village schools had acquired new skills and could participate in new ways.

Strengthening the SMCs

The role of the SMCs was also changing. From mobilizing the community and getting the school built and running, SMCs were learning to manage more effectively—organizing meetings to discuss student and teacher attendance, girls' education, the provision of books and school supplies, maintenance and equipment. Their responsibilities grew, in part,

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to prepare for the end of USAID funding. SC strengthened the capacity of SMCs to develop community action plans, to understand the community's civic rights and to advocate for its needs. As the government decentralizes more and more responsibility for education to the communes and to the CAP without providing the resources, SMCs will have to work harder to advocate for themselves. SC encouraged the organization of federations of SMCs, known as SMC/APE, to give them more weight in promoting community schools, but these remain relatively timid about approaching government authorities.

Sustaining the community schools requires dynamic partnerships among all education stakeholders. Partnerships with local NGOs and others had been nurtured on an on-going basis and had helped SC to capitalize on a range of capacities to achieve significant results. These partnerships were reinforced to ensure that all stakeholders participated in the operation, financially and otherwise. Various education actors were invited to *cadre de concertation* meetings. SC provided organizational development support to the implementing NGO partners, based on analyses of their institutional needs.

Sustaining community schools requires dynamic partnerships among all education stakeholders.

Malian school children in a race.

Photo credit: Michael Bisceglie

The problem of teacher retention

Paying teachers had always been an issue. In 2001, the World Bank and USAID encouraged the government to include the salaries of community schoolteachers in their Education Sector Investment Program (PISE), using HIPC debt forgiveness. The PISE program negotiated a US $45 million loan for 2001–2004, of which US $34 million was earmarked for basic education, including building schools and providing textbooks.

The government agreed to finance a portion of community schoolteacher salaries, but the money has not been paid regularly or to all teachers. Therefore, 40–50 percent of the communities have continued to pay their teachers, who often wait months for their payments. Community school teachers' salaries continue to be low compared to the salaries of civil servants, which may help to explain why teachers leave their jobs.

A girl gets a drink of purified water at the Blakala school.

Photo credit: Michael Bisceglie

Looking ahead

The decade of USAID funding ended, as planned, in 2003. The future of the community schools in Sikasso without that funding, without SC's oversight, and without support for the network of local NGOs, remains to be seen. The indicators of the success of the village schools rarely include the community engagement and ownership that must be retained if the schools are to endure.

Table 2.2: SC Teacher Retention, 1992–2000

Initial year of service	Still teaching	No Longer Teaching	% Still Active
1992	2	6	25.00
1993	3	18	14.29
1994	9	48	15.79
1995	26	168	13.40
1996	60	357	14.39
1997	97	564	14.67
1998	160	491	24.58
1999	163	318	38.89
2000	162	241	40.20
2001	306	186	62.2
2002	422	7	98.37

Source: Save the Children US Sahel Office, Annual statistics 2002–2003 (October)

> *Community schools in Mali serve approximately 18 percent of all elementary school pupils.*

Education reform has already benefited from the experiments in the community schools; the process of decentralizing the management of education to the communes should also draw upon the experience of these last years. Sustainability requires using the experience gained in these village schools in southwest Mali to help implement the decentralization of education that will itself help to determine the future of the community schools in Mali.

Community schools (established by SC and others) provide an important part of basic education in Mali,[36] serving approximately 18 percent of all elementary school pupils. Several issues must be addressed as the government considers what to do with the existing schools:

How to continue the process of integrating community schools into the national system, when only teachers' salaries are being paid by the government, without losing schools that were supported with much more than salaries until 2003?

How to strengthen the acknowledged weaknesses (teachers, number of grades, construction) so that the schools can be integrated into the national system?

How to maintain the innovations that have worked? In a word, can the government use the experience in southern Mali to help decentralize its school management, integrate the community schools within the national system and maintain the successful innovations that set these community schools apart?

Community school teachers are, typically, less well trained than professional teachers and will continue to be perceived as inferior unless they receive more and better training. This requires time and money, but will benefit the education system as a whole. A medium-term plan to train these teachers should be linked to salary increases in order to consolidate the experience and retain the teachers who have already proven themselves in these schools.

A planned transition to communal schools will take time, and may well be preceded by a government assessment of all community schools in Mali. Some interim support is likely to be needed to keep the teacher attrition and school closure rates to a minimum during this period.

School children in front of their village school.

Photo credit: Michael Bisceglie

Long-term impacts

Certain innovations promoted by the village schools—such as initial local language teaching—have affected national education reform, which today promotes bilingual education. Other reforms—a flexible calendar, enrollment parity—have helped to make the community schools attractive. Can these innovations that heighten the attractiveness and quality of education in Sikasso be retained as the community schools become communal schools? This would

suppose system-wide standards and norms, designed as part of the regulatory support and framework that should be provided by the decentralization process, and a negotiated deviation from tradition. Maintaining the innovations will be important for sustaining the enterprise.

The most effective innovation of the SC village schools is, arguably, local commitment and management: community engagement and governance made

Decentralization will work if local management and governance are effectively maintained.

these schools a part of village life. Decentralization will work if this local management and governance are effectively maintained. The experience is embodied in the communities that have mobilized to educate their children; the trained School Management Committees that run the schools; the local NGOs that have been trained by SC and have worked closely with the committees—these are all well positioned to help implement the decentralization of education management and should remain vital links in the decentralized system.

Notes

[2] As originally presented at the ADEA Biennale, Mauritius, 2003.

[3] Les écoles communautaires (écoles du village) dans la région de Sikasso/Mali: 1992–1997: Bilan et perspectives, Rencontre de Bougoni, 16 décembre 1996, Save the Children Sahel Field Office, p. 2.

[4] Personal observation of classrooms in Kalana. MOE statistics suggest an average ratio of 80:1.

[5] DeStefano, Joe. Community-Based Primary Education: The Experience of the BEEP Project in Mali A Collaborative Effort USAID/Mali Save the Children USA. (April 1995) Numbers vary slightly on these figures but none are higher than 20%. Laugharn, p. 15, probably the most reliable source, cites "under 20% for girls."

[6] Laugharn, Peter, Negotiating 'Education for Many:' Enrollment, Dropout, and Persistence in the Community Schools of Kolondieba, Mali., (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of London : July 2001) p. 15.

[7] At the end of the 1980s, access to formal basic education in Mali was stagnant if not declining. Government capacity to provide basic schooling was severely constrained because of the persistent patterns of resource allocation that favored secondary and higher education, coupled with an overly centralized, supply constraint dominated approach to sectoral development. That is, the government's ability to expand access was constrained by the rate at which it was willing and able to allocate funds, organize the installation of schools, and hire teachers." Ibid. p. 2.

[8] Christensen, et al. p. 69.

[9] "Under the Fourth Education Project, in conjunction with which the BEEP (Basic Education Evaluation Project) project was developed, the World Bank, French Cooperation, USAID, and other donors made funds available to the education sector for expansion and improvement of basic education. School construction was to be jointly funded, 75% by the ministry, with the Fourth Education Project funds, and 25% by the communities…. USAID's emphasis was on trying to increase access by improving the quality and efficiency of the system, thus allowing more children to be served by the existing structure…." DeStefano, pp 2–3.

[10] USAID also supported the community schools of World Education whose emphasis is parent-teacher associations. In all other ways, however, WE community schools were identical to government schools.

[11] With "funds…for one such construction per year… it would have taken almost two centuries to have a school in every community." Laugharn, p. 15. DeStefano also remarks, "In 1990, Save the Children began working with the Ministère de l'Education de Base (MED) to help communities share the cost of school construction according to the Fourth Education Project formula. The three classroom school model has a total cost of US\$ 30,000…..only one official school was constructed in 1991, and another in 1992." p. 2.

[12] Laugharn, p. 17.

[13] DeStefano, p. 3.

[14] Laugharn, p. 19.

[15] To design the expanded curriculum, between 15–20 participants attended a series of five workshops (\$1000/workshop) to develop new modules that were then tested, corrected, validated and used.

[16] AID Mali, AADEC, AMPJ, ASG, CRADE, GADS Mali, GRADE Banlieue, GRAT. Local NGO partners were added in groups of 4 starting in 1994–1995; by 1999, the 16 NGOs were reduced to 12 after budget cuts; in 2001, a mid-term review suggested further cuts, leaving eight.

[17] In 2003, after funding had ended, many NGO partners were interviewed to give a disinterested view of their work with SC. Their appreciation of the training, and in particular, greater autonomy during the last two years of the program, were cited.

[18] Velis, Jean-Pierre. Blazing the Trail: the Village Schools of Save the Children USA in Mali. UNESCO, Paris, 1994 "…the cost of building permanent, three-classroom schools in accordance with current standards (the cost per classroom was about US\$10,000)…" Blazing the Trail, page 9.

[19] Laugharn, p. 17.

[20] Blazing the Trail, p. 11.

[21] Cotton is the primary source of income in the Sikasso region, and the second largest export for Mali after gold. Pointing to the contradiction of development investments being given to countries whose exports are blocked by the US and the EU, Nicholas Kristof (NY Times, May 27, 2003) cites US agricultural subsidies of roughly \$2 billion yearly to farmers as causing a deep crisis in world cotton markets and Oxfam (2002) points out that "while the US advocates free trade and open markets in developing countries, its subsidies are destroying markets for vulnerable farmers… For the region as a whole [sub-Saharan Africa], the losses amounted to \$301m, equivalent to almost one-quarter of what it receives in American aid… Mali lost 1.7 per cent of GDP and 8 per cent of export earnings." Subsistence single-crop farmers like those in Sikasso are vulnerable to shifts in world market prices and unable to lobby against them. Education, however, at least enables them to read the contracts or the scales weighing their crop.

[22] Tietjen, Karen. Community Schools in Mali: A Comparative Cost Study, USAID SD Publication Series Technical Paper No. 97, (June 1999), Taken from Table 7, page 61. Note that the data was collected in late 1996 and 1997.

[23] Tietjen, Karen. Community Schools in Mali: A Comparative Cost Study, USAID SD Publication Series Technical Paper No. 97, (June 1999), Taken from Table 7, page 61. Note that the data was collected in late 1996 and 1997.

[24] Les Ecoles Communautaires (Ecoles du Village) Dans la région de Sikasso/Mali: 1992–1997: Bilan et Perspectives, Rencontre de Bougoni.

[25] Cissé, Morifing, et al. Les ecoles communitaires au Mali. (IIEP, Paris, 2000) pp. 220–221, annual per child cost to pay for teachers.

[26] DeStefano.

[27] Ibid. p. 5.

[28] Ibid. p. 6.

[29] Ibid. p. 7.

[30] Ibid. p. 8.

[31] Ibid. p. 8.

[32] Ibid. p. 9.

[33] Ibid. p. 11.

[34] Sicotte, Alfred, Djoume Sylla, and Laladou Soumare. Evaluation a mi-parcours du Programme Education 97–02 (Mali, April 2001)

[35] In 2000, the late payments came in two chunks: each teacher was paid 300 000 CFA, or an annual salary of 25000 CFA/month. In 2001, more teachers were paid but only for 10 months. In 2002, teachers were paid for 9 months; in 2003, teachers received 5 months of their salary through July 2003. This situation discourages teachers and makes SMCs less able to manage their schools partly because teachers paid under this system tend to consider themselves more accountable to the CAP than to the SMC. This situation led SC, World Education and Africare to call a forum to discuss suitable and appropriate mechanisms of payment that ensure the employer's role of SMC. This mechanism was used the first year but the CAPs gradually kept the NGOs and the SMCs away. For example, SMCs were paid directly the first year and they paid the teachers in turn. Now radio broadcasts announce that salaries are ready for distribution by the CAP, whom some teachers consider to be their employers.

[36] The 2002–2003 MOE statistics (vol. 1 p 18), counts 2437 community schools and 3441 public schools for a total of 7200 elementary schools. Community schools therefore count for one-third of the national infrastructure of basic education, and serve approximately 18% of Mali's pupils (231,302 of the 1,294,672 pupils).

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