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This issue of *Indigenous Affairs* focuses on indigenous peoples and education. Educational levels among indigenous peoples around the world are generally low. This is the case for indigenous communities in poor continents such as Africa, where educational levels are low overall although worse for indigenous peoples, but it is also the case in wealthy nations such as Canada, where indigenous peoples exhibit educational levels far below the national average.

This situation is a reflection of the general marginalization and exclusion from which indigenous peoples suffer. The goal of having all indigenous children attend and complete primary schooling is far from being universally achieved and the educational services open to indigenous children are generally below recommended minimum standards.

As emphasized recently by Mr Rodolfo Stavenhagen, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples, at the 2005 Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights and the IV Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the situation of the human rights of indigenous peoples is far from satisfactory. In spite of some progress over the last few years in certain countries, in most regions of the world indigenous peoples continue to face serious obstacles to the full and effective enjoyment of their rights, including the right to education. One of the main obstacles is poverty.

Numerous technical and comparative studies reveal that poverty affects indigenous peoples more severely than the rest of the population, be it those living in their communities of origin or those living in urban areas. Poverty indicators for indigenous peoples are generally below the national average. A low level of per capita monetary income is not the only form that poverty takes. Poverty among indigenous peoples also translates in a failure to meet their basic needs, insufficient access to public and social services, including access to quality education, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to productive resources such as land, water, forests and other natural resources. This is a complex

panorama of persistent poverty, deeply rooted in the historic conditions of spoliation, discrimination and structural inequality suffered by indigenous peoples. Such multifaceted poverty cannot be overcome with piecemeal measures. It requires comprehensive public policies that unfortunately, to date, neither the majority of states nor multinational bodies have succeeded in bringing about.

As pointed out by the Special Rapporteur, full enjoyment of all human rights for indigenous peoples depends first and foremost on full enjoyment of the right to education. Education is an indispensable tool with which to extricate themselves from the exclusion and discrimination that has historically been their fate, and it is the way out of poverty.

In his annual report to the UN Commission on Human Rights, the Special Rapporteur pointed out that in many countries indigenous children, in particular girls, experience difficulties in obtaining full access to educational services. And when they do, the education they are offered is generally of a poorer quality than that of non-indigenous populations. The Special Rapporteur emphasized that the difficulties encountered by indigenous children is a matter of concern, in particular the difficulties arising from discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and gender, the latter often being compounded by gender discrimination prevailing within the indigenous communities themselves.

The articles in this issue of *Indigenous Affairs* reflect the observations of the Special Rapporteur. The situation of education among indigenous communities is a cause for concern in all parts of the world. However, the situation is of particular concern in Africa. Here, a great number of indigenous children do not go to school at all – a situation first and foremost caused by poverty and a lack of access to schools. Among those who do attend school, many tend to drop out early because of problems with boarding schools and separation from families, the need for mobility during the dry season, the poor quality of schools and teachers, mistreatment by teachers and the very fact that poor families can



*Indigenous training center in Bolivia. Photo: Pablo Lasansky-IWGIA*

hardly afford to send their children to school. On top of this comes frustration among parents that their children's education tends to alienate them from their culture and traditions – without providing them with any viable alternatives, as job opportunities are extremely limited. The articles by Jennifer Hays/ Amanda Siegrühn on the San in Southern Africa and Johnson Ole Kaunga on the pastoralists in Kenya describe these problems.

The Special Rapporteur has pointed out that, after the decades of predominance of an educational model aimed at assimilation, there is now an increasing trend towards designing educational policies based on respect for cultural diversity and the promotion of bilingual education. However, there still remain many institutional, pedagogical, cultural and linguistic problems.

As highlighted by the Special Rapporteur, it is not only the quantitative improvement of indigenous education that is urgent; it is equally pressing to improve its quality. Indigenous peoples do not simply demand "education" but an education that is appropriate to their own social and cultural specificities. The participation of indigenous communities in the design, implementation and assessment of such programmes is therefore essential. At the same time, if poverty reduction strategies are to have a long-term impact, it will not be sufficient to achieve progress in primary education. It will be equally necessary to pay attention to secondary and higher education. Setting such priorities is important in order to avoid a new generation of indigenous youth and children from continuing to be excluded from the benefits of economic, social and human development.



*Ju/'hoansi children participate in a healing ceremony, Namibia.  
Photo: Catherine Collett/Kalahari Peoples Fund*



*Maasai children, Kenya. Photo: Jenneke Arens*

Indigenous peoples have not remained passive observers of the shortcomings they are confronted with in the educational system. They have used all their creativity, imagination and potential to combat these failings and promote the social and cultural development of their communities. Many of these experiences, some of which the Special Rapporteur was able to observe during his country visits, are bearing fruit and deserve attention.

The articles in this issue of *Indigenous Affairs* describe some innovative educational models that are being tried out by indigenous peoples around the world – models which seek to provide good quality education and build on indigenous peoples' own culture in order to become tools of empowerment rather than deculturalization.

Since the vast area of Nunavut was created in the northern Canada in 1999, the new Nunavut government has emphasized the need to improve the education system. The Nunavut government took over responsibility for a situation in which educational levels were amongst the lowest in Canada and the creation of a better educational system was one of the priorities of the new government. In the article "*Education in the Canadian Arctic: What Difference has the Nunavut Govern-*

*ment Made?*", Jack Hicks examines the improvements that have taken place and the challenges which still remain.

In the article "*We're Going Slowly Because we're Going Far – Building an Autonomous Education System in Chiapas*", Stine Krøijer describes how the Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Mexico are continuing their self-government efforts, which includes having their own education policy. The indigenous uprising of 1994 encouraged deep discussions around education plans, proposing radical changes to ensure that teaching in the autonomous regions reflected the realities and needs of the communities. Education in the Zapatista territory is considered part of the process of strengthening both their organisation and their autonomy. Teachers receive no funding from the state, however, and as the communities are not always able to provide them with support, the continuity of the Zapatistas' autonomous education programme remains under threat.

Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador are considered plural and multicultural countries with official bilingual intercultural education programmes that could potentially form the basis for developing new innovative approaches. However, these education policies con-



Quechua women from Bolivia - Photo: ILO



Assembly in the new Joamie School, Iqaluit. Photo: Greg Younger-Lewis

tinue to be criticised by indigenous organisations for doing little more than translating the normal Spanish-language education curricula into indigenous languages. The article *“Indigenous Wisdom in Bilingual Intercultural Education: a Field of Struggle”* by Jytte Vagner considers the need to include the proposals of indigenous organisations and elders in official education programmes. The national organisation of the Peruvian Amazon, AIDSESEP, has been running one of the region’s most innovative education programmes for the last 15 years. This programme incorporates indigenous elders into the technical teams set up to develop the curriculum.

In Sabah, Malaysia, the indigenous organization PACOS has developed a successful pre-school system for indigenous children. The article *“Giving the Best Possible Start: Preschool Programme for Rural Indigenous Children in Sabah, Malaysia”* by Anne Lasimbang describes the development and functioning of this program, which has been successful in promoting education for more indigenous children in Sabah.

Only limited attempts have been made in Africa to design educational systems that respond to the specific needs of indigenous communities. However, some attempts have been made in southern Africa and

in the article *“Education and the San of Southern Africa”*, Jennifer Hays and Amanda Siegrühn analyse the educational situation of the marginalized San population and describe San education projects in Namibia, Botswana and South Africa.

In his article *“Indigenous Peoples’ Experiences with Formal Education: The Case of the Kenyan Pastoralists”* Johnson Ole Kaunga describes the attempts of a small pastoralist organization in Kenya to develop a shepherd education programme for Maasai children who would otherwise not have any possibility of attending school because they have to care for their families’ livestock throughout the day.

Culturally appropriate education for indigenous children is a key factor in the empowerment of indigenous communities and, as emphasized by the Special Rapporteur, must receive the priority it deserves, not only in public programmes and budgets at national level but also at international level and in international bodies involved in promoting development and fighting poverty, such as the World Bank and the UNDP. Education is part of the Millennium Development Goals and it is to be hoped that substantial progress can be achieved over the forthcoming decades. □

# EDUCATION IN THE CANADIAN ARCTIC: WHAT DIFFERENCE HAS THE NUNAVUT GOVERNMENT MADE?

Jack Hicks



*Inuit teacher, Joamie School, Iqaluit. Photo: Greg Younger-Lewis*



*Children learn how to make an igloo outside Aqsarniit Middle School, Iqaluit. Photo: Greg Younger-Lewis*

Photo: Greg Younger-Lewis



The birth of Nunavut, a vast but sparsely populated territory in the Canadian Arctic created after the division of the Northwest Territories on 1 April 1999, was not just the fruition of a political project. It was also the culmination of 25 years of lobbying to create a government that was a better reflection of the desires, and more suited to the needs of the majority of the people living there, 85 per cent of whom are Inuit.<sup>1</sup>

The new Nunavut government has jurisdiction over many of the things that matter the most in people's day-to-day lives - including education, health care and housing. The 18 men and one woman elected to Nunavut's first Legislative Assembly in the spring of 1999 assumed responsibility for a situation where health conditions were considerably worse than in the rest of Canada, with low levels of formal education, high and rising levels of violence, and by far the most overcrowded housing in the country.

As one overview of the creation of the new territory and government pointed out, *"The visionaries who gave birth to the Nunavut project and then negotiated it into existence did so in the belief that it would facilitate meaningful self-government, sustainable economic development and healthy communities. The challenge of overcoming Nunavut's economic and social problems, however, may well dwarf the considerable challenge of negotiating and implementing the aboriginal rights and 'self-government through public government' arrangements which make up the Nunavut project."*<sup>2</sup>

More than six years have now passed since the new government came into being. It is not too early to begin examining whether it is making any progress on those challenges, and this article will attempt to summarize what has happened with respect to the education system.

## The colonial approach

In historical Inuit society education was not an activity separate from the rest of people's daily lives. Each day saw young people being prepared to become adults capable of surviving in an exceedingly harsh environment, with successful educational outcome being the gradual assumption of adult roles and responsibilities. Traditional Inuit styles of education worked because everyone involved understood their purposes and methods. Inuit society was, almost by definition, an exceedingly well-educated society.

The introduction of European-style formal education, delivered by teachers in schools, in Canada's Arctic was remarkable for both its late arrival and its paternalistic character.

The federal government initially delegated its fiduciary responsibility for the education of Inuit children to the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches. These churches ran residential schools that were lonely and terrifying places for the children, who were taken from their family's camps by airplane in the autumn, and returned to their parents the following spring. *"Parents wept to see their children taken from them and sent to live among a different people in a foreign land. And their worst fears were rapidly realized by the disruption that such education caused to their children and to family life."*<sup>3</sup>

In 1954, the then Prime Minister acknowledged that Canada had *"administered its great northern territories with a complete absence of mind."* The previous year a federal official had estimated that perhaps five per cent of school-age Inuit children in the Northwest Territories and Arctic Québec were receiving *"reasonably consistent education."* The first federally run schools in the area to-

day known as Nunavut, opened in three communities in 1950 and in Frobisher Bay (now called Iqaluit, and the capital of Nunavut) in the fall of 1955. However, it took the government until 1968 to build elementary schools in all Inuit communities. Teachers brought up from the South laboured with minimal - and often entirely inappropriate - materials to provide the children of hunters and gatherers, recently settled in permanent communities, with the kind of rudimentary schooling that the government felt was in their best interest. A uniquely successful initiative was the establishment of the Churchill Vocational Centre (CVC) in Churchill, Manitoba in 1964. 851 young Inuit lived and studied at CVC over the ten years it operated; most have nothing but good things to say about the three years they spent there.<sup>4</sup>

The situation prevailing in the early 1970s, when Inuit began to lobby for a division of the Northwest Territories and the creation of Nunavut, was analyzed in a three-part essay entitled 'Inuit in our educational system' that Inuit rights activist Tagak Curley published in the magazine *Inuit Today* in late 1975 and early 1976:

*The children are now given to an institution for guidance and the Inuit parents, because of their inexperience with the values of the school system and because of their misconception or misunderstanding of the role of the school, concede to the educational system for their children's guidance and their future. ... The parents so often find themselves unable to help their children, even when the children (teenage years) so desperately need help. This happens mainly because, in my mind, of the parents' state of affairs. You see the parents are already defeated citizens (victims) of the present society. They have no pride or dignity involved with the democratic system and all the programs designed to serve them. They do not have the confidence to lead their children. There exists among the parents an inferior feeling which captures them and deprives them of their moral and rightful obligation as parents for the well-being of their children. They are in a state of cultural shock which originated when the government started to "civilize" them and conquered them. Eventually they lost their dignity.*

The board of directors of the national Inuit organization passed a resolution stating that "the high drop-out rate from schools in the Inuit homeland demonstrates that obvious fundamental defects exist in the education system," calling for a "complete overhaul of the education system" across Arctic Canada, and suggesting that "Inuit as well as non-Inuit consider not sending their children to school

*until assurances that necessary changes will be implemented are made."*

The fledgling Government of the Northwest Territories responded to this kind of organized dissatisfaction by establishing elected education councils in each community<sup>5</sup> And introducing legislation allowing instruction in indigenous languages until Grade 3 where communities desired it. Since there were just 12 trained Inuit teachers actually teaching in the schools at the time, Inuit classroom assistants with minimal training carried the additional burden. This in turn led to the creation of the Eastern Arctic Teacher Education Program in 1979, which was soon expanded by the introduction of field-based teacher training and strengthened by a 1981 partnership with McGill University.<sup>6</sup>

1979 also saw a number of young Inuit and Dene politicians seek election to the territorial legislature. Tagak Curley, now a Member of the Legislative Assembly, pushed for the creation of - and then co-chaired - a Special Committee on Education. That committee's recommendations resulted in a new *Education Act* being passed in 1983 and significant improvements being made to the education system across the Northwest Territories. Schools were expanded, progress was made on developing curriculum materials in indigenous languages, more authority was given to both the community-level councils and to management boards established in each of the three administrative regions in what is now Nunavut,<sup>7</sup> and secondary education of a kind was eventually extended to even the smallest communities. Still, problems remained - and few Inuit children graduated from high school (as secondary school is generally referred to), although some of those who did graduate had received the education (and, crucially, the parental support) required to continue and do well at universities in the South.

## The context for Nunavut

The situation existing just prior to the creation of Nunavut can be summed up by an editorial and a subsequent series of letters in *Nunatsiaq News*, the spirited weekly newspaper published in Iqaluit. The impetus for the newspaper's editorial of 6 March 1998, "The NWT's math flunk-outs" was the response by the Northwest Territories' Minister of Education to the news that northern students had done very poorly in a national mathematics test conducted the previous year. The Minister had shrugged off the test results, stating that "the tests aren't designed for Inuit and Dene children."



Inuit girl, Cape Dorset. Photo: Greg Younger-Lewis



Children in Cape Dorset. Photo: Greg Younger-Lewis

*“Disingenuous nonsense,”* the newspaper commented. *“Mathematics is a universal language. Whether you speak Arabic, Hindi, Cantonese, Swahili or any other language the principles of mathematics are the same. Aboriginal languages are no different. That’s what makes [the government’s] position so morally repugnant -- because it contains the unspoken assumption that aboriginal cultures are intellectually inferior to others.”*

*“In the territorial school system, little is expected of children so little is achieved. ... The prospects for change aren’t promising. At every level of the system ... a rigid conservatism prevails. No one wants to be responsible and no one wants to be accountable for the worst school system in Canada. Until that changes, the majority of Nunavut’s children will continue to wallow in ignorance and a frustrated state of colonized helplessness.”*

A teacher at the high school in Iqaluit responded the following week with a letter putting much of the blame on parents, because *“far too many children do not have basic support structures in place.”* The teacher argued that in order to succeed in school children need regular attendance, a decent night’s sleep, a decent breakfast, parental ownership of their child’s learning, and parental pride in their child’s accomplishments.

The following week a parent responded that he was appalled by the low standards at the school his child attended.

## Nunavut

When it became time to design the future Nunavut government, much of what was required for a modern education system was already in place. Modern, well-equipped primary and secondary schools existed in every community. Community residents elected education councils, and school operations were managed by three regional boards, which were composed of representatives from the community-level councils. A modest community college system was operating. What was missing was the ‘headquarters’ of the Department of Education - consisting of the most senior departmental officials, the policy staff, the financial managers, the people who planned and built new schools etc.

Soon after taking office Nunavut’s first Cabinet decided to eliminate the three regional education boards,<sup>8</sup> and they were wound down at the same time as the new Department of Education was starting up. Between dissolution of the boards, the challenges inherent in division (including the loss of a great deal of ‘in-



stitutional memory') and the additional challenges imposed by decentralization (the decision to locate components of the departmental headquarters in communities other than the capital), the department is likely to remain in building/re-building mode for years to come.

The first years of Nunavut have been as turbulent for the education system as they have been for other parts of the government. Nunavut's first Minister of Education resigned just a year and half into his mandate, the first Deputy Minister returned to the South in the spring of 2001, and other senior positions in the department have experienced a high rate of turnover as well.

In its first year of its existence the new government embarked on a high-profile effort to rewrite the *Education Act* it had inherited from the Northwest Territories. The then Minister called it "an initiative that will impact on the development of education in Nunavut for many years to come." The reality turned out to be rather less than the rhetoric. What the public got was a vague 'consultation' process that produced little of substance, and a draft *Bill 1* that almost no one liked or supported. *Nunatsiaq News* commented that the intent of the draft legislation appeared to be "to remove control and authority from community-based elected bodies and put it all in the hands of the Minister and departmental bureaucrats."<sup>9</sup> Members of the Legislative Assembly made other trenchant criticisms, including the fact that the bill contained no clear legal requirement that Inuktitut be taught in Nunavut's schools.

Nunavut's first Legislative Assembly eventually rejected the draft legislation, and the Department of Education has since launched a new attempt to rewrite the *Education Act*.

At the same time, a report setting out a ten-year plan to implement Inuktitut as the language of instruction in Nunavut was being "reviewed" inside the departmental headquarters for two years, before it was made public. Children have long been able to attend school in Inuktitut through to Grade 3, and many parents would like their children to be able to complete Grade 12 entirely in Inuktitut. Other parents, however, are so disillusioned with the quality of Inuktitut instruction (especially in the higher grades) that they are asking the department to leave Inuktitut instruction up to the family and focus instead on teaching English and mathematics competently. "I was quite surprised that the [councils] asked that no Inuktitut be taught in schools," the Minister of Education commented recently after traveling to several communities for consultations.

## Positive experiences and initiatives

Nunavut's education system is not without its successes. An average of 130 students now graduate from high school each year, this is more than twice the number that graduated each year during the 1990s. 380 Nunavummiut are currently enrolled in post-secondary programs in southern Canada, and that is in addition to the hundreds of students enrolled in Nunavut's community college system. Less quantifiable is the *quality* of education that these students have received. While some graduates continue to university and do well there, Nunavut Arctic College has found it necessary to implement an 'access year' program, to ensure that students enrolling in its programs have the basic language and math skills to succeed at college level.

The teacher education program continues to train teachers in the communities they live in, although the campus-based version of the program has been less successful at retaining students. Delivering training primarily where 'adult learners' live (and already have families, and most likely a housing unit that they could lose if they left the community) seems to be working in the case of teacher training, but other courses must primarily be delivered in a central location - such as the new nurse training program which recently graduated the first two nurses to have been educated entirely in the territory. The cost per student of delivering this kind of post-secondary education in Nunavut is fantastically high (the nurse training program costs \$1 million per year, but accepts just 14 new students each year - of whom six made it through the first year in 2004, but what has been the cost to the society as a whole of not having any Inuit nurses?

The Nunavut government has also been part of an initiative that offered Inuit a one-time opportunity to earn a Bachelor of Laws degree from the University of Victoria through an academic program delivered in Iqaluit. More than a dozen Inuit - most of them women, as is usually the case with post-secondary education in Nunavut - have recently graduated as fully qualified lawyers. The Akitsiraq Law School program is widely viewed as having been a huge success. Again, the cost per student of running a law school in Nunavut has been fantastically high - but what has been the cost to the society as a whole of not having any Inuit lawyers?<sup>10</sup>

(right) Class in Joamie School, Iqaluit - Photo: Greg Younger - Lewis



## Challenges remain

Programs such as these - and indeed the Nunavut project itself - can only succeed if enough young people graduate from high school in a position to succeed in post-secondary training. Inuit with high school diplomas are at a huge premium in Nunavut these days - especially in the capital, Iqaluit, where many of the senior positions resulting from the creation of Nunavut are located. As was the case in Greenland, self-government actually resulted in *increased* numbers of non-Inuit moving to the new capital to take challenging and high-paying jobs. Nunavut's heavy reliance on short-term workers from southern Canada will not diminish until there are more well-educated Nunavummiut who can fill those positions.

Sadly, three-quarters of Nunavut's children drop out without completing their education. Nunavut's high school graduation numbers improved after it became possible to complete Grade 12 in the smaller communities, but they have plateau-ed at a graduation rate of just 25 per cent - one third of the rate of the rest of the country. Many students find it difficult to progress past Grade 10, where they first encounter the high school curriculum. Nunavut's school enrollment figures (and it should be noted that figures on actual attendance are not available) show a bulge in that year, as many students try for a second year to pass their Grade 10 exams. The number of students continuing to Grades 11 and 12 is much lower than the number who enter Grade 10.

Only 38 per cent of the 573 teachers in Nunavut are Inuit, and the small size of the teacher education program has resulted in the system barely being able to replace the Inuit teachers who leave the classroom for other types of work in the new government - and certainly not able to expand teaching in Inuktitut beyond Grade 3. There are still no Inuit teachers at the high school level, and there is no realistic possibility of Nunavut offering its children Inuktitut instruction through to Grade 12 in the foreseeable future even if parents were united in their desire to see this happen. Establishing Inuktitut as the working language of Nunavut will also be impossible if the percentage of non-Inuit in the central agencies of the Nunavut government remains as high as it is today.<sup>11</sup>

There are few tools for holding the school system accountable. While some people oppose standardized testing as being insensitive to cultural differences, others argue that the absence of testing denies parents an important means by which to monitor the system - and to pressure it to improve the quality of education that their children receive when testing reveals prob-

lems. The few test results that exist are dismal. In math tests conducted across Canada in 2001, students in Nunavut performed at levels well below the rest of the country. Only 27.8 per cent of 13-year-old Nunavut students could reach even 'Level 1', the lowest of five levels of difficulty against which student performance was measured. That means most students in Nunavut have not mastered simple skills such as multiplying two numbers less than 1,000, or interpreting simple information contained in graphs and tables. Across Canada, 88.3 per cent of 13-year-olds reached or exceeded 'Level 1'. Just 8 per cent of 13-year-olds in Nunavut met or exceeded 'Level 2', considered to be the minimum acceptable level of difficulty for this age group. Predictably, Nunavut's senior education official offered the same kinds of explanations (excuses?) as his predecessors in the Northwest Territories used to offer.<sup>12</sup>

There is, however, consensus that the solution to this situation is much bigger than just what happens in the classroom. As the current Minister of Education notes, "*A teacher only has a student for 4 or 5 hours a day - the rest is up to the parents.*" The President of the Federation of Nunavut Teachers believes that drop-out rates will decrease only if "*... children begin arriving at school energized after having had a nutritious meal, and a peaceful sleep in homes where the parents live a healthy lifestyle --- which includes ensuring that their children attend school every day and valuing their children's education by taking an active part in it.*" He suggests that a wider, bolder strategy is needed: "*a strategy that will enable all children in Nunavut to come to school prepared. This will take a gigantic refocusing of thinking and action, with an interagency committee forming in each community of all partners in the life of the child - family, health and social services, education, policing, elders, etc. - to find solutions to the issue of poor attendance and drop-out rates.*" The head of the teachers' union acknowledges that the Nunavut government invested more than \$100 million in new schools during its first five years,<sup>13</sup> but notes that it is easier to achieve results from an aggressive building plan (which offers politicians welcome opportunities to attend opening ceremonies) than it is from under-resourced programs in the classrooms.

## Pressure to do better

In 1975, an Inuk with a vision for his people argued that colonialism and paternalism had stripped Canadian Inuit of their dignity. With the creation of Nunavut a measure of Inuit dignity has been restored, but serious

social problems still plague the communities. Nunavut's high school graduation rate of 25 per cent is as much a symptom of widespread social suffering as the tragically high rates of suicide by young Inuit men.

Observers fear that without significant socio-economic improvements (which would require investments far larger than the Nunavut government's budget is capable of) and aggressive, well-planned education, training initiatives - from early childhood right through to on-going training and development for employees of all levels of the public service - human resource challenges may doom the new government to be a less effective version of the previous government, dressed in a seal-skin vest. The new Department of Education has yet to display the vision, the capacity or the willingness to innovate and take risks that initiatives of this magnitude require.

25 years ago Canada's national Inuit organization stated that low graduation rates "[demonstrate] that obvious fundamental defects exist in the education system." That critique is as true now, as it was then. In the 1970s and 1980s, it was Inuit organizations that lobbied the Northwest Territories' Department of Education to improve the education system. Today it appears to be up to the Inuit and non-Inuit parents elected to community education councils to challenge Nunavut's Department of Education to play a more active role in the processes of healing and social change that the new territory so urgently requires.

Self-government institutions are only as effective as people make them, and Nunavut's education system has a critical role to play - and a long way to go - before the dream of Nunavut can become a reality. □

## Notes

- 1 Nunavut covers an area of 2.1 million square kilometers, roughly the size of continental Europe. There are 25 communities, ranging in size from 175 to 6,000 people. Nunavut's 2001 Census population count was 26,745 of whom 84.6 per cent were Inuit. The Inuit population is very young: Persons less than 15 years of age comprise 40 per cent of the Inuit population (compared to just under 20 per cent for Canadians as a whole), while persons less than 25 years of age comprise 60 per cent of the Inuit population. The median age of Inuit in Nunavut in 2001 was 19.1 years, compared to 37.6 years for Canada as a whole.
- 2 Jack Hicks and Graham White, "Nunavut: Inuit self-determination through a land claim and public government?" in: *Nunavut: Inuit Regain Control Of Their Lands And Their Lives* (eds.) Jens Dahl, Jack Hicks and Peter Jull (Copenhagen: IWGIA, 2000).
- 3 Hugh Brody, *The People's Land: Eskimos and Whites in the Eastern Arctic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 186.

- 4 One of the many present-day Nunavut leaders who went to CVC made a point of explaining that she is not a residential school *survivor*, she is a residential school *graduate*.
- 5 The names given to these community education councils have changed several times over the years; they are now called District Education Authorities.
- 6 Frank Darnell and Anton Hoëm, *Taken to Extremes: Education in the Far North* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996), pp. 162-70.
- 7 Starting with the Baffin Divisional Board of Education in 1985, and later in the Keewatin and Kitikmeot regions. See Darnell and Hoëm, pp. 223-7.
- 8 In an attempt to balance concerns about duplication with respect for "the longstanding tradition in Canada that parents and other electors have a direct say in the running of schools," The Nunavut Implementation Commission had recommended that the three boards be collapsed into one. NIC, *Footprints in New Snow* (1995), p. 26.
- 9 Even without the new legislation, some disgruntled school principals and teachers find it ironic that educational decision-making is now more centralized in the departmental headquarters than it was in the last decade of the previous government - primarily due to the demise of the regional boards. As the regional boards were composed almost entirely of Inuit, and as most of the senior officials in the headquarters are non-Inuit, critics note that this has resulted in a decline in *Inuit* control.
- 10 Nunavut's first Inuit lawyer was 'called to the bar' in early 1999, and just a few weeks later was elected to be the first Premier. Many of Nunavut's first crop of home-grown lawyers may also choose to put their legal education to use in ways other than becoming practicing lawyers.
- 11 How long would the French language survive in the province of Québec, the only French-speaking jurisdiction in North America, if Québécois children were educated in English from Grade 4 on?!
- 12 "Nunavut flunks national math test," *Nunatsiaq News*, April 12, 2002.
- 13 The federal government does not provide money specifically targeted for Nunavut's education system. Educational expenditures are financed out of the territorial government's general revenues, more than 90 per cent of which are provided by the federal government. The education system therefore has to compete with other Nunavut government departments - most notably the Department of Health and Social Services - for increasingly scarce resources.

*Jack Hicks served as Director of Research for the Nunavut Implementation Commission, and as the Nunavut government's Director of Evaluation and Statistics from 1999 to 2004. He is now a social research consultant based in Iqaluit, and an external Ph.D. student at "Ilisimatusearfik" (The University of Greenland).*

Photo: Stine Krøijer



# “WE’RE GOING SLOWLY BECAUSE WE’RE GOING FAR” BUILDING AN AUTONOMOUS EDUCATION SYSTEM IN CHIAPAS

Photo: Stine Krøijer



Stine Krøijer

*"Indigenous autonomy is now reality on Zapatista territory, and we are proud that the communities themselves have been the driving force behind this. However, I do not want to give the impression that the situation is a perfect or ideal one. "To govern by obeying" is a trend in Zapatista territories but it is not without its ups and downs, its contradictions and deviations. And yet it is a dominant trend. And it has benefited the communities to talk of having managed to survive conditions of persecution, harassment and poverty rarely before seen in the world's history. The autonomous councils have managed to achieve a gigantic task: that of building the physical conditions for resistance. But they have not done this alone; it has been with the essential support of civil society. Responsible for governing a territory in rebellion, in other words, with no institutional support and in a state of persecution and harassment, the autonomous councils have focused their sights on two essential aspects: health and education".<sup>1</sup>*

## Dreams become reality

Since the armed Zapatista uprising in 1994, the Zapatista communities in the south-east of Mexico have endeavoured to govern themselves, and to do so autonomously. When the Mexican state decided to ignore the demands of millions of indigenous people by failing to approve the Indigenous Law – a product of the 1996 dialogue between the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) and the government – the Zapatista communities decided to put their dreams into practice and make autonomy a reality in their territories. From a position of resistance, the region's indigenous peoples began to implement health, education and marketing systems and to organise their own autonomous authorities. They decided to do this, and turn their back on the state's so-called social development programmes, until the collective rights of indigenous peoples were recognised<sup>2</sup>.

The autonomous education system that is described below is the concrete result of the organisational process, and the importance of having an autonomous education system that increasingly trains members of the Zapatista communities to face up to the enormous tasks of self-government is obvious.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, it is the objective of the education system that it strengthens autonomy at all levels and recovers languages and cultural values and customs. It would be impossible to relate here the wealth of experience that the last ten years of work on autonomous education in the three zones has provided.<sup>4</sup> Instead, we will focus on analys-

ing the relationship between education and building autonomy.

## The community: the bedrock of autonomy

The community is the foundation of the autonomous education system and one of the Zapatista authorities. It is essential that any education system corresponds to the communities' needs in a way that the official system never did. "The whole process was built around dialogue, and a number of consultations took place in order to decide on the four key areas and the way in which our demands would be included. Autonomy is thus an ongoing practice," explains a member of the North Zone's Good Governance Committee (*Junta de Buen Gobierno*).<sup>5</sup>

The indigenous communities made a number of fundamental criticisms of the official school system. They highlighted the absenteeism and alcoholism of the teachers, their interference in the internal affairs of the community, their lack of respect for indigenous languages and cultures, their inadequate teaching methods - demonstrated by the fact that the children "didn't even learn to write a letter" -, their use of corporal punishment, the frequent aggression and sexual abuse of women and the irrelevance of much of what they taught.

Following the Zapatista uprising, many of the official teachers abandoned their schools and an opportunity thus arose to consider bringing in a different education system. For more than 6 months, with the help of a group of people from Mexico City, discussions were held on content, teaching methods and how an autonomous education system should be organised. These community consultations resulted in the choice of 4 key areas: Life and Environment, History, Languages and Mathematics. It was important that these areas reflected the reality and needs of the communities: the relationship between human beings and nature; the use of natural resources at community and at national and international level; the history of the community and the historical condition of indigenous peoples, etc.

The four areas are organised around the 11 Zapatista demands.<sup>6</sup> When teaching the demands, the promoter seeks to recover past experiences together with the children and promote collective creativity, whilst remaining open to change and integrating the knowledge of all those included in the process. For example, the situation of the community's lands and their history in terms of their recovery and release from the large estates is discussed with the children; their demands for

land and territory are considered, along with outside interests over their natural resources (oil, biodiversity, water). It is a question of taking the child's concrete experiences as a starting point and inspiring him or her to consider how the community's situation could be improved. The focus on demands also ensures that culture is taught as something that is changing and relevant to the present day.

## A different way of teaching

As previously explained, the people's demands are expressed within the classroom so that the pupils can consider how best to resolve them, and their history is taught in order to build greater autonomy. Both the content and the methodology of the autonomous education system are therefore closely related to the political aspirations of the Zapatista movement.

This change in pedagogy is the result of greater reflection on children's rights among the education promoters<sup>7</sup> and the communities. Children are no longer punished; other ways of motivating them are found. They take the interests of the child as a starting point and attempt to create a varied environment that stimulates research. And change can be seen in the children: they are more self-aware, more aware of their rights, and their parents say they now show a greater appreciation of their culture and identity. "The children are beginning to maintain their culture and identity," explains one parent from the municipality of Ricardo Flores Magón. "They are aware of our demands and of the right to self-determination. One day, the children will become the authorities and will support their people". Many parents appreciate this change in methods although it has taken some time to get used to it, particularly the new assessment methods, which continue to be a topic of debate.

In the North Zone, they have sought to assess the children through "end products". This could be a theatrical production, a mural explaining a demand, a mathematics shop where the children help their parents calculate the cost of peppers, etc. The end products are an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills to their community. In addition, the promoters talk to the parents or the whole community about the children's progress and a joint assessment is carried out, discussing how they can continue to motivate the pupils. The use of qualifications has been completely abandoned although there is talk of the value of some kind of written endorsement that could be useful if the San Andrés Accords and the autonomous education

system are one day recognised. At the moment, the Mexican State does not recognise the autonomous education system even though Mexico has formally ratified the ILO Convention no. 169. The formal education system is seen as the primary tool for the creation of national unity and assimilation of the indigenous population.

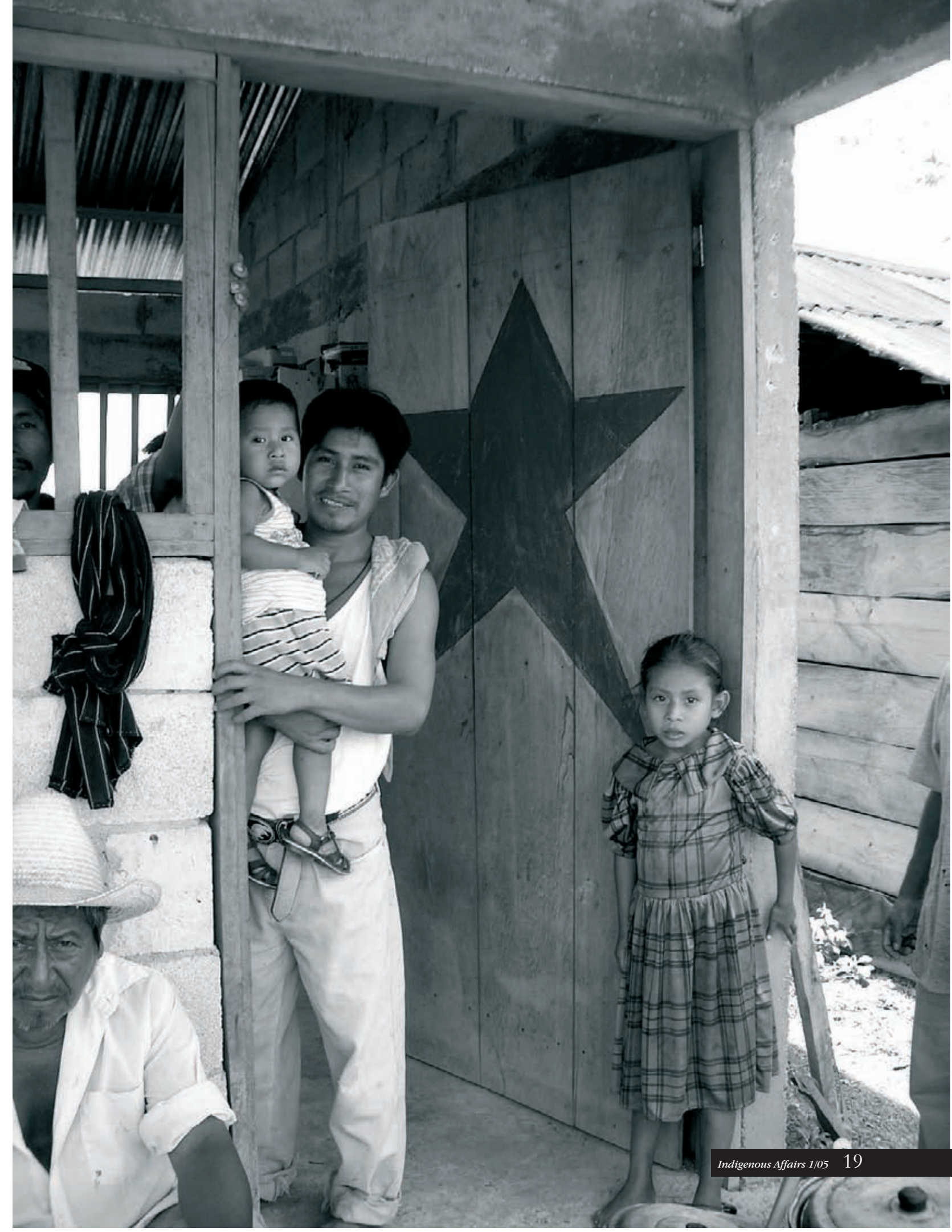
## Teacher training

The education promoters are chosen by the communities themselves and so they often arrive to start their training with varying degrees of education. The small communities often send very young promoters who cannot yet read or write. As the government does not recognise the autonomous education system, the promoters receive no pay. It is the community's responsibility to support the promoter and his/her family through collective work on the family's fields. According to those interviewed, the Good Governance Committees are making sustained efforts to promote women's rights and one third of the promoters in the zones are now women.

The promoters receive just one year's training. During that year, they alternate between spending 20 days at the Training Centre and 10 days in their community in order to put what they have learnt into practice. During their training, they develop materials and work sheets covering the 4 key areas and the people's demands. Great efforts have been made to provide follow-up for promoters once they have completed their training. Meetings of all the promoters take place twice a year in every Centre. These meetings offer an opportunity to exchange methods, analyse problems encountered in the school or community and gain further knowledge of different areas.

One concrete expression of the increasing autonomy in the three zones' communities is the fact that they are gradually taking over the process of training new promoters themselves. The training of the first generation took place with the support of a group of assistants from Mexico City but the communities soon realised there was a need to have their own trainers, who would have a better understanding of the communities' problems and indigenous culture. A number of promoters have now taken over the role of trainers, responsible for training the new generations of promoters. In other words, responsibility for the autonomous education system is increasingly being taken by the people themselves.

Education has a very important role to play in strengthening organisation and autonomy. This is re-





flected in many ways: the promoters act not only as educators in the school but they also play an organisational role in the community and zone as well. This is expressed, for example, in the fact that they may help people to read and write letters, provide literacy classes to adults or hold positions of responsibility within their communities. In addition, the promoters help to counteract the offensive from official teachers and other local government representatives who are used by the central government to destroy the Zapatista organisation and break up local unity by offering school breakfasts, female sterilization plans or loans to single families. The government also knows that education is of strategic importance and the existence of an autonomous school in the community is an important element of resistance. Therefore the Mexican government has begun building schools in the communities with Zapatista population and does its best to convince the parents of sending their children to the government school.

### Challenges for the future

The autonomous education system is not dependent on external funding. The greatest challenge therefore continues to be enabling the communities to support their own promoters. Promoters often have more on their minds than just the children and teaching them; they often have to find their own living too. It is not always possible for small communities to support all their promoters (health, agriculture, education) and sometimes the harvests are not as good as expected. The harsh reality of resistance only makes the situation worse. The Good Governance Committees are trying to promote collective work and small production activities to improve the situation.

In terms of education, another challenge is the level of bilingualism and the use of indigenous languages in the classroom. In two of the zones, the children use a number of indigenous languages but find Spanish extremely difficult. In the Forest Border zone, near the border with Guatemala, the loss of the indigenous language (Tojolabal) is more notable and Spanish is the first language for many children. The promoters are trying to recover the language from the old people but this requires great efforts when the language is no longer spoken in the home.

The issue now is one of strengthening the indigenous languages and seeking appropriate ways of teaching them as either a first or second language. Other issues relate to reaching agreements on how the languages are written, having access to materials in indigenous

languages and ensuring greater inclusion of the communities' elders in the classes.

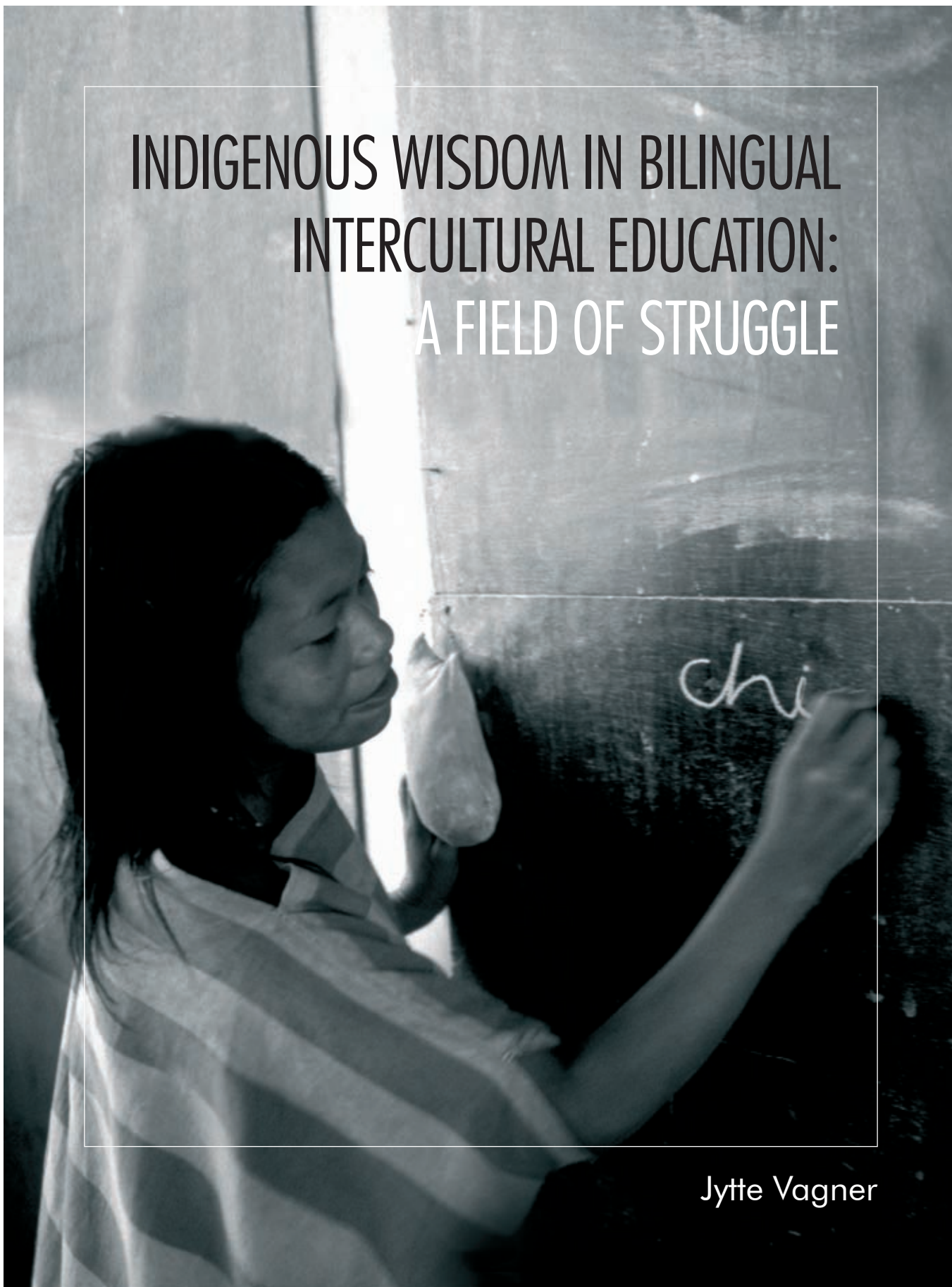
The autonomous education system in Chiapas is securing that the children of Zapatista parents get a basic education that has been lacking in the communities for years. Today, the children can read, write, get a fair price for their products and they know their basic rights. Obviously, it is a major challenge for the future to obtain the recognition of the new education system, which according to the Zapatista depends on the government's willingness to recognise the San Andrés Accords that provide the overall framework of collective rights. Until then, the children from the communities are not able to go for the official higher education. But, as they say in the communities, "We're going slowly, because we're going far and one day our rights will be recognised". □

### Notes

- 1 Speech by the EZLN at the WTO demonstration, September 2003
- 2 Chiapas, with its population of approximately 3,2 million (in 1990), is the poorest of the Mexican States. It is the State with the highest percentage of indigenous populations (almost one third) and with the most unequal distribution of land (Estratda Martínez: *El problema de las expulsiones en las comunidades indígenas de los altos de Chiapas*, 1995:13-17).
- 3 This article is based on an evaluation of the project "Semillita del Sol" that took place in April-May 2005 together with Priscila Pacheco. The project, funded by Operation Dagsværk, which is the Danish student organisation, supports the establishment of an autonomous education system in three Zapatista zones.
- 4 The zapatista "territory" is divided into five autonomous zones or caracoles: Roberto Barrios (or Zona Norte), La Garrucha (or Zona Selva Tzeltal), Oventic, Morelia and La Realidad (or Zona Selva Fronteriza). Each zone consists of various autonomous municipalities.
- 5 The Good Governance Committees form the autonomous governments. They also represent a construction of power via networks between a zone's autonomous municipalities and the establishment of organs of power (self-governments) with a new style of exercising power (distinct from the Mexican style of "bad government").
- 6 The demands are also called the fifth area of the education system or the "area of integration". The 11 Zapatista demands are land, housing, work, food, health, democracy, freedom, justice, peace and security, education, culture and information.
- 7 The teachers in the autonomous education system are known as education promoters to avoid accusations that they are "usurping the role" of central government.

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# INDIGENOUS WISDOM IN BILINGUAL INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION: A FIELD OF STRUGGLE



Jytte Vagner



Gran Pajonal, Peru. Photo: Alejandro Parellada

**B**olivia, Peru and Ecuador have all ratified Convention 169 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which recognises the existence of indigenous peoples with collective rights. With regard to education, this convention proposes the creation of state-funded indigenous educational institutes at all levels, educational programmes in the indigenous languages and in the language of cultural interface, the use of the media and the production of educational materials in local languages.

The constitutions of the three countries recognise their multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual reality. During the 1980s and early 1990s, education laws and reforms were passed recognising Bilingual Intercultural Education (BIE). Although the institutional framework within which BIE operates is different in each of the three countries, each has a national-level department responsible for BIE.

The implementation of BIE was a battlefield from the very start, however, with tensions being created due to the different representations and versions of the truth and reality at play. The knowledge that constructs the different versions of the truth and the validity of each one, as well as their interactions, are all issues related to power.

BIE has thus far been based on the same curriculum that has been used for years in regular Spanish-speaking education. All they do is translate it into the indigenous



language, make a few improvements in terms of methodology and then divide the content into levels for the children according to cognitive conceptions. The curricula continue to be produced by experts who, in the best of cases, undertake studies in the communities but do not involve the people in their production and continue



Bolivia. Photo: Nikolaj Bro Moseholm - Ibis

to use a scientific approach to the study of reality, ignoring the existence of other approaches. No questioning of the concept or policies of knowledge itself therefore occurs; there is no insistence on such issues as: What knowledge? Whose knowledge? For what? For whom?

But the problem lies not only in a lack of recognition within national policy. Indigenous organisations and academics find themselves in a vacuum in terms of systematising their knowledge and methodologies in order to incorporate them into the curricula. There are isolated experiences and strategies, such as a knowledge recovery programme so that a community can maintain its culture, for example, but no wider official programme.

This article is based on proposals from indigenous organisations and elders with regard to what knowledge the teacher training curricula should include and how it should be included. This debate grew out of an exchange between BIE technicians and indigenous elders and has resulted in strategies and methodologies for incorporating this knowledge into the curricula. It has demonstrated the urgent need for political will in terms of considering indigenous knowledge and practices valid for the teaching/learning process. It is only in this way that the monoculturalism of current educational systems will be overcome, focusing on the organisations' policies of recovering and (re)creating new research methods with which to systematize indigenous wisdom and produce curricula. This article endeav-

ours to illustrate the struggles, both epistemological and socio-political, that are currently at play in the efforts to achieve true interculturality in BIE, with the aim of challenging the ideological domination of the education system and giving new direction to BIE.

### Ideological decolonization

In October 2004, the bloc known as the "Unity of Native and Popular Indigenous Peoples" (UIO-P)<sup>1</sup> produced a proposal for transforming national education entitled: "For a native indigenous education - Towards ideological, political, territorial and socio-cultural self-determination - Towards ideological, political, territorial and socio-cultural decolonization". The proposal comprises the thoughts, approaches, proposals, demands and plans of indigenous peoples in terms of transforming the way in which Bolivian education policy is applied and monitored in the context of BIE. It also recounts the achievements and difficulties plus lessons learned in the implementation of the many BIE experiences both in Bolivia and in Latin America as a whole. It proposes the following in terms of curricular content:

*"For the native indigenous nations, the production of a curriculum for the whole of the plurinational education system should take as its starting point the world view, territorial, cultural and linguistic reality of the communities. This cur-*

*riculum should include the universal knowledge necessary for the education of life and for life itself. (...)*

*The curriculum should develop a knowledge of the different aspects of the life of the nations, on the basis of local and regional learning needs, in order to thus respond to demands and expectations and should, in turn, strengthen community life. (...)*

*The research involved in curricula production will form an opportunity to create true community participation in education.”<sup>2</sup>*

Similarly in Peru, the indigenous people of the Amazon - represented by the national Amazonian organisation, AIDSESEP - have for more than 15 years been basing their proposal for bilingual intercultural education on an ethical/political dimension. By taking responsibility for training teachers in BIE, AIDSESEP not only wanted to improve the educational level of indigenous boys and girls but also consolidate a number of aspects that they believed to be fundamental. In their opinion, the BIE programme is an essential vehicle for disseminating and affirming the exercise of indigenous rights and they believe that, in addition to the pedagogical information a teacher needs to know, s/he must also teach the boys and girls about their rights to territory and self-determination because it is the peoples' right to decide their own future and take their own decisions. The BIE proposal includes elements of their cultural heritage and what they learn in contact with other peoples and other knowledge systems.

In the teacher training programme 'Training of Teachers for Bilingual Education in the Peruvian Amazon' (FORMABIAP), promoted by AIDSESEP, elders have been included in the teams alongside teachers and technicians in order to develop the curriculum and core educational themes (life cycle, agroecological cycle, ritual cycle and astral cycle)<sup>3</sup>. This approach takes as its starting point a vision of humankind's relationship with nature, along with AIDSESEP's political objectives (the right to self-determination, to indigenous territories etc). The elders are chosen according to their knowledge of culture (myths, rites, dances, art, use of medicinal plants etc), their knowledge of indigenous languages, their handicraft skills and political commitment to the community, among other things.

These proposals do not reject what is traditionally considered as theoretical knowledge but they do focus on local, cultural and ancestral knowledge and the links between human beings, space and nature. In addition they aim for collective knowledge based on community

participation. Understanding and using knowledge in this way suggests that the political project of BIE is not simply political but also epistemological. Within the project can be found an epistemological system that incorporates ways of knowing, concepts, logics and ideologies, all rooted in the people's experience of their historical-cultural condition and power relations.

## **Wisdom in the curriculum**

The challenge for the indigenous organisations now is to include this knowledge in the education system and thus overcome the reigning hegemony and monoculturalism. A number of possible solutions to this challenge were suggested at an event<sup>4</sup> involving BIE technicians and indigenous elders.

Firstly, they concluded that it was necessary to recognise and henceforward talk of *indigenous wisdom*, as this is how ancestral knowledge is considered and recognised in the indigenous communities. It is unimportant whether this knowledge is recognised by "science" and the "scientists" or not. Wisdom is a form of knowledge that is present and applied on a daily basis. Its transmission and development, and its inclusion in the teacher training curriculum, will need to be considered from the viewpoint of indigenous concepts. For this, it will be necessary to include elders in the educational process as a matter of urgency as it is they that are the repository of the ancestral wisdom of the communities. Their involvement would contribute to the formulation of new strategies and methodologies for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge into the curricula and into all educational materials.

In addition, they concluded that it was not only a question of including indigenous content but of incorporating a completely different approach to reality and knowledge. Indigenous elders should participate in this process because, as stated above, it is they that hold this knowledge. With regard to making changes to the structure of the teacher training curriculum, the following strategies were proposed:

In the academic sphere, there is a need to clearly define the epistemological status of ancestral knowledge and practices. There is still some confusion that prevents the true value of indigenous knowledge from being accepted. The way in which the elders organise this knowledge differs from scientific methods. There are no taxonomies, no divisions. It involves thought, feeling, philosophy and spirituality. A consensus will need to be reached on the categories used in discussions and appropriate terminology will need to be sought so that

the concepts can cover the whole range of ideas. In addition, they want to apply new research methods, and to do so ethically and with respect. It must be those who are working in the communities that carry out this research. To research is to live, participate and then write. In this regard, future research on the part of teachers could be aimed at recovering, rescuing and systematising names.

In the social sphere, those running the teacher training colleges will need to permit the participation of parents and elders in the education process. These people should be involved in the organisation, planning and implementation of the BIE curriculum.

The physical space of the teacher training colleges will need to be opened up to nature, not in terms of practical agricultural work but as an academic space from which the pupils can gain far more sustenance. This will necessarily need to draw on the knowledge and gain the approval of the parents and community.

In the political sphere, there is an urgent need for the political will to accept this knowledge and these practices as valid for the learning-teaching process. In this regard, it was considered important to influence the indigenous communities and the direction of BIE in order to encourage the involvement of elders and strengthen the way in which wisdom is considered in the BIE educational process. Another key element is the formation of cooperation and exchange networks between the continent's indigenous communities so that they can take up the task of incorporating wisdom into the curriculum and give new direction to the current BIE system.

These strategies reflect an approach to reality that is totally different from the scientific way of doing things. Wisdom is grounded in practice, it is a form of knowledge based on experience and is present and applied on a daily basis. For this, all stakeholders (elders, parents, people playing a role in the community) are considered producers of knowledge.

## Conclusion

Despite the educational reforms, and the fact that the Andean countries consider themselves to be pluri- and multicultural, BIE as a national policy - and specifically the idea that BIE goes beyond bilingualism and should incorporate other knowledge - is making slow progress in the three countries. In addition, the words pluri- and multiculturalism hold no great importance within the dominant structures of society, and government spaces continue to be monocultural. The incorporation of indigenous wisdom is not being undertaken as a national

policy but as work on the part of indigenous - and some international - organisations. Disciplinarization continues at national level - whereby indigenous peoples are treated as the object rather than the subject of knowledge - and this is reinforced by a total division between school and community. The strategies and methodologies proposed by the indigenous organisations in terms of changing the curricula are aimed at overcoming this disciplinarization and decolonizing knowledge. The fact that the organisations are exchanging their experiences and producing concrete strategies and methodologies in terms of how to systematize a knowledge base that is built at the local and practical level and how to include it in the teacher training curriculum enables them - on the basis of concrete proposals - to have greater influence over national public education policies and to demand their collective rights. □

## Notes

- 1 Organisations comprising the UIO-P: Consejo Nacional de Marcas y Ayllus del Qullasuyu (CONAMAQ); Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia (CSUTCB); Confederación de Indígenas del Oriente Boliviano (CIDOB); Asamblea del Pueblo Guaraní (APG); Confederación Sindical de Colonizadores de Bolivia (CSCB), Federación Sindical de Mujeres "Bartolina Sisa" (FSM-BS), Consejo Educativo Aymará (CEA), CENAQ, CEPOG and CEAM.
- 2 UIO-P: 2004 For a Native Indigenous Education - Towards ideological, political, territorial and socio-cultural self-determination pp. 63-64
- 3 The life cycle refers to the process of conception, birth, growth and death. The agroecological cycle refers to the process of preparation, sowing, earthing up and harvesting. The ritual cycle refers to festivals related to the life and agroecological cycles. The astral cycle refers to the lunar and astral calendars, to the influences of the stars on life.
- 4 III Regional Meeting on Bilingual Intercultural Education "Ciencia Indígena en el Currículo de Formación Docente" Puyo, Ecuador December 2002. CONAIE, DINEIB Ecuador, Ibis-Denmark. Bolivia, Peru, Guatemala and Ecuador participated.

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# EDUCATION AND THE SAN OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

Jennifer Hays and Amanda Siegrühn



The San<sup>1</sup> are the indigenous peoples of southern Africa, numbering approximately 100,000 and representing three major linguistic groups. Once living throughout the southern part of the continent, today the San live primarily in Namibia, Botswana and South Africa, with very small numbers also residing in Zambia, Zimbabwe and Angola. Like indigenous peoples worldwide, San communities are currently facing drastic social change, extreme marginalisation and poverty.<sup>2</sup> Literacy, numeracy and other skills learned at the formal schools are increasingly necessary for survival, and San communities want their children to succeed in the school system and to obtain these skills. Unfortunately, San communities across southern Africa experience serious problems with education.<sup>3</sup>

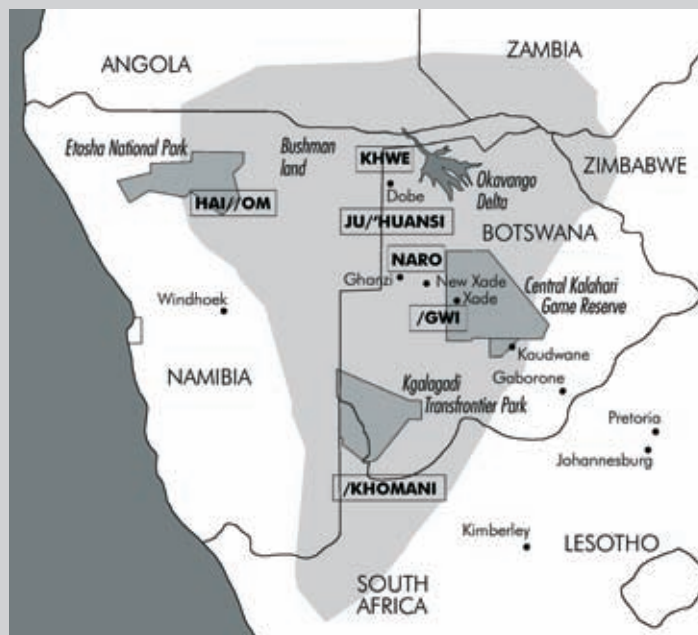
The most obvious and commonly noted problem is a very high drop-out rate (and thus low success rate) among San students. This has been attributed to a number of interconnecting factors, including the lack of mother-tongue education for most San communities, cultural differences between the home and school, cultural practices (such as hunting trips or initiation ceremonies) that keep students away from school, frequent abuse at the hands of school authorities and other students, and the alienating experience of boarding schools (often necessitated by the great distances between their home villages and the schools).

Extensive consultations among San communities about their educational situation have revealed that for both parents and learners, educational success is viewed as crucial for the survival of their communities. They want to have access to the skills they need to actively and effectively participate in the economic and decision-making processes that affect them. However, an attitude of resistance to existing formal education systems has developed, as communities see that children in these systems often turn their backs on their communities or else return without employment in the formal economic sector and without having learned traditional survival methods. Many parents comment that their children have been 'stolen' by the system (Tsireletso 1997; LeRoux 1999).

Although some of these problems are shared with other minority groups in southern Africa, in San communities they are compounded by their extremely marginal social status and their general lack of access to land and other resources. Furthermore, a critical difference between the San and other groups in the region (including dominant *and* minority groups) is the fact that the San are descended from hunting and gathering populations, as opposed to agro-pastoralists. Although today many San people live on farms and work with animals, and some do practice subsistence agriculture, a great deal of research and experience with these populations shows that they maintain a mentality and worldview that stems from the social organisation and subsistence strategies associated with a hunting and gathering lifestyle. These include deep-seated egalitarian ethics, a non-hierarchical approach to social organisation, differences in disciplinary strategies, in approaches to teaching and learning, time and

time management, and a multitude of other subtle and overt differences. Thus far, attempts to simply integrate San learners into the existing mainstream education systems have proven ineffective. Even where some improvements have been made, the numbers of San students completing their formal education remains extremely low in comparison with other groups.

One of the strongest and most consistent requests of San communities consulted on educational issues over the past 10 years is the desire to have their own schools. They express a strong desire for education that respects and values their own language, culture, background and knowledge, that addresses their social and economic realities, and that provides their children with a positive learning experience. They would also like increased parental and other community involvement in education initiatives. Furthermore, they express a desire to have a variety of educational options available to them, and for these options to be available not only to children of strict school-going age but to older community members as well. In this, the desires of San communities are consistent with those of indigenous peoples worldwide and other minority groups, including



*A Ju/hoan teacher from the Nyae Nyae Village Schools Project assists a learner.  
Photo: Catherine Collett/Kalahari Peoples Fund \**



religious groups, whose values are not necessarily reflected in the mainstream institutions of their society. Furthermore, the right to such an education is guaranteed by numerous international and regional human rights and educational rights documents (see also Hays 2004).

Unfortunately, southern Africa's recent legacy of apartheid includes a history of forced separation of people based on language and ethnicity, and the use of mother-tongue education as a tool for separation and oppression. Southern African governments and citizens are thus understandably wary of educational initiatives that seem to promote "separate education", or education in one's mother tongue at the expense of the dominant language(s). This makes it difficult for San communities to make their desires understood. Although the pedagogical soundness of mother-tongue education, particularly during the early years, is recognized and educational bodies in southern Africa are, in theory, committed to providing this option for all of their citizens, what this means in practice varies. This article will briefly compare and contrast the educational approaches of Namibia, South Africa and Botswana to San minorities, and current regional efforts.<sup>4</sup> There are currently three major education projects in southern Africa that cater specifically or primarily for San populations, and a fourth project, to address the needs of San learners in Botswana, is currently in the early planning stages. Each of these projects will be described in more detail below.

## San education in the region

### Namibia (approximately 35,000 San)<sup>5</sup>

Of the three countries, Namibia currently has the greatest potential to provide mother-tongue and culturally appropriate education for the first three years of school for San minorities. In 2000, the Intersectoral Task Force on Educationally Marginalised Children, under the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture (MBESC), identified San children as one of the three major "educationally marginalized" groups in the country, and has developed policies to cater specifically for these groups (MBESC 2000).<sup>6</sup> Namibian educational policy explicitly recognizes the importance of mother-tongue education during the early years of schooling (MBESC 1997), and the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED), a directorate of the MBESC, has spearheaded the effort to create mother-tongue educational materials in San languages.<sup>7</sup>

Although Namibian policies create an environment in which innovative mother-tongue education projects may be implemented for San communities, in practice

efforts begun in this direction often stall as key individuals change positions in government, or as new priorities arise in a changing political environment. Furthermore, the relatively small number of children who speak any particular San language also makes it difficult to continue to justify the expense and effort needed to create mother-tongue educational materials. At present, only a very small minority of San children have the option of attending a school where they are taught in their mother tongue, or which recognizes and respects their unique culture. One of the most progressive, and perhaps the best known of these, is the Nyae Nyae Village Schools Project (VSP) located in the Nyae Nyae Conservancy of north-eastern Namibia. A second effort, different in approach and scope, is that of the Gqaina School in the Omaheke Region. These two projects will be described below.

### South Africa (approximately 7,500 San)

Current South African education policy encourages mother-tongue education for the first three years, and provides funding for language development for all of the official languages. However, although the Khoe<sup>8</sup> and San languages are recognized, they are not official languages and there is thus little government funding available for their development. The Northern Cape Education Department<sup>9</sup> has indicated a commitment to designing a curriculum and materials that incorporate San languages and culture but consistent lack of funding and logistic difficulties have slowed this process.

Most of the San population indigenous to South Africa itself was assimilated into other African societies after their arrival during the early part of the second millennium, or exterminated following the arrival of European colonists in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Armed commandos with the stated purpose of annihilating the San during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were quite effective, and those San that remained were largely assimilated into the "coloured" ethnic category during the apartheid era. As a result of decades of linguistic persecution under the apartheid era, today most San and Khoe populations indigenous to South Africa speak Afrikaans as a first language with only a few elders still speaking their original mother tongue. For these groups, "mother-tongue" education is more an issue of language restoration than of effective pedagogy, though still a crucial aspect of community development. Efforts are being made in this direction with the cooperation of linguists and, for the Nama (a language in the Khoe family), by drawing upon the extensive educational materials available in Namibia.<sup>10</sup>

The largest San community in all of southern Africa is that of the re-settled !Xun and Khwe<sup>11</sup> soldiers (originally from Angola and Namibia) and their families in Platfontein, South Africa.<sup>12</sup> !Xunhwesa Combined School, which serves this community, is the largest San-only school in all of southern Africa, with 1,190 learners in pre-school through to Grade 12. This school will be described in greater detail below.

### **Botswana (approximately 50,000 San)**

Although Botswana has one of the most successful formal education systems in Africa, claiming universal basic education of up to ten years, San children do not reap the same benefits as children of more dominant groups in the country. A serious obstacle for San students (and other minorities) is language. The building of a national Batswana identity has relied heavily upon the promotion of *Setswana* as the primary language of its citizens, and the use of other languages for any public functions, including education, has been strongly discouraged. While Botswana does recognize the right to mother-tongue education, the “mother tongue” is assumed to be *Setswana*,<sup>13</sup> this is thus the language used

as medium of instruction for the first years of school before switching to English as the medium of instruction by Grade 4 at the latest (Botswana 1994).<sup>14</sup> There is no provision for mother-tongue primary education for minority language children, who must begin primary school in a foreign language (*Setswana*), then switch to another (*English*) before they have even mastered the first.

A great many San in Botswana fall into the category of “Remote Area Dwellers” or “RADs.”<sup>15</sup> Botswana’s Remote Area Development Programme (RADP) provides support services and material goods to remote communities and has a special focus on educational needs. Children from settlements without schools are transported to boarding schools where they are provided with school clothing, food and hostel accommodation while attending school. Although the government of Botswana invests a great deal of resources in providing RAD children with the opportunity to attend government schools, at least up until Standard/Grade 4, these schools, and the hostels, tend to be very unsympathetic places for San students. The idea of separating parents and children is foreign to San culture; the pain and alienation that San students feel at boarding schools can be acute. Abuse by hostel staff and other students,



poor hostel conditions, stigma experienced by the San as "RADs" and a general lack of cultural sensitivity exacerbate the situation. The subjects are taught in a foreign language, cultural representations in curriculum materials represent the perspective of the dominant group, and teaching styles are derived from the dominant culture (Nyati-Ramahobo 2003). These factors further reinforce the marginality of San language and culture within the schools and make it more difficult for them to succeed in that environment.

### Regional structures<sup>16</sup>

Although the governmental approaches and the specifics vary, the most serious problems that the San experience with regard to education transcend linguistic groups and national borders. Furthermore, several of the language groups reside in two, three or more countries. Recognizing this, the *Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa* (WIMSA), a networking and lobbying organisation based in Windhoek and serving San communities in southern Africa, has initiated efforts at the regional level in order to facilitate the sharing of experience, information and materials across borders. In 2001, WIMSA established the *Regional San Education Programme*, which is co-ordinating a variety of educational initiatives in Namibia and the region. These include the production of a format that can be used to support initial mother-tongue literacy in the Grade 1 classroom, one that can be easily adapted to any San language and that can be modified to include aspects that identify individual communities.

An initiative of the Regional San Education Programme that has met with initial success since its implementation in 2003 is WIMSA's *Tertiary Student Support Programme*, which aims to ensure that more young San successfully complete higher education and further training, and that skills and knowledge acquired can be used to support the development of San communities and organisations in the future. Now in its third year, the programme currently sponsors nineteen students, eight of whom are expected to graduate this year. Thus far, six San students have graduated, four with teaching qualifications.<sup>17</sup> One important result of this programme will be an increase in the number of trained teachers who speak San languages as their mother tongue; this is an important step towards increasing access to mother-tongue education for San communities.

Linked with the Regional San Education Programme, *The Southern African San Education Forum* (SASEF) is a platform for the ministries of education in South Africa, Botswana and Namibia to exchange information and ideas about San education with San or-

ganisations and communities. Their primary areas of concern include the development of San languages for use at school and the development of curriculum materials in these languages, along with addressing the high dropout rate and limited employment opportunities for San youth throughout the region. While the rationale and potential for SASEF is strong, the logistics of cross-border co-ordination among government bodies are cumbersome and progress is slow.

Furthermore, while cross-border efforts could enhance San education initiatives everywhere, the emphasis must always be on local community consultation and involvement. There is no quick-fix solution that can be implemented in a blanket form for all San communities. The three existing projects described below represent three different situations, and very different approaches. While each one has its strengths, each also has its shortcomings. The Minority Education Project in Botswana (also described below), still in its early phases, seeks to learn from other efforts in South Africa and around the globe, and to create educational alternatives for San that fully incorporate their culture, traditional knowledge and skills.

### San education projects

#### The Nyae Nyae Village Schools Project, Tsumkwe East, Namibia<sup>18</sup>

The Nyae Nyae *Village Schools Project* (VSP), located in the Nyae Nyae Conservancy of Namibia, grew out of a collaborative effort between local NGOs and Namibia's (then) Ministry of Education and Culture in the early 1990s, as a response to Ju | 'hoan<sup>19</sup> children's lack of participation in the government schools of Eastern Tsumkwe District. In the five Village Schools,<sup>20</sup> children are taught in the Ju | 'hoansi language, by members of their own speech community. While the focus is on providing schooling closer to home that incorporates the language, knowledge and skills of their communities, the goal of ultimately preparing children to be successful in the government schools is central to the project. Emphasis is on increasing the self-confidence of both learners and the communities, so that Ju | 'hoan children can enter the English-medium government schools in Grade 4 with the basic skills necessary to succeed there, and a firm grounding in their own culture.

The VSP has drawn both acclaim, for its high ideals and innovative approach, and strong criticism for what is often seen to be a failure to achieve its original goals. Although very many children attend the Village Schools, most of these do not attend the government



*Den/ui Village School, Nyae Nyae Conservancy (Namibia), one of five Village Schools that make up the Nyae Nyae Village Schools Project. This particular school building was donated by the Rossing Foundation. Photo: Catherine Collett/Kalahari Peoples Fund*

school in Tsumkwe (which they are supposed to start in fourth grade) for very long. The reasons children give for dropping out have mostly to do with the school in Tsumkwe or the town itself rather than the VSP.<sup>21</sup> Another problem experienced by the VSP itself is the difficulty of providing adequate support to the teachers. Since they are in scattered villages, and have no transportation of their own, arranging meetings, workshops and other forms of support is difficult and time consuming. The lack of adequate support staff has meant that the teachers often feel isolated and unsure about their teaching approaches. For these and other reasons, the teachers sometimes abandon their posts, further fuelling criticism of the project.

It is important to note that the Nyae Nyae communities value the VSP and do not necessarily see a problem with its functioning. Their complaints are primarily about the government school in Tsumkwe town and the fact that they feel unwelcome there. Parents and students in the Nyae Nyae area consistently express a desire for the village schools to go beyond grade three and for mother-tongue education to be available in the higher grades.

#### **Gqaina School, Omaheke, Namibia**

Gqaina Primary School is a private, government-subsidized school that has been operating for 11 years. It is considered by many involved with San education to be

a model school, especially because of its very low dropout rate,<sup>22</sup> its culturally sensitive boarding environment, and its emphasis on mother-tongue education for Ju |'hoansi students in Grade 1 along with the inclusion of Ju |'hoansi as a subject in higher grades (Gqaina goes up to Grade 7). Although none of the teachers are San themselves, two speak Ju |'hoansi fluently and there are San women employed as hostel matrons and in the kitchen.

The school serves a rural community, primarily teaching the children of farm workers: some come from up to 80 km away. The population is made up of many ethnic groups, though about 50-60 % of the students are San and priority is given to San students if there are more applicants than available places at the school.<sup>23</sup> In other parts of southern Africa, there is usually tension between the San students and those from other ethnic groups, and frequent reports of bullying. Gqaina School has managed to facilitate positive relations between the different groups. This is due in part to a lack of toleration of bullying, close supervision of the students' relations and effective discipline for fighting.<sup>24</sup>

While Gqaina School is commendable in many respects, it is also important to note its limitations. Mother-tongue education is only through Grade 1, rather than the recommended minimum of three years. The school itself only goes through to Grade 7, and most students drop out at the higher levels. Further-

more, community involvement is limited and the educational model still largely reflects the values, knowledge and culture of dominant groups.

### **The !Xunhwesa Combined School, Platfontein, South Africa**

The !Xunhwesa Combined School in Platfontein, constructed in 2003, serves the resettled !Xun and Khwe communities. The school follows the mainstream “outcomes-based” curriculum and, of the full-time staff, only the two Grade R (pre-school) teachers are San, and they are the only ones who speak either of the San languages.<sup>25</sup> Since the beginning of 2005, initial literacy, using the Molteno ‘Breakthrough’ method, is also being taught partially in the mother tongue for Grade 1. After that, education primarily takes place in Afrikaans and, more recently, in English. When funding is available, teaching assistants are appointed by the school to assist non-San teachers in lower classes, and to assist with the emotional difficulties faced by children in a foreign learning environment. At the time of writing, there are no funds available for teaching assistants.

!Xun and Khwe children, from Grade R onwards, are in the same class. There are also children of mixed !Xun and Khwe relationships who are bilingual. Unfortunately, the relationship between the resettled !Xun and Khwe has been marked by conflict, and the tensions often spill over into the school. Upon relocation from their initial settlement in Schmidtdrift, the two groups wanted to establish separate communities, including separate schools. When this proved impossible the communities opted for two separate townships with the new school in between.<sup>26</sup>

The original school in Schmidtdrift was established twelve years ago by the South African military for the children of its employees. Since that time there has been virtually no relationship between the school and the communities and thus no community ownership of the educational process. Community members seem to consider the school as a potential source of income rather than as a partner in education. This lack of involvement places the school at risk of becoming a place of assimilation into mainstream society.

### **The Minority Education Project, Botswana**

Efforts are currently underway in Botswana to design and secure funding for a model education project that will serve as an example for San and other minority groups across the region who wish to develop alternative educational approaches for their communities. A team of consultants have conducted initial research and submitted recommendations, and partial funding has been secured

from the South African diamond company DeBeers, in conjunction with their Botswana affiliate Debswana. It is recommended that the proposed school(s) continue at least through to Grade 10, with mother-tongue education for at least the first three years and ideally longer. This ambitious project seeks also to create links with other education projects in the region, and with indigenous education projects around the world.

There are several potential stumbling blocks that must be carefully negotiated, and discussions about how to proceed with the project are ongoing. For example, one complicated question is how to balance San communities’ consistent requests for schools that cater for individual language groups with the Botswana government’s (and general southern African) wariness of schools that are identified with a particular ethnic group. Concerns revolve around both the potential for the exclusion of other ethnic groups (including other San language groups), and the desire to ensure that San communities have access to education that is equal to that of other groups (as in other parts of the world, *traditional education* is still considered by many to be inferior to *formal education*). Addressing these concerns will require sensitive negotiation at the local level with the various communities involved, and government bodies. The project could also benefit greatly from the current global movement to recognize, respect and value diverse forms of knowledge, especially that of people who live in close contact with their natural environment as do many San communities (Barnhardt and Kawagley 2005).

Based on the experiences of San and other indigenous minorities, initial recommendations emphasized several characteristics as essential for the project, whatever form it eventually takes, including:

- The development of a learning environment that incorporates and builds upon the language and culture of the learners and builds their confidence and self esteem
- The cultivation and active development of San teachers through in-service training
- An education program that allows for options, in order that San communities may remain flexible in their economic choices
- An education system that allows the learners to develop skills that will be useful to them and will allow them to pursue the lifestyle that they choose
- The identification of and development of opportunities for San learners upon completion of various levels of schooling
- *Community consultation and involvement at all levels of design and implementation of the project, and ultimate community ownership of the school.*

This last objective is simultaneously the most critical to the project's success and also the most elusive. "Education" has come to be seen by many San as something that is defined and controlled by dominant institutions and outsiders. Although, as described above, San communities everywhere have expressed a desire for their own schools, they are also aware that there are elements of the education they need today that must be provided by outsiders, and that funding and other logistics also require outside support. A delicate balance must thus be achieved between non-San individuals and organisations involved and the communities themselves in order to foster a sense of community ownership and return the responsibility for education to the communities.

## Conclusion

Although southern African countries differ significantly in their approaches to education for San minorities, all three emphasize formal education, based upon Western models. The primary focus of attention has been upon removing the entry barriers for San students to government schools. The right of San communities and their children to have access to formal education is crucial, and is something that San people say that they want and need. As indigenous groups in other parts of the world have also made clear, however, providing such access is not the whole answer to addressing educational issues for the San. It is also necessary to challenge ideas about what education is, and to begin to understand and value the educational approaches of the San that have been developed over the centuries. In doing this, southern African governments—indeed, educational initiatives throughout the world—may just find that they are the ones that have something to learn. □

\* The photos taken in the Nyae Nyae Conservancy were supplied by Kalahari Peoples Fund (KPF), a U.S.-based organization composed of volunteer anthropologists, linguists and educators who have worked with San communities in Botswana and Namibia for over 30 years with a specific focus on educational initiatives. KPF was closely associated with the founding of the Nyae Nyae Village Schools Project in Namibia and continue to provide ongoing support for education and literacy initiatives, including computer literacy.

## Notes

1 Other terms used are *Bushmen* or (in Botswana) *Basarwa*. None of these terms are the peoples' own names for themselves, and people generally prefer to use their own terms such as *Ju!'hoansi*, *Khwe*, *Naro*, or *!Xun*. In this article the

- term *San* is used when referring to the larger grouping, as it has been identified by the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities of Southern Africa (WIMSA) as the least offensive.
- 2 For an excellent description of the problems facing the indigenous populations of southern Africa today, see the volume edited by Hitchcock and Vinding (2004), *Indigenous Peoples' Rights in Southern Africa*. Barnard (1992) provides a thorough overview of the San cultural groupings.
  - 3 These have been well-documented; see for example Kann, Hitchcock & Mbere 1990, Kann 1991, Mendelsohn, Swarts and Avenstrup 1995, Le Roux 1999, Siegrühn & Hays 2000, Nyati-Ramahobo 2003, Polelo 2003.
  - 4 For a more detailed description of the educational situation of San in each of the three countries, see Hays 2004
  - 5 Figures in these headings are from Saugestad 2004 and Chennels 2004.
  - 6 The other two are the Ovahimba and the children of farm workers, many of whom are San.
  - 7 The first is Ju!'hoansi; similar plans are also underway for Khwedam. The South African-based Molteno Project has been contracted to adapt/translate its 'Breakthrough to Literacy' programme, developed for speakers of African languages, into the above-mentioned San languages.
  - 8 The Khoe are the descendants of semi-nomadic pastoralists who were also present at the time of the arrival of the Europeans and who are also often considered indigenous to the area; however their arrival in southern Africa dates back some 2,000 years while the San are thought to have lived in the area for at least 20,000 years. Today, although their languages are also marginalized, in general the Khoe are far more integrated economically and politically into the mainstream societies than are the San. See Hitchcock and Vinding (2004) for further discussion.
  - 9 The vast majority of San in South Africa live in the Northern Cape Province.
  - 10 In Namibia, the Nama are not considered to be a marginalized group as they are in South Africa, and a fully developed range of learning materials is available in the Nama's language, *Khoekhoegowab*.
  - 11 These are two specific groups of San, with different languages. The "!" in !Xun represents one of the click sounds found in all San languages.
  - 12 This community of approximately 6,000 was temporarily settled in army tents at Schmidtsdrift in 1990, and in 2004 they moved to a permanent settlement at Platfontien. The !Xun and Khwe became caught in the crossfire between the forces of the SADF (South African Defence Force) and SWAPO (South West African People's Organisation) during the South West African Bush War, which lasted for almost 30 years until 1989. Many San men were forced to become trackers for either of the two warring parties, and the survival of San communities was often dependent on these unequal alliances.
  - 13 Recent surveys indicate that at least 18% of the country's citizens have other home languages (Botswana 2003)
  - 14 There is currently a move to begin instruction in English as early as Standard 2, but this has yet to be implemented everywhere in the country. This earlier introduction of English instruction creates even more difficulties for minority language children, especially as the method of language introduction was designed for Setswana-speaking children.
  - 15 Most RADS are also San; a common estimate is that more than 80% of the RADS nationwide are San, and that this number approaches 100% in some areas.

- 16 Updated information for this section was provided by the Regional San Education Programme Coordinator, Yvonne Pickering.
- 17 The other two received diplomas in Natural Resource Management.
- 18 For more background and analysis of the Nyae Nyae Village Schools Project see Hays 2002; 2004.
- 19 *Ju'hoansi* is the name of the people and their language; *Ju'hoan* is used as an adjective. The vertical line represents one of the click sounds in the language.
- 20 The number of village schools fluctuates somewhat. There were originally three schools, this number later increased to five, and schools periodically close and reopen depending upon water and food availability, movements of elephants, and other factors.
- 21 These are numerous, the most common being reports of abuse and/or teasing from other children and the teachers; theft of property; lack of food; not having the proper clothes and/or toiletries; and missing their parents and family.
- 22 For example, at the beginning of 2004 there were 305 students in the school; by August only seven children had dropped out.
- 23 Herero students make up a large percentage of the remaining students; other groups represented include Nama/Damara speakers, refugees from Angola, and Ovambo-speaking children from the northern parts of Namibia.
- 24 For example, making the fighting students work together on a project.
- 25 South African policy states that school staff should be representative of the South African population and of the specific community, where possible. An interest in and knowledge of the San culture is not a prerequisite, however, and although the teachers are encouraged to learn !Xun and Khwedam there is no structure in place for this.
- 26 The Platfontein deed is in the name of one legal entity: the !Xun and Khwe Community Property Association.

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# INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' EXPERIENCES WITH THE FORMAL EDUCATION SYSTEM:

## THE CASE OF THE KENYAN PASTORALISTS

Johnson Ole Kaunga

*Maasai youth, Kenya. Photo: Jenneke Arens*







*A shepherd school in Dol Dol, Kenya. Photos: Marianne Wibben Jensen*

In Kenya, the pastoralists are one of the most disadvantaged sectors of society. The pastoralist districts, mainly the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALS), have the highest incidences of poverty<sup>1</sup> and the lowest levels of access to basic services: education, communication, infrastructure, public health and nutrition to name but a few.

The Kenyan pastoralists (Samburu, Maasai, Pokot, Turkana, Borana, Gabbra, among others) have experienced and continue to experience social policy exclusion and discrimination leading to perpetual marginalization in practice and at policy level. Pastoralism is a production system that makes the best use of natural resources and conditions in the rangelands and it provides direct employment and livelihoods to over 3.5 million Kenyans. Yet pastoralists are considered by state bureaucrats as leading a peripheral, waning and primitive way of life the disappearance of which needs to be accelerated through “modern development” and formal education.

Despite decades of continued marginalization, domination by mainstream societies, non-recognition, top-down development approaches and assimilationist education policies, the pastoralists have to a great extent managed to conserve and maintain their unique way of life, cultural practices and identity. The pastoralists’ identity and culture, in their diverse forms, are considered the backbone of Kenyan national heritage. There is no doubt as to their contribution to Kenyan cultural diversity. They also contribute greatly to the national economy and to biodiversity conservation. Yet the participation of pastoralists has been deplorable, to say the least, in matters such as the formulation of education policies or development processes, and in assessing the relevance of the education curriculum to pastoralists. Pastoralist children’s enrolment and performance in education lag far behind.



### **Basic education as a basic right**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) proclaimed the right to education and called for free and compulsory elementary education for children between 6 and 12 years. Article 26, in particular states, “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory”.

The right to education was further reaffirmed in the 1960 UN Convention Against Discrimination in Education and the world declaration on Education For All (EFA) in 1990, at Jomtien in Thailand, where most governments, including Kenya, reaffirmed their commitment to provide education for all their citizens.

In Kenya, the term “basic education” was used to refer to three main levels of education, namely: Early Childhood Development (ECD), Primary Education and Adult Education and Literacy. However, it has recently been expanded by the Ministry of Education to include Secondary Education, through the government policy of Universal Basic Education (UBE).<sup>2</sup>

In 1964, the Kenyan government set up the Kenya Education Commission (Ominde Report) with the main objective of formulating an education policy framework that was unified, non-segregational and non-discriminatory in independent Kenya. A pastoralist contribution was lacking and so was the pastoralists’ input as to what kind of education they desired in an independent Kenya.

During the colonial period, most pastoralist Districts were “Closed Districts”, meaning that entry by missionaries and other outsiders, and movement of the pastoralists themselves within and out of the Districts /reserves, was restricted. The education service providers at that time were the missionaries and the colonial government, both of whom viewed pastoralists as pagans and difficult to control. The independent Kenyan government’s view on pastoral lands and pastoral-



ists themselves was no different from that of the colonialists. Most of the pastoralist districts were classified and gazetted as “hardship areas”. Teachers and other civil servants posted to these areas were to be paid special allowances. In fact, many of them were posted there on disciplinary grounds - to encourage them to reform! Pastoral lands were the Siberia of Kenya!

To get pastoralists into mainstream development and administration (read: control them), the Kenyan government has since then used formal education as a tool for building “national unity”, “nationhood”, “loyalty”, “development”, “decolonization” and for deculturizing pastoralists. In the process, the education system has ended up alienating pastoralist communities to the extent that the pastoralists have started to strongly view and approach education as a tool of social disruption and dispossession of their livelihood, culture, land and natural resources. In the schools, the children are discouraged from using their mother tongue and wearing their traditional regalia and ornaments. Likewise, essential child labour, necessary for the herding and pastoralist production system, has been thrown off balance.

### **Education as a double-edged sword**

On the basis of the above, formal education can be viewed as a double-edged sword among the pastoralists. The formal education system as it exists at the moment is viewed by some pastoralists as a perpetual catalyst, weakening their pastoralist traditional institutions of governance, social-cultural interactions, traditional livelihoods and indigenous traditional knowledge.

The authorities, on the other hand, view formal education as a process of opening up pastoralists to the reality of modern development and enabling them to interact with the rest of Kenyan society. The Kenyan authorities strongly believe that the pastoralists’ way of

life and culture is, to a great extent, inhibiting pastoralists from benefiting from the fruits of modern development, from the inevitable changes that will take place anyway.

At the same time, education has been very important, indeed fundamental, in enabling pastoralists to access positions of leadership and authority and to organize and advance their interests and rights. It has enabled them to articulate their concerns at the local, national and international levels and, more importantly, it is education that has enabled the pastoralists to form the civil society organizations that are now at the frontline of advocating the rights of these communities. Formal education has helped the pastoralists to advance their own development agenda and position. They have thus been able to move forward in terms of questioning and challenging the Kenyan Ministry of Education on the relevance and appropriateness of the current education curriculum and policies, which are in conflict with the ancient production systems that pastoralists continue to eke a living from and which are treasured as a foundation of their identity.

### **Pastoralists’ experiences with formal education in Kenya**

Despite its various shortcomings, formal education has contributed to positive developments. There are now a handful of senior pastoralist men and women in politics, in the private sector, in other official positions and not least within the civil service. Formal education has played an important role in ensuring that they have been considered competitively for those positions. It is also true that political inclinations play a great role in the process of attaining these positions and ensuring that one “survives” the tribal turbulence that forms the reality of Kenyan governance and administration.

Formal education has also broken the silence that dominated pastoralist women and their continued suffering. It is through women who have attained formal education that the social and cultural discrimination of pastoralist women has come to light and that strategies for addressing this have been designed. These issues include violations of indigenous women's rights, discrimination against the girl-child, early marriages and female genital mutilation. It is also through pastoralists with formal education that issues pertaining to pastoralism and their life aspirations have been raised at various levels of decision-making, including international fora.

It is imperative to note that pastoralists are not totally against the formal education system. They are primarily questioning its relevance and appropriateness as seen in relation to their sources of livelihood and future survival as a people with their own identity. They are asking whether it is possible to devise educational strategies that allow them to continue undertaking their normal traditional lifestyles.

### **Participation of pastoralist children in the formal education system**

The participation of pastoralist children in formal education has been and continues to be hindered by a number of factors that work to ensure that enrolment in and access to education remains low.

There are only a few primary schools established in the pastoralist districts, partly due to the "closed districts" policy of the colonial regime. In these few existing schools, there are inadequate learning materials and too few teachers. From a pastoralist perspective, formal education is in direct conflict with pastoralist mobility trends that require them to move, along with their livestock, as a strategy for managing drought. Boarding schools were started as a way of addressing the educational needs of pastoralist children during the drought seasons. However, boarding schools also had their own problems, ranging from inadequate care of the children to increased education costs (as many were run privately by the missionaries) and increased incidence of pregnancies, resulting in increased school drop-out rates for girls. Boarding schools became the first practical "cut-line" between the child and the pastoralist way of life.

There are only a few boarding schools in pastoralist districts that cater for pastoralist children. However, boarding schools in arid lands, home to the majority of Kenyan pastoralists, have kept learning institutions "alive", so to speak, during the long, recurrent droughts.

Where there are no boarding facilities, households are forced to take their children along with them when they move to strategic pastureland, and teachers are left alone or with very few children. Under such circumstances, the Ministry of Education would normally transfer the "under-utilized teachers" to other schools or completely close under-enrolled schools. The cases of the Lariok Orok and Seek primary schools in Mukogodo division of Laikipia District are good examples of this.

Pastoralism is a labour-intensive production system and children contribute to a large extent in the management and herding of livestock. It has been difficult for pastoralist communities to fully embrace formal education as it means: a) increased costs of hiring labour at the household level; b) investment in a system that is helping to disrupt family and cultural values and worse; c) a great number of those who have benefited from education rarely come back home to help the family as they end up being jobless and some start viewing pastoralism as a primitive way of life. Formal education is viewed among some pastoralist communities as investing too much in the individual at the expense of the entire household. For one child's education, a household would have to sell more than one cow, while under normal circumstances one cow sold would take care of the entire household's needs for at least a month or two.

Despite such investment, there is no guarantee that the educated and successful pastoralists share with or "plough back" to their family members the benefits accruing from education. Education has tended to promote an individualization of resources as compared to the communal way of living and sharing. For instance, some of the educated and well-to-do pastoralists have grabbed land and deprived other community members of the use of that land.

There are cases where certain families have invested a great deal of family resources in their children's education to the extent that the family ends up living in abject poverty while the children lead a totally different life and marry someone from the mainstream community whose perception of pastoralists is very negative. This has not only influenced the level of enrolment of pastoralist children in formal schools but also created negative attitudes among the parents as to the real purpose of education.

The tender age of 6-12 years, when children learn a lot in terms of indigenous survival and living skills, is also the same age at which the government demands the children enrol at school. To avoid conflict with government officials, most parents take children not perceived as good at herding livestock to school. Most pastoralist communities are polygamous and, in some cases, it is the children of the favourite wife who remain at home to manage the family's livestock (hence ensuring inheritance of family property and resources) while the children of the despised wife go to school.

School participation has also increased the workload for women, as they increasingly have to do the herding, watering and treatment alongside their domestic tasks, giving them minimal time to participate in other development activities.

### Low enrolment rates

Tables 1 and 2 below give an indication of the gross enrolment rates at the Early Childhood Education (ECD) and primary school levels of some selected pastoralist Districts. Some Districts occupied by the mainstream

communities, i.e. the Kikuyu and Kamba, have been sampled for purposes of comparison. The table shows that enrolment rates among pastoralist children are still very low despite various efforts by several actors.

The data for Isiolo, Keiyo Marakwet, Turkana and Samburu is relatively high as compared to other pastoralist areas such as Wajir or Tana River. This can be attributed to aggressive donor-funded programmes such as NORAD in Turkana and the Van Leer Foundation, the World Food programme, the Dutch Bilateral programme and Action Aid in the others. NORAD's investment in the Turkana District boosted access and quality of education to a level where the Turkana Dis-

**Table 1**  
The Lowest and Highest Enrolment Rates at ECD level by District and Gender

District with the lowest enrolment rates					District with the highest enrolment rates			
	District	Boys (%)	Girls (%)	Average (%)	District	Boys (%)	Girls (%)	Average (%)
1	Garissa* (Somali)	17.8	11.9	14.9	Isiolo* (Borana)	70.8	67.6	69.2
2	Mandera*(Somali)	20.1	11.3	15.8	Samburu*(Samburu)	71.6	54.8	63.2
3	Wajir*(Somali)	21.7	14.4	18.2	Mombasa	53.4	54.3	53.9
4	Tana river*(Oromo)	23.2	21.6	22.4	Turkana* (Turkana)	55.2	47.5	51.4
5	Lamu	25.5	22.7	24.1	Nyandarua	50.5	51.3	50.9
6	Muranga	23.2	21.6	24.4	Kitui	48.2	47.7	48.0

Source: MOE, Statistic Unit (unprinted Data), 1998 table 1

\* Districts with large pastoralist populations

**Table 2**  
The Lowest and Highest Enrolment Rates at Primary Schools level by District and Gender (1998)

Districts with the lowest Enrolment Rates					Districts with the Highest Enrolment Rates			
	District	Boys %	Girls %	Average%	District	Boys %	Girls %	Average%
1	Garrissa*	26.6	16.6	27.1	Keiyo* Marakwet	99.5	98.8	99.2
2	Wajir*	35.2	21.8	28.9	Bungoma	97.8	98.6	98.2
3.	Tana River*	43.1	34.0	38.7	Nyandarua	93	95	94.8
4.	Mandera	52.2	24.8	39.4	Kiambu	91.6	90.4	91.0
5.	Samburu*	49.0	30.7	40.0	Nandi	90.5	90.9	90.7
6.	Isiolo*	50.2	34.6	42.7	Laikipia*	90.5	90.3	90.4
7.	Narok*	46.5	52.2	48.9	South Nyanza	90.3	83.0	86.7

Source: MOE, Statistic Unit (Unprinted)

\* Districts with large pastoralist populations

tract was at one point leading in the national examinations. Since NORAD's withdrawal, due to severed diplomatic relations with Kenya, things have worsened.

The Laikipia Maasai live in the Laikipia District but form only 10% of the total population of the District. The mainstream communities such as the Meru and Kikuyu have dominated the schools, thus raising the enrolment rates. If you visit the schools within the Laikipia Maasai community, enrolment is very low and the schools are in a deplorable situation. There are scarcely 10 Laikipia Maasai who have ever reached university level. The data in the above table can give a wrong impression that almost all children attend school in Laikipia. Among the Laikipia Maasai, the majority of children do not go to school and this situation does not seem to have changed, even with the introduction of the free education policy that is currently rolling.

### **Relevance of formal education to the pastoralist livelihood**

It is important to note that pastoralism is both a way of life, a culture and a production system. The pastoralists view education as a threat not only to their culture but also to their livelihood. The curriculum is designed in a way that reflects pastoralism as a primitive way of life and children are encouraged to discard it. Many pastoralist youth, for instance among the Laikipia Maasai, who have completed primary education, are jobless but they can no longer fit into the pastoralist way of life. As such, formal education is producing another category of pastoralists who do not practice livestock keeping and who spend a lot of their time undertaking menial jobs. This is, for instance, the case in the small Laikipia Maasai trading center of Dol Dol. Education promises are high and beyond reality.

One of the major concerns raised by pastoralists is the relevance of some aspects of formal education to pastoralism. Practical livelihood options for those children who do not excel in the very exam-oriented learning system are rare. Children who do not attain the required marks are considered failures and end up not going beyond that point, thus creating and perpetuating frustrations.

The key problem is a curriculum that introduces children to issues that have no connection with the pastoralist reality. Education promises are very high and yet unemployment and impoverishment among the educated youth is also high and the consequences of all this end up affecting the future of the child negatively. As they can no longer adequately fit into the pastoral

system, and as the education system has taught them that pastoralism is a primitive way of life, the system ends up alienating the child from its household, community and society at large. The system de-culturizes and demeans the fabric that holds the child and the community together. After education, very few pastoralist children go back to their own communities and, as such, parents become disillusioned with the process.

### **Medium of instruction in formal schools**

In Kenya, Kiswahili and English are the recognized mediums of instruction in school. The use of mother tongue is discouraged and children are punished when they are caught using it in the school premises. Children are encouraged to report to the school authorities any of their peers caught using their mother tongue. This is done to encourage mastery of English and Kiswahili. The children have developed negative attitudes to their mother language to the extent that they even use Kiswahili at home.

### **The way forward: alternative approaches to basic education**

There are still many pastoralist children who do not attend school. However, they are in the frontline of sustaining the pastoralist production system through provision of labor and are a strong medium via which pastoralist culture is transmitted from one generation to the next. Some pastoralist development and human rights organizations have formulated innovative approaches that have enabled pastoralist children to access some basic relevant and appropriate form of education. This has recently been named informal education (as opposed to formal schooling). The Ministry of Education formulated a policy on non-formal education in 1997 to help address the disparities existing in education. The slums of Nairobi and a few pastoralists' organizations took advantage of this and initiated innovative approaches that have enabled a number of out-of-school children to enrol and attain basic numeracy and other essential skills.

In 1997, OSILIGI (the Organization for the Survival of IL-Laikipiak Indigenous Group Initiatives), based in Laikipia, with support from CARE Kenya, set up a mobile school targeting out-of-school Maasai herds boys and girls. These children do not normally get the chance to attend formal schools because their labour is crucial at home – they have to look after the family assets, the livestock. OSILIGI undertook a learning needs assessment that in-

formed the formulation of a curriculum and then designed a mobile learning school system. The mobile school learning cycles and curriculum are designed to take account of the pastoralist production system and culture, and include inputs from the parents in the learning process and in the selection of the mobile school teachers.

The children participate in the process of formulating the curriculum and in deciding on the learning approaches. Livestock management, disease control and treatment, environment, personal hygiene, oral histories, culture, numeracy and Kiswahili are some of the subjects that parents indicated as being of great importance for their children to learn.

The herds boys and girls attend the mobile schools in the afternoon when their siblings have come back home from formal schools. They exchange roles, with those attending formal school during the day taking over the responsibilities of looking after the livestock in the afternoon, thus allowing their brothers and sisters to attend mobile schools.

This is one learning cycle. The other learning cycle takes place when the formal schools are closed for holidays and the school children come home and assume the herding responsibilities while the herders go to learning centers, known as "learning camps" for a whole month to learn. The herds boys and girls receive intensive and vigorous training during the long holidays in these so-called "learning camps", which are strategically placed in the Mukogodo Division in areas where the Laikipia Maasai usually migrate to during the drought season.

During droughts, when the pastoralists have to move, the parents decide on the direction of the movement and the teachers of the mobile schools move along with them. The teachers are provided with draught animals – donkeys - to assist them in transporting the learning materials. The Laikipia Maasai mobility routes are fairly well-known in drought seasons and it has not been very hard deciding the direction in which to move. The Laikipia Maasai comprise five Maasai sections: the Il Momomnyot, Il Ngwesi, IL Dikiri, Lewuaso and Il Mookodo. During the drought, the different sections tend to move in the same direction as they share common natural resources and have a common traditional governance system. This makes it fairly easy to establish mobile schools and identify teachers.

Learning sessions are organized with elders who teach culture and songs. Child-to-child learning is also encouraged. The old men and women are brought in at different times to teach boys and girls respectively about the Maasai way of life. For instance, they teach which traditional herbs treat certain diseases.

This non-formal education has been faced with a number of challenges that have seriously affected its operation. First, the local education officers felt that the non-formal education system was competing with formal education and they had no idea of the existence of the non-formal education policy. The government had a non-formal education policy but it had no framework for its implementation and, worse still, the officers on the ground did not know about this policy. At times, formal teachers were used and it tended to formalize the learning approaches.

Some parents thought that the alternative approaches to basic education, such as mobile schools, were an alternative opportunity for households as a whole that saw formal education as very demanding and expensive. The idea was that the two systems should complement each other. However, the formal schools denied the mobile school the use of facilities such as classrooms and denied admission to those shepherds whose parents had decided that their children would attend the formal school.

The biggest challenge was that there were no other areas from which to draw on experiences for purposes of information and knowledge sharing. This made it hard to know whether there was any improvement or not. There were just too few mobile innovative approaches to learning or education.

Non-formal education has, to a large extent, had to rely on foreign aid for the production of teaching materials and teachers' salaries, among other things, and this was and remains its major weakness. It is therefore up to pastoralist organizations to lobby local and central government to finance these initiatives and to provide a proper framework for implementation of the non-formal education policy. □

## Notes

- 1 Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper 2000-2003, Government of Kenya (GOK), June 2000
- 2 Government of Kenya (GOK), Education Sector Policy Framework Paper 1997

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# GIVING THE BEST POSSIBLE START

PRESCHOOL PROGRAMME FOR RURAL  
INDIGENOUS CHILDREN IN SABAH, MALAYSIA

Anne Lasimbang

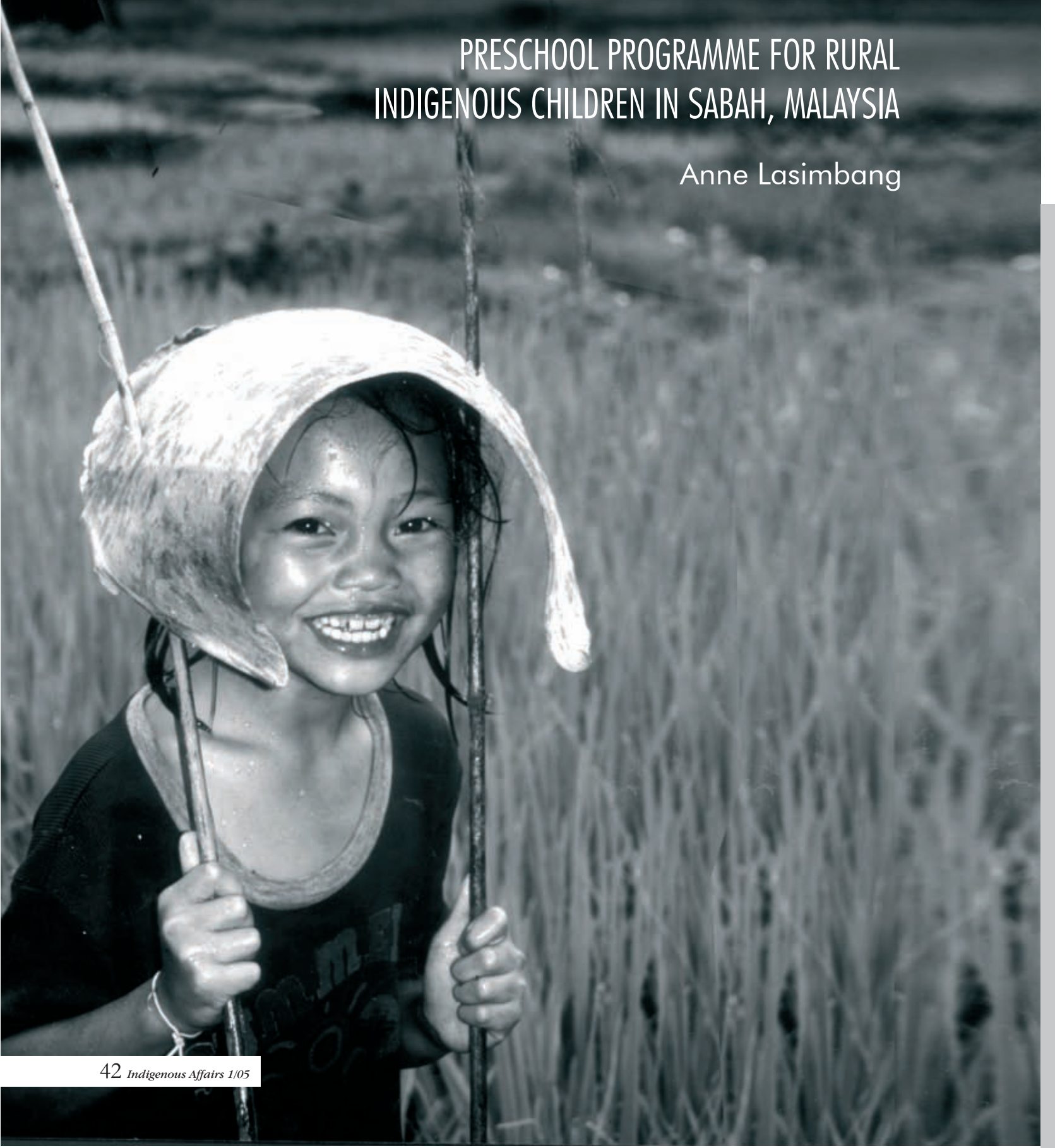




Photo: Christian Ernt



The Malaysian education system, from preschool onwards, follows a national curriculum that is highly competitive and places high priority on school skills. Preschool education aims to enhance children's potential in all aspects of development, help children master the basic skills and foster positive attitudes as preparation for entering primary school. A child entering the first year of primary school is therefore expected to have already mastered basic skills in reading, writing and counting. Since the year 2000, the Ministry of Education has made kindergarten classes for six-year-olds compulsory but these are mainly located within the primary school compounds. They are still not widely accessible to rural communities, where the majority of the indigenous peoples are located. Education facilities, infrastructure and qualified teachers in the rural areas are also not at par with those in the urban areas. Clearly, an indigenous child enters school already disadvantaged and lags behind other Malaysian children.

As in other indigenous communities around the world, the indigenous communities in Malaysia consider the education of their children to be important. Adequate education is seen as a means by which their children's future is secured. In the East Malaysian state of Sabah, situated on the island of Borneo, 39 different ethnic groups make up about 60% of the 2.4 million population. The majority of the indigenous peoples live in rural areas where basic infrastructure such as roads, schools and health facilities is often limited or lacking altogether. It is against this backdrop that the community-based organization PACOS Trust is working to strengthen and empower Sabah's indigenous communities through various initiatives such as community organizing, land rights and resource management, and community education. Under its community education programme, and with financial support from the Ber-

nard van Leer Foundation, Netherlands, PACOS initiated a pilot preschool project in 1993 with 25 children and 3 preschool teachers. This was based on the villagers' identification of preschool education as one of their basic needs due to the low attendance of children in school and their poor performance. In 2005, 15 years later, the preschool or early childhood care and development (ECCD) program has developed into a very strong activity. PACOS now operates one commercial training centre and 15 rural preschool centres in remote parts of Sabah covering 600 children and 50 preschool teachers.

### The preschool programme

When PACOS started the preschool programme, it had the following objectives:

- a) To prepare indigenous children for primary school using the curriculum from the Malaysian Education Ministry and developing other pre-school materials that reflected local language, culture, environment and materials;
- b) To conduct community discussions around topics such as health, nutrition, environment and child development;
- c) To create a forum for parents, men and women, to come together and express their views about community issues such as gender relations, land, economy, indigenous knowledge and child-rearing concerns;
- d) To promote positive indigenous values and traditions that strengthen the community across the generations;

Briefly, the strategies adopted were as follows:





Pre-school in Kg. Terian, Sabah. Photo: Christina Nilsson



Dusun children playing cards, Kg. Terian, Sabah. Photo: Christina Nilsson

### 1. Training programme (field and centralised)

A training programme was essential for building the capacity of the communities to be able to manage the project themselves in the long run. This included caregivers' training in early childcare and development, leadership training (especially for women), workshops on health and nutrition as well as some paramedic workshops for communities in remote areas. There was a gradual move from simple skills to a more complex understanding of early childhood care and development, concepts of collective leadership and community involvement and also an understanding of the importance of setting up and sustaining people's organisations.

### 2. Designing and producing relevant educational materials and curricula

There was a dire need to design and produce local materials that were relevant to the rural areas and that took into account indigenous values, customs and traditions. To date, the preschool program has come up with an integrated curriculum incorporating indigenous knowledge, local language and materials.

### 3. Networking

Networking between villagers, local groups, organisations within the state, both national and international, was important because through networking communities could share their resources, problems and also support one another.

### 4. Community activities and outreach meetings

Community activities that are carried out within a village are important in order to bring people together. Outreach meetings were held in individual homes or within a group of houses. This was important in order to reach out to women in the rural

areas, as many of them do not dare to give or share their opinions in public.

### 5. Strengthening the preschool centres and their links with the nearby primary schools

There was a need to provide early stimulation for young children before they are absorbed into the formal education system. Since the age range of 0 to 6 years is considered crucial and important for a child, preschool centres can provide systematic and planned stimulation at this early age. It was therefore important to continually upgrade and strengthen these centres. In order that the work during the preschool age would continue, it was also crucial to strengthen the links between these centres and the primary schools.

## Lessons learned

A number of important lessons have been learned from this project.

Children in all of the project areas are very close to their families and enjoy a tremendous amount of freedom to follow their parents around or to attend the activities at the preschool centres. In areas where the communities are mobile, we find that the families stay in their farms according to the farming seasons and that the children's attendance in the centres will go down during certain seasons. However, as soon as the families are back in their village, the children's attendance in the centres will again become part of their daily routine. Despite this irregular attendance, the feedback from the primary schools has been positive. Children who have attended preschool are doing better and adjusting to school well. When PACOS started its pilot project in the village of Kipouvo, the primary school

(right) Preschool children doing an activity in class with their teacher. Photo: Colin Nicholas

was scoring 0% passes in the government year six evaluation test. However, this has grown steadily from 20% to 80%, and one former preschool student scored distinctions in all five subjects that were tested, a result otherwise only possible in urban schools. This improvement in school performance is also evident in other villages where community preschool programmes are running.

Because parents are actively involved in the preschool activities - such as the monthly parents' meetings, centre maintenance, educational visits and children's sports days - stronger bonds have been created between families in the villages. When their children enter primary school, parents are more willing to take part in activities organized by the school. By being actively involved in their children's learning both in the preschool and primary school, parents are becoming more aware of what is going on and are able to give support to their children when needed. Indirectly, their children also become less apprehensive about school and do not drop out when faced with difficulties.

The preschool centre is also community owned, unlike the primary schools, which are government property. Access to the preschool is also free and therefore the centre is not only used by the children but is also used for other village meetings when there are no

classes going on. Some of the centres are also used by the local health clinics when they undertake their periodic medical outreach. Other centres have also become learning centres for adults where literacy classes are conducted in the village. This is in clear contrast to the primary schools, which are not accessible to the community except for school learning and by the school staff themselves: all others must get permission from the school authorities to enter their premises. It is therefore important that preschool centres are well maintained and have facilities that are within the reach of children and the community.

In some villages, the houses are quite dispersed and remote, making it difficult for families and communities to relate to service providers and the centres of power collectively on matters such as requests from districts administrators for health clinics and improvements in infrastructure. As a result, their prospect of bringing about change are limited, more so where local culture has been weakened or lost and local leaders are appointed by the government based on their political affiliation and not on their ability and wisdom. But the preschools have created an avenue for the community to come together when the centres organize activities for the children. Despite political differences among village leaders, the preschools have been able to cut



across these differences and they are considered a uniting factor in all the project areas.

In some instances, a family may keep their children away from the preschool centre due to political differences. However, after a while they end up sending their children to the preschool because they realize that they will lag behind the other children when they enter primary school. The preschool events that generate most participation are the family day and the preschool graduation day. During these events, quarrelling village leaders or families forget their differences and take part in the activities and this gives opportunities to mend broken communication. The preschools have therefore created a common identity for communities that binds them together in support of the holistic development of their children.

The preschool programme in the communities has also provided the teachers and caregivers with the opportunity for personal development. Through the preschool programme, PACOS has seen women leaders being built and coming forward to take up issues that are faced by the communities. In the villages, women are generally not given the opportunity to voice their opinions or they take a low-key position by staying in the kitchen preparing food or sitting at the back with their small children during village meetings. Since most of the teachers, caregivers and village preschool committee members are women, being on the preschool working committee has provided them with an opportunity as well as encouragement to be active, committed, organized, to make decisions and interact with other leaders from other communities.

The training of preschool teachers as leaders is also one of the aspects included in the preschool teacher training programme, besides skills and knowledge in early childhood. Slowly, they gain confidence and an ability to come forward in village meetings and even take up positions such as treasurers or secretaries in people's organizations. In the pilot village of Kipouvo, we initially had 2 women leaders; now we have 9 women who are actively involved in the village administration.

## The Bernard van Leer Foundation

There were also many lessons learnt from the Bernard van Leer Foundation (BvLF), which is the funding agency. BvLF was not only able to provide long-term funding support to PACOS but it also played many supporting roles such as connecting PACOS with other organizations working in the area of Early Childhood Care and Development. BvLF encourages and supports its partners to visit and learn from each other. Through

these exposure visits, our ideas, knowledge and skills have increased and this has strengthened our programme. The materials sent from BvLF on the experiences of other partners throughout the world were also relevant to our work and helped a great deal.

BvLF also puts a great deal of effort into local capacity building and promoting local institutional development through funding support, training courses and networking. As a result, PACOS is now able to contribute effectively at both local and international level, co-hosting or contributing to workshops, conferences, meetings and seminars.

## Conclusion

The strategies used in this project have benefited many rural indigenous children throughout Sabah. Local capacity and local institutions have also been developed, especially PACOS itself. There are still many challenges ahead relating to education among indigenous children in Sabah. One such challenge is to make preschools available to remote communities that lack basic infrastructure, and to provide quality support and follow-up. Another is to make the curriculum really relevant to indigenous children while at the same time taking into account the national curriculum. Yet another is to find long-term financial support for the preschool projects, which is necessary because most of the communities are faced with poverty and degraded resources.

However, despite these challenges, lessons from this project are now being used in another project phase of the preschool work among the indigenous peoples of Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia through the National Indigenous Peoples Network of Malaysia. With more indigenous peoples' groups journeying together, we hope that our children will not only get the best possible start but the best possible future. □

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