

GUINEA BISSAU

A better chance for Isabel

“My name is Isabel Luís Gomes. I am 15 years old and I am a student in the Cunha Gomes School. I am a sixth-grade student. I should be almost finishing school, but unfortunately I was enrolled late.” She introduces herself very shyly.

In Canchungo, located in Guinea-Bissau’s Cacheu region, there are a lot of girls like Isabel who were enrolled late at school. Fortunately this situation has been changing thanks to a continuous campaign for girls’ education and the promotion of quality education here and elsewhere in the country with the support of the Icelandic Committee for UNICEF and other donors.

“Now there are very few children who do not go to school,” says regional girls’ education focal point, Mendes Pereira Jandi. “All this process is coordinated by the Ministry of Education, but without the support of partners like UNICEF the results would not have been so encouraging.”

Improving the quality of education

Isabel studies in one of the schools rehabilitated by the community with the support of UNICEF. “We currently have nice desks with good benches and all necessary materials to study well, such as books and notebooks,” she says proudly. “The sanitation facilities are much better, too. Boys and girls have different latrines that are much cleaner.” Some 12,000 students are benefiting from the community initiative that led to the construction or rehabilitation of 105 classrooms in 55 rural schools in three major regions of the country – Cacheu, Gabu and Tombali.

“When my Portuguese language and social science teacher explains now, my colleagues and I understand much better,” says Isabel. Several initiatives have helped improve the quality of education in the region, such as three-year training programmes for primary school teachers without any technical and pedagogical qualification, which include scientific topics as well as innovative teaching methodologies. Manuals for teacher training and self-learning are available for each trainee according to his/her academic grade. Last year, the training programme reinforced the capacity of 30 per cent of Guinea-Bissau’s 1,462 primary school teachers. The second phase of this three-year programme is under way.

In the community, there is growing awareness of the importance of sending both boys and girls to school. “The school that we have is good, but if we could, we would certainly build more classrooms,” says the President of the School Management Committee, Bubacar Mendes. “We are happy with the support given. We don’t have much, so when we receive help to put our children in school, that’s reason for great joy. That’s why, as members of the local community, we monitor children’s school attendance. If there are children who do not attend lessons we visit their parents to know the reasons behind it. Sometimes children miss school

due to the domestic and agriculture workload. When this is the case, we sensitize the parents to the importance of sending their children to school.”

Isabel lives with both parents. She has three brothers and two sisters. “I always help my mother with the housekeeping. I am responsible for cooking the meals, even during the school year. At the moment, we are on holiday,” says Isabel. “When I am on holiday I don’t pay too much attention to the books. I prefer to watch TV and play football. Right now my football team is in a local competition. So far, we have been the best. I think we are going to win the competition this season. In each village there are at least four teams competing among themselves. During the school year we also organize football competitions. Every classroom has two teams, one of boys and another one of girls. My team is very good and I am an excellent football player.”

Isabel extends her thanks to all the people who contributed to the rehabilitation of her school, “because otherwise many of us would not be able to study and have a better chance in life.”