

A two-steps flow of communication: how to work with Muslim communities in Cameroon

Working with Muslim communities is one of the greatest challenges UNICEF has to face in this country where muslims represent about a quarter of the 15,5 million of cameroonians. In the Adamawa Province, the concentration zone for the Cameroon Programme of Cooperation, two thirds of the population are muslims.

Due to traditional constraints, gender disparity, high rate of illiteracy, traditional habits or lack of access to mass media, the promotion of the Rights of the Child relies on the well known communication strategy, used in social communication programmes: the two-steps flow of communication.



Right from the very beginning, the Programme has to identify reliable community-based NGO and associations, or community leaders such as traditional rulers covering several villages. Advocacy will help build confidence and strong relationships among the partners, thus reinforcing their commitments to children and their well being. The capacities of the leader and his root partners will be reinforced as regards the CRC, participatory approaches and social mobilization activities. Logistic support such as documentation, training materials, training modules and transportation fees will be given to further develop community sensitization activities as well as follow-up and evaluation activities.

As of now, the results have been very encouraging. As far as immunization campaigns are concerned, muslim traditional rulers have been deeply involved in mobilizing communities even within the nomad populations such as the Bororos. For the birth registration campaign, since 2001, UNICEF's support to *Adamawa Solidarité*, an NGO, has led to the issuance of 1160 birth certificates and 2000 legal birth decisions. In line with the education programmes, support was given to Pupil's Mothers Associations to manage the child-friendly, girl-friendly school activities.

As a result, girls' education has improved in Ngaoundéré, a city situated in the muslim northern part of the country at more than 1000 km away from Yaoundé, the capitale of Cameroon.

Ngaoundéré has been selected as a pilot zone for the experimentation of the «Child-Friendly, Girl Friendly School» initiative because of the low rate of school attendance particularly for girls in that area. Also in these muslim communities, girls' education is not a priority because according to the tradition, their first vocation is to become a wife and then a mother. Therefore, as the first signs of puberty appear, the major concern of parents is marriage for the young girl so that she may be protected from hist-free-thinking and other kinds of temptations deplored by the society. Early and forced marriages are common practices with a hord of frustrations, dramas and tears.

For five years, Girls'Education in this region has been one of UNICEF's priorities. Activities were carried out in formal shoos and in non formal and pre-school education centres in support of Basic Education.

In the rural areas, these centres are community based and their initiatives have had an overwhelming success. In fact, very few government schools exist there and even if they do exist, they do not always have enough teachers. Where schools exist, it has been noticed that students are mostly boys. Towards the end of the primary school cycle, there is a high rate of drop-out for girls.

In order to facilitate the access and retention of girls in school in these areas, , there is a need to build strong and sustainable alliances. It is for this reason that the « Pupil's Mothers Association » was born.

With support from the local NGOs and the sub-divisional inspectors of education, these mothers have come together undertaking income-generating activities. They have constituted common initiative groups and have obtained support from traditional rulers who have given them land to build school centres. Following this, they have created a fund in the association where compulsory weekly contributions are made by members (100 F cfa or US\$ 0.34) to meet the expenses of the group (building of classrooms using local building material, production of benches and desks, purchase of school stationaries).



Pupil's mother association meeting with education authorities

These women have finally succeeded in making their husbands their allies to make contributions and save funds for the group. With these funds, investments are made in various areas for the survival of the school : grinding mills, community farms, purchase of a ram or a cow fed and sold later or purchase of a cow either for milk production or to serve as a starting point for cattle herds.

As of now, 226 mothers associations have been set up in these communities. They are supporting 50 government schools, 70 non-formal education centres and 32 pre-school education centres. Generally girls represent half of the total school attending population. From the results obtained so far, the rate of school drop-out for girls has fallen from 7,23% in 2000 to 4,33% in 2002.



Pupil's mother association meeting

UNICEF's support includes training of teachers, purchase and distribution of school books, building of latrines and supporting NGOs to follow up activities.

Today, many girls have been able go to school and have learnt how to read and write thanks to the perseverance of their illiterate mothers. One of the concrete results recorded now is that marriages of girls of less than 15 years of age are more and more delayed.

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