

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-8

Rural Education

P.O. Box 319
Banjul, The Gambia
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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

The Lady Chilel Jawara, the Gambian government's tourist cruise boat, makes the 230-mile trip up the Gambia River to Basse only once every two weeks now that the tourists have gone back to Europe and the approaching rainy season has turned the attention of most Gambians from trading to farming. For many of the villages along the river, the boat is the only reliable communication with the rest of the country. Its arrival adds excitement to the routine of daily life, so wherever it stops the villagers come down to the wharf en masse to watch the transfer of merchandise between hold and pier and to scan the decks for a familiar face.

I boarded the Lady Chilel for the return trip from Basse. On the journey downriver, passing the sparse woods and laterite cliffs of the interior and then the thick mangrove hedge that lines the banks of the tidal section, I frequently returned the waves of shouting children gathered around the chugging water pumps that irrigate the rice fields beyond the banks. So picturesque was the ride that not until later did I make the connection between my study and this pleasant interlude. Those black, ragged children scampering along the banks, waving and shouting, should have been in school.

The Huck Finn in each of us rebels at that statement, but the lives of those children are not carefree and their futures are bleak. Without education they can look forward only to years of toil, poverty, hunger, disease and premature death. Simply increasing educational opportunities, however, will not substantially change that prognosis. Mistrustful parents don't send their children to school. Those children who do attend—in rural areas only about 12 percent of the school-aged population—see no prospects of improving their lives in the villages and so they go to Banjul or one of the other large towns, where they can meet hundreds of other youngsters like themselves looking for non-existent jobs.

"The problem isn't education, it's development," according to Saim Kinteh, assistant education officer for non-formal education. "There must be a frontal attack on all development programs in which education is used as a tool."

Kinteh proposes a radical new strategy for the assault. He would like to see all government programs channeled through

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the office of a development coordinator in each rural administrative district. Such an officer would know the needs of his area better than the various department heads in Banjul, and he would be able to decide which government programs to emphasize to answer those needs.

"A development officer would see the totality of development," Kinteh says. He would also make the most efficient use of government resources. "In any given week, twenty Land Rovers from twenty different departments may visit the same village. An education officer will say they need a new school; a health officer tells them they should have a dispensary. The villagers get confused."

The main problem with Kinteh's scheme is that it will never be accepted by the vested interests in government. He admits that when he broaches the subject in intergovernmental meetings, he is "told by the other departments to mind my own business."

This response by government officials may have more behind it than a desire to maintain their authority. Since independence, African national governments have exploited rural areas to improve conditions in the cities where the people who run the country live and work. In The Gambia, agriculture and natural resources account for about two-thirds of the gross domestic product, and the peanut crop alone accounts for about 95 percent of the country's exports. Yet in the government's 1975-1980 development plan, which professes the intention of correcting past neglect of the rural areas, proposed capital expenditures in urban districts were at approximately the same levels as those for rural areas in the first three years of the plan. Even in the last year of the plan, capital expenditures for the Banjul area, which has less than a fifth of the country's population, were pegged at almost 40 percent of total capital expenditures. Small wonder, then, that school leavers see little hope for advancement in the villages and head for the capital, where the money is.

"Primary school leavers are not against manual work," Kinteh says. "They're just facing the basic facts of life—they cannot make a living in the villages."

William Denn, the local director of a British assistance program called Action Aid, sees economics as a major determinant in the problem of rural education. Financial considerations may be more important than religious or cultural influences in shaping attitudes toward school. A child would be sent to school only if his family expected to receive more money from him in a wage-earning or salaried job than if he became a farmer. Complicating such an analysis is the disruptive influence of Western education, which may lead urban workers to forget their obligations toward home. Government officers resist postings in their home districts because they would be too near beseeching relatives. To keep family ties strong, and to find a place in the city economy for a child with only a few years of schooling, Africans have developed a system of minute vertical division of labor, stripping away

small tasks from one employee to assign to a newcomer. Thus a storekeeper may employ several relatives in restrictive positions as clerk, cashier, messenger or stockboy. Someone still has to tend the farm, so families are reluctant to send daughters to school, since women do much of the farming anyway and it is considered less suitable for a girl to be sent away from the family to work in the city.

Denn believes that the division of urban labor may be reaching a saturation point, but what the result would be if this were true is anybody's guess. He is hoping to overcome the rural resistance to Western-style schools by establishing multi-purpose "community learning centers" in the villages. He expects the program will eventually develop its own curriculum, but the project only began in October and the centers at this stage are adhering to the curriculum of the government schools.

I saw examples of some of the problems facing educators in rural areas, as well as some possible solutions, on a tour of primary schools in the Upper River Division, at the other end of the country from Banjul. With Assistant Education Officer Omar Sosseh, I first visited Tambasensan, a village near the river, about 10 miles from Basse along a sandy track which often looks like no more than a footpath. The gray soil is baked hard as rock after eight months without rain and supports little more than bare, twisted shrubs. Between 500 and 1,000 people live in the village; no one knows exactly. They are Fulas, and they live in round, thatched-roof huts surrounded by neat cane fences, leaving just enough room between compounds for our Land Rover to squeeze through. The school stands about 100 yards from the village, a brown, mud-brick building with three classrooms and a storeroom. The school has 94 students, three classroom teachers, an Arabic instructor and a headmistress. Only two other primary schools outside the Banjul area are run by women, one of them a girls' school in Basse, but more than half of the Banjul primary schools have headmistresses. The director of women's education in Banjul told me that the problem she faced was getting parents to send their daughters to school and allow them time off from household chores to do their homework. In the schools and in the public job market, there is no discrimination against women, she said.

In Tambasensan, the headmistress was having trouble getting the villagers to send any of their children to school, but the students she had seemed to be doing well, and she hoped to begin a fourth-grade class and start accepting children from neighboring villages next year. Her most immediate problems were furniture, since almost all the pupils had to sit on the floor, and fencing to surround the pit latrines behind the school.

Compared to the headway the Tambasensan school is making, the school in Fatoto was a disappointment to me and to the assistant education officer. Fatoto is the administrative headquarters for the district and is three times the size of Tambasensan, but it seemed to have fewer children in its

classrooms. Students and teachers seemed less earnest than in the village school, an impression shared by Sosseh, who told me he was disturbed by the teachers' attitude. The headmaster wasn't at the school when we arrived. He had gone home to relieve himself, there being no latrine in the schoolyard. When he returned, Sosseh excused himself and I moved a discreet distance away while he had a few words with the headmaster.

At the next stop, however, there was no way of keeping the dirty linen out of the visitor's sight. The entire staff of the Song Kunda school met us on the steps and bombarded Sosseh with a list of complaints: no furniture, no books, no students, no respect from the villagers. The education officer called on me to affirm that their troubles were no worse than those of other schools, which I could gladly do as far as furniture and books were concerned, but the lack of students was the worst I had seen. There were only about six in the second grade and about 10 in the fourth grade. The Upper River Division is largely populated by Serahulis, descendants of the ancient Soninke empire who are famed throughout The Gambia for their wealth, gained mostly from their trade in diamonds from Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia. Despite their riches, the Serahulis maintain many of their traditional ways and strongly resist the advance of Western culture. The status of their women is especially unenviable. Most of the girls who come to school are already engaged and leave by the fourth grade to be married. Yet Sosseh, to shame the teachers, picked up an English textbook and asked a class for volunteers to read, and the girls were the most eager. As Sosseh pointed out, the fewer the students, the easier it is to teach them, and with the girls a little education may have a wide effect if they pass on their eagerness for knowledge to their children.

The next school I visited, in a village just as isolated as Song Kunda and faced with the same problems, supported Sosseh's contention that the teachers' attitudes were the main factor in the success of education. Sotuma is a smaller village than Song Kunda, it's not even on my tourist map of the country, and officially it has 40 fewer students, but there were many more children in the classrooms when I visited and the teachers were hard at work with their lessons. The willingness of those Gambians who have had some education to endure the hardships and do what they can to help their rural countrymen is crucial for the development of the rural areas, but there must also be a change of attitude toward the land, so that it is worthwhile to go to a village school and remain in the village after graduation or come back after further education. This may be happening. On my last day in Basse, I met a young accountant for the government's central bank who worked in Banjul, but was back in his family's village on leave. He told me he hoped to be transferred to Basse because he wants to own land and farm it, and he can't do that around Banjul. If more of The Gambia's educated men and women felt like he does, this country would take a large step toward development.

Sincerely,

Bowden Quinn

