

Senegal

'Building for life'—in the midst of civil insurgency

In the far western bulge of the African continent, in a landscape once 'discovered' by Portuguese explorers and still dominated by baobab trees, mangrove swamps, sea-going pirogues and huge rivers disgorging into the Atlantic Ocean, is a very special school sanitation programme. In Casamance, southern Senegal, a long-running civil insurgency has disrupted regular life and inhibited development in every area. But an extraordinary effort, based in Ziguinchor, the regional headquarters, has been made to keep the schools running and even enable them to improve.

Due to local poverty and the ongoing emergency, the World Food Programme (WFP) provides food rations for schools in the most deprived areas. UNICEF has added a programme in the same schools called 'Building for Life'. Its core feature is the construction of toilet blocks and water points to reduce diarrhoeal sickness and parasitic worm infestation among the children, and generally demonstrate the virtues of safe and tidy toilet practice. The water supply also makes it easier for a roster of mothers to prepare the daily meal and to wash up afterwards. But — as with all well-conceived school sanitation interventions — the package is designed to bring about many other benefits.

One need is to encourage the enrolment and retention of girls in school. In Senegal as a whole, 500,000 school-age children do not attend school, and 300,000 of these are girls. The lack of separate toilets for girls — or any toilets at all for children to use during the school day — is a major disincentive to girls' attendance. Parents feel their daughters are disgraced and potentially subject to harassment if they have to go in the nearby 'bush'. In this region of insecurity, there is also a need to revitalize the schools and enhance their role in building a peaceful and productive community. With strong parent-teacher associations and solid links between staff,



The school girls wash their hands with soap after having used their new toilet blocks

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students and the surrounding population, the school can become an oasis at times of rebel disruption.

Under 'Building for Life', students are taught skills that include stress management and conflict prevention, environmental knowledge, and health and hygiene information. The water supply also constitutes an emergency stand-by for the community in times of drought. The toilet blocks are open for use out of school hours by members of households who have not yet installed their own at home — so long as they leave the cubicles clean. Despite the emergency, a majority of the 435 targeted schools have by now been reached, embracing well over 100,000 children altogether — and through them, their families.

A clever self-cleansing design

The design of the toilet block in Casamance is special. A local NGO, Idée Casamance, which provides entrepreneurial skills to young men leaving school, is responsible for their development. In spite of the heavy rains that fall in the wet season, the blocks are without roofs. Idée's models are based on the VIP,





Privacy and dignity: the girls have their own toilet block

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whose fly-reduction system depends on cabin darkness. But in the dark, it was found that boys aimed poorly. The walls were not tiled, and as urine is very aggressive, they soon began to smell horribly.

First windows and light were introduced. Then it was realized that, if the blocks were built without roofs, during the wet season when the schools

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are closed, all the cubicles and pans would be thoroughly washed by the rains. The buildings also manage without doors since the student entering the block turns right or left to enter one of the cubicles. Girls who might otherwise be shy to enter feel their modesty is protected. And problems with broken doors and hinges are avoided. Outside, there are wash

basins with taps and soap. The whole construction is neat and compact.

At the hub of village life

At Dar Salaam Pakau, the school is in a grove of vast baobab trees at the heart of the village. Although the school director, Abjant Ndiaye, does not like the way the road leads straight through its grounds, this does mean that the school is at the hub of village life. Ndiaye says that, as a result of 'Building for Life', the school is run on a much more participatory basis. There is now a school assembly with deputies from each class and 'commissions' for health, hygiene and sanitation. A woman from the village looks after the water pump, and others have been developing the vegetable garden. There is also a commission to manage conflicts in the village. 'Since the school government was installed,

there has been a much better sense of civic responsibility in the community and the atmosphere is much improved,' says Ndiaye. 'Once we came back from the week-end and found the toilet dirty, so we had a meeting in the village to change this.'

Although the primary targets are the children, Ndiaye believes that they transfer information effectively to their elders too. 'We organize the children to spread ideas in a democratic way. They wear special caps to give them self-respect. This has also changed their relations with their teachers, who are now willing to share some of their power.' The mothers in the village have been prompted to start their own association. As well as supervising the school feeding programme, they monitor the way the children clean the school, and if the toilets are not as they should be, the commission for hygiene is summoned. When there is a festival, the school toilets are thrown open to all. The sense of high community morale, centred on the school, is palpable and convincing.

Persuade the children and adults will follow

The local district engineer, Augustin Kelly, pays tribute to the involvement of UNICEF in the programme. 'Before UNICEF came, there had been school closures. But they proposed that we work with teachers to make education more secure. They produced special packages and training models to show teachers how to put across hygiene and other types of messages in the classroom. The result has been a real change in people's habits. It is not so difficult to persuade a child to do thing differently as it is to persuade an adult, but if you change the way a child does things, then the adult follows.'

Augustin Kelly also sees a reduction in disease. 'In the past, we had diarrhoeal diseases, in the north we even had cholera. Now diarrhoea has reduced. Livelihoods have also improved: if the child is in good health, the family gains. There is a reduction in parasites, and the number of hospitalizations of children is lower than elsewhere. Also the exam results are better.' Demand for household sanitation has also risen. 'Those around the school want to have toilets nowadays, and this provides employment. Sanitation is an idea whose time here has come.'

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Case Study #3