

**GIRLS EDUCATION FEATURE**

**ODA BOKOTA SCHOOL: MAKING THE DIFFERENCE FOR GIRLS**



*Jump rope session during morning break-time at Oda Bokota School*

Rrrring ... the morning break-time bell sounds at the Oda Bokota School. Classroom doors fly open and young girls and boys empty into the extensive grounds. The sounds of laughter and excited chatter fill the air.

As footballs are kicked across fields, and jump-ropes turn faster and faster, the carefree spirit of childhood reigns supreme over the school compound. As they laugh, play and celebrate their freedom, the students of Oda Bokota are making a profound and audible statement that their school is providing them with a healthy learning environment. In the inimitable style

of children, they pull it all off effortlessly, leaving no hint of the tremendous effort that went into making their present situation a reality.

Oda Bokota School is located in Bora Dugda woreda (district), of Ethiopia's Oromia region. In 1994, there were only 2,555 students in Bora Dugda woreda. By the time the Oda Bokota school opened its doors for the 1997-98 school year, that number had climbed to 9,817. During 2000 - 2001 the total enrolment rate in Bora Dugda woreda stood at a record 17,220.

These dramatic increases in student enrolment rates are a direct result of a proactive programme launched by the Bora Dugda Education Office in cooperation with the UNICEF Ethiopia - Government of Ethiopia Programme of Cooperation.

In 1994, the Government of Ethiopia and UNICEF embarked upon a new country programme of cooperation with a new vision and approach for rural development. Although the Woreda Integrated Basic Services (WIBS) programme, draws to a close this year, the best practices gleaned from the cross-sectoral development interventions that targeted selected disadvantaged woredas in each region of Ethiopia, will be reflected in future development initiatives. WIBS was designed to improve the conditions of children and women facing extreme basic needs deprivation. The objective was to transform these relatively backward woredas into examples of successful development. Successful strategies would then serve as models for other woredas to follow. The remarkable increase in enrolment rates in Bora Dugda is among the factors that render it a showcase for the programme.

Addisu Tsegaye is the headmaster of Oda Bokota. He is very conscious of the demographics of his students, the significance of these characteristics for enrolment rates, and the extra effort required to fill the school's classrooms.

"The majority of students at this school come from rural areas where parents are reluctant to send their children to school," says Tsegaye. "Through anti-AIDS clubs that are established in the school system, we used the platform of community HIV/AIDS information sessions to promote awareness



*Pumping water to quench thirsts at the end of their break period, Oda Bokota School*

about the benefits of education. We had to go out into the rural areas to talk to groups of parents and convince them of the benefits of sending their children to school, particularly girls. We have worked hard and not only have we filled our classrooms, we are now faced with the problem of not having enough classroom space for all our students."

The Oda Bokota school was initially built to accommodate 800 students. During the three years that it has been operating, the actual number of students at the school has boomed and is fast approaching 2000. During the 2000-2001 academic year, there were 1,118 boys and 772 girls enrolled in the school.

With UNICEF assistance, the Government of Ethiopia, has been implementing the Norwegian supported African Girls' Education Initiative (AGEI) in Bora Dugda woreda through the WIBS programme. The objective of AGEI is to ensure girls' access to and achievement in a gender sensitive education system that offers quality education.

Oda Bokota is the main node for the cluster school programme, which is an important part of the Girls' Education Initiative. The school serves as a model for others in the district in terms of programmes and best practices, including its outreach activities to promote girls' education. Quality enhancement is given particular attention, with teacher training programmes, curriculum development initiatives, HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns all designed to make the schools more conducive and positive learning environments for all students, in particular girls.

The school provides training for teachers throughout the district, including sensitization on gender issues. This is particularly important as traditional attitudes on the appropriate place of girls, as well as practices like early marriage that effectively kill all chances for them to attend school, are among the major barriers preventing girls from attending school. Sensitized teachers are better able to challenge repressive traditions, as well as to teach and convince community members regarding the value of educating girls. Female teachers have an important responsibility in this regard, serving both as examples to the community and role models for the girls.

Schools in Bora Dugda used to have only one latrine serving all students - exposing girls to sexual harassment and abuse. This would discourage female students, especially those who don't live in the vicinity of the school, from continuing with their education. As a result of the UNICEF supported WIBS programme, most schools in Bora Dugda woreda now have separate restroom facilities for girls.

The WIBS programme has also made an effort to ease the workload at home thereby freeing time for girls to attend school. Cross-sectoral interventions in the community, such as public water points and grinding mills have been successful in this regard.

The WIBS programme has assisted schools like Oda Bokota cope with the rising demand for schooling that has resulted from successful outreach and awareness creation initiatives. Through WIBS, UNICEF provides desks, teaching materials, metal sheeting for new construction, equipment for mini media clubs, tools for the environment club, wells fitted with hand pumps to ensure an accessible source of clean water, among other inputs.

An important part of this success are innovative schemes designed to lower over-all drop-out rates. Recognizing that the majority of students in the woreda come from farms, the regular school year, which over certain periods coincides with high season on the farms, is altered to accommodate the few weeks when students are needed to help with farm work. This is particularly important at the beginning of the rainy season when farms prepare for sowing - a time that coincides with the school year's examination period.

While significant progress has been achieved in the work to increase overall and girls' enrolment rates, new sets of problems are emerging as a result of this success. Until additional classrooms are constructed and teachers hired to accommodate the steadily rising demand, a two-shift system has been introduced to make more efficient use of available facilities. Other concerns include the problem of student placement after completing 8<sup>th</sup> grade, which is the highest level offered in Bora Dugda.



*Primary School Student, Oda Bok ota School*

These are, however, welcome challenges for educators like Addisu Tsegaye, who has witnessed remarkable changes in his school over the past few years. "I am determined that all the students who attend this school are able to reach the highest levels of educational attainment that the system can provide," he proclaims. "It is up to us to make it possible for them."

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