

A literate Environment and the Eradication of Illiteracy in Guinea

Mamadou Aliou Sow, General Manager, Editions Ganndal

Socio-educational data

In Guinea, as a result of the implementation of PASE (Sectoral Adjustment Programme for Education), a global co-operation framework established between the government and the main funding sources for education, including the World Bank, USAID and French bilateral aid, major objectives were achieved between 1990 and 1999.

Under PASE I (1990-1994):

over 3,000 classrooms were built;

more than 8,000 teachers were trained;

over 400,000 textbooks and teachers guides were provided;

the gross enrolment ratio was raised from 28% in 1990 to 44% in 1994.

PASE II brought about:

a lessening of educational disparities between rural and urban areas, and between boys and girls;

better management of the education system;

a gross enrolment ratio of 53.54% at the start of the 1999 school year.

Primary pupil strength was put at 674,632, including 37% girls in 1998, and the mean book/pupil ratio at 1 to 3. Estimated overall illiteracy for the same period was 69%.

Programme of basic education for all Programme of basic education for all allProgramme of basic education for all

The Guinean Government adopted an *Educational Policy Declaration* on 19 September 1989, operationalised by three educational development letters. Reinforced by the recommendations of the World Conference on Education for All, held in Jomtien in March 1990, this educational policy has constituted the foundation of all activities and initiatives launched under the general objective of basic education for all in Guinea.

As officially understood, the notion of basic education covers the following subsectors: elementary education, the first cycle of secondary education, literacy instruction, the NAFA Centres, specialised education, and apprenticeship centres for the young.

The non-formal education system

As in most African countries, it will be a long time before the vast social needs regarding basic education can be met through the traditional formal education system alone. In its awareness of this major constraint, the Ministry with responsibility for education, seeking alternatives that could contribute to an effective response to the fundamental educational needs of the population, organised a multi-sectoral meeting in November 1991 to interpret and adapt the Jomtien Declaration. The meeting gave rise in particular to the National Action Plan to counter illiteracy, which is in effect the National Non-Formal Education Programme designed to complete and extend the formal system.

The most successful outcome of this programme is undoubtedly the **NAFA Centre** concept developed by the Ministry of Pre-University Education through the National Commission on Basic Education for All (CONEBAT) and UNICEF, aimed essentially at establishing a major objective of equity.

Situation of publications in national languages

The 1968-1978 decade corresponds to the most decisive phase in the promotion of national languages, with the advent of the "Socialist Cultural Revolution" which ratified the introduction of these languages as the medium of instruction at all levels of primary and the initial phase of secondary education.

That period, marked by a strong and manifest political will, saw the implementation of a sizeable package of supportive measures based on the production and dissemination in six national languages of a great many instructional aids: textbooks, literacy and post-literacy booklets, rural press, works of scientific popularisation and other civic and political education materials.

Since the change in the country's political direction dating from 1984 and the consequent 'banning' of education in the national languages, Guinea has definitely dropped behind in the drive to enhance the status of these languages as compared with its former leading role throughout the continent.

This situation has impaired the process of producing and circulating publications in national languages, with the actors and outlets suddenly reduced to a strict minimum. Only the National Literacy Service (SNA) has been able to continue the task of producing teaching aids in national languages, with considerably diminished human and material resources. An overview of SNA productions in recent years is appended hereto.

Where private publishing is concerned, apart from publications produced in co-operation with NGOs, the two existing publishers are doing their best to cover, albeit sporadically, the area of publication in national languages. Editions Ganndal is showing real resolve in the matter and its publications can be found in the bookshops.

Obstacles to the emergence of a literate environment

A score of languages are spoken in Guinea, including eight national languages spoken by a majority as the first or second language. They are Pulaar, Maninka, Soso, Kisiei, Kpelle, Löghöma, Wamey and Oneyan. These are also the main languages of literacy instruction.

Despite the highly significant results achieved by Guinea's first regime in the matter of using national languages as media of instruction, the loss of status of these languages is a major obstacle to the emergence of a literate environment, given that over 69% of the population cannot read or write.

The successive literacy campaigns undertaken in the country since its accession to independence in 1958 have not really produced any significant reduction in overall illiteracy, particularly in rural areas, and reading habits are still a distant goal in a context of increasing poverty.

All in all, the process of designing, producing and distributing books in national languages suffers from many impediments. They have to do with the lack of incentives to write in local languages, the lack of commitment of the private publishing sector, and the absence of a proper machinery to encourage the dissemination of printed material. Such shortcomings particularly affect the implementation of sound adult literacy programmes.

Given the added difficulty of the number of alphabets used in Guinea (harmonised, Adjami, Arabic, Ikra N Ko, etc.), their low rate of assimilation by the public concerned and the shortage of quality reading materials, one can readily imagine the amount of ground needing to be recovered.

Another no less important factor is the institutional environment of publications in national languages. For what we are witnessing is a gradual cutback in the amount of public money earmarked for institutions engaged in research, production and training in national languages (National Literacy Service, Institute for Research and Applied Linguistics, National Institute of Educational Research and Action, etc.). The State's financial partners themselves do not regard this sector as a funding priority, which thus reduces the scope for involvement of the private sector, NGOs and other associations engaged in education and literacy work.

The idea of a draft national literacy policy, at present before the government for consideration, is a decisive step towards measures aimed at an overall upgrading of national languages and their official status.

New strategies and capacity-building

Implementation of the national programme of basic education for all has made it necessary to devise new strategies.

The above-mentioned draft national literacy policy has the following eight general objectives:

- (a) to raise the overall literacy rate from 35% to 49% and female literacy from 20.84% to 36% between 1999 and 2003;
- (b) to induce 41% of the newly literate to follow the post-literacy programmes;
- (c) to create a literate environment;

- (d) to build up capacity for managing, monitoring and evaluating literacy structures and operators;
 - (e) to develop a dynamic partnership with all operators involved in literacy activities;
 - (f) to mobilize internal and external resources;
 - (g) to develop a strategy for the use of national languages in official and public life;
- to monitor and evaluate literacy and post-literacy activities.

The new strategies

As stated above, one of the main innovations introduced as a means of strengthening non-formal education is the institutionalisation of the NAFA Centres or 'second-chance schools', which are intended to cater for the educational needs of those excluded from the traditional system (drop-outs or un-enrolled children from 10 to 16).

The government is implementing the programme for the establishment of NAFA Centres with technical and financial support from UNICEF. Its purpose is to give the 10 to 16-year-olds - both drop-outs and un-enrolled - the practical skills (reading, writing and arithmetic) they need for greater proficiency in their day-to-day lives and to fit them harmoniously into their socio-economic environment.

The NAFA Centres today represent an immense hope for a great many rural families in Guinea and the results achieved are very encouraging.

The national book policy

In the present context, the government is clearly conscious of the fact that only through a consistent and pro-active policy to promote books and a literate environment will the country succeed in creating a society of readers and a population capable of meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century.

The Ministry of Culture, for instance, endorsing the preliminary efforts of the Guinean book trade under the auspices of REPROLIG, has taken the important decision to officially start framing a national book policy. This reflects a practical reflection of the political will of decision-makers to give the book and reading sector all the attention it deserves.

The basic situational analysis carried out on the occasion of the national symposium on culture held from 15 to 18 September 1999 in Conakry indicates that the various partners in the book trade are motivated in this respect. An official request by the government has been submitted to UNESCO (UNESCO/DANIDA Initiative) for appropriate financial and technical assistance.

The expectation is that, once this national book policy has been formulated and adopted by the government, it will bolster a viable literate environment in Guinea.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it simply needs to be stated that for a long time to come non-formal education and the quest for a literate environment will occupy the energies of the various partners in basic

education to make the aim of Education for All a living reality in Guinea.

The non-formal sector is very little studied in Guinea, which presents a major problem in terms of the availability of relevant information on the actual numbers of people involved, performance and the nature and quantity of existing educational materials in national languages. Effort is therefore needed to fill this gap.