INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-6

Obstacles to Education

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Dear Peter,

The path of development for an African country is as rough and tortuous as the dirt tracks in the African bush. Nature, history and economics present obstacles which batter the best-made plans until they cease to function.

For more than fifty years it has been recognized, first by colonial administrations and then by the governments of independent West African nations, that a major problem facing educators is how to create a school system which meets the needs of a poor country. Western-style education assumes that students will reach a level of learning which exceeds the basic requirements of a developing country. Even when such education is geared toward agricultural or vocational training, it emphasizes technical applications of knowledge which are beyond the means of a poor nation.

The result is African countries find that to a great extent they are unable to employ the skills obtained by their most educated citizens. Increasing the availability of Western-style secondary and tertiary schooling, besides being a drain on deficit-ridden budgets, is self-defeating as the disillusioned young people either leave the country in search of employment and pay commensurate with their skills or form layers of discontent within the modern African society. Yet these countries must teach their young the basics of Western languages and science techniques to improve standards of living and provide a foundation for development.

One solution attempted by Senegal is a program called Enseignement Moyen Pratique -- middle-level practical education. The aim of the program is to develop rural teaching centers where students with primary-school education can be taught skills which they will be able to use in their home regions. To promote the practicality of the training, the program also seeks to organize the students into cooperatives which will continue as functioning economic units after the students graduate.

According to a teacher at one of the E.M.P. centers I visited, the concept grew out of a study of widespread student unrest in 1968. The situation at that time was similar to the Ziguinchor disturbances I described in my last

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letter, but in 1968 the student strike was nationwide and of such gravity that it threatened to topple the government. The worst trouble was in Dakar, and the subsequent investigation revealed that many of the participants in the riots there were not students but unemployed youths from the rural areas, most of whom had received some formal education and had come to the city to escape the poverty and boredom of village life. E.M.P. was proposed as a method to keep such young people in their localities, providing them with the skills to make a living there.

About 40 percent of Senegal's children between the ages of 6 and 14 attend primary school. Of these, only about one-fifth go to the secondary level, leaving about 40,000 children a year who end their formal education ill-equipped for a job in the modern sector even of a developing economy but who have become alienated from their traditional culture.

Careful preparation goes into the establishment of a training center, according to E.M.P. Director Yaya Konanté. A preliminary investigation determines what localities can support centers and decides what courses will enable graduates to find a livelihood in the area. An essential part of the program is the acceptance and participation of the community. M. Konanté said the villagers have to agree to house and feed the students, to provide land for the school and to provide the means for the young people to earn their living after they complete the program, which in most places means giving them land to grow crops. Students attend the program for four or five years. M. Konanté said they must have completed the six years of primary school and be between the ages of 13 and 16 when they enter, although a teacher in a rural center told me it would accept children with no formal education because of the lack of qualified applicants in the area. The training includes French and mathematics lessons geared to reinforce the practical education. For example, in one center I saw a French lesson combined with student demonstrations of carpentry projects. For the first two years students receive training in all the practical courses offered, but after the second year they specialize according to preference and aptitude. The centers operate six months a year; the other six months the students are in their villages helping their parents where the centers' teachers visit them to instruct, gauge their progress and provide a link between home and school.

It sounded great in the director's office in Dakar. Unfortunately, the theories are not working out in practice. Despite M. Konanté's recitation of the rigorous process of setting up the centers, my visits revealed that centers had been established in areas which couldn't support them because of shortages of students or water, both of which were specifically cited by the director as criteria in the preliminary studies. Some of the staff members in the centers were ignorant of the principles of the program, especially the idea of forming student cooperatives. Such problems cannot be attributed to false starts of an incipient program. The pro-

ject began in 1971 and by 1976 there were two experimental centers. The director at that time forecast 800 rural centers and 400 urban programs by 1982. M. Konanté conceded that his predecessor had set his sights a little high. There are 11 centers operating this year and the director hoped to have five to eight more opened every year. He envisioned a maximum of 100 centers, each with 400 students, in about 15 years.

However, even M. Konanté's expectations appear delusively optimistic. My visits to three E.M.P. centers revealed the program is foundering because of inadequate funding, poor planning and environmental adversity. My first stop was in Bargny, a town of about 25,000 inhabitants less than 40 kilometers from Dakar. Like the other centers I visited, the Bargny program was in its second year of operation, but unlike the others it had filled its class quota of 100 students each year and had to refuse admission to many other youngsters. As in acceptance to secondary school, the decision is made on students' results in the examination given to all primary-school students after the sixth grade, so the gulf between those who succeed in school and those who fail is only marginally affected. Nor does the Bargny program do much about the drift to urban areas. The center's director described the region as semi-urban, but even so, many of the students expect to take the skills they learn to Dakar.

Nevertheless, the program has promise. The boys learn carpentry, electrical repair, gardening and fishing; the girls are taught needlework and cooking and also work in the garden. All students receive instruction in math and French. Materials are scarce because the centers are unable to function on the 25,000 CFA francs ($125) a month they receive for operating expenses, but most of the staff is enthusiastic and makes do with what they have. The center has outgrown its present facility but a larger school is being built with Belgian aid. The director and students are unhappy about the design which places an unnecessary supporting column in the middle of every classroom, but the woodworking teacher, a Peace Corps volunteer with construction experience, said he and the students will remove the columns once they move in. They have already done some renovation work on one of the primary schools.

Nguékokh is a smaller town about 80 kilometers from Dakar. The problems its center faces are more severe. Materials and staffing are short. Volunteers come on certain days to teach carpentry, agriculture and needlework, but the director and one assistant see that the 60 students are kept busy for the eight hours a day, four days a week that the centers are open. The director was pessimistic about the center's chances. He expects the monthly operating allowance to stop coming, as it did for the second half of last year, because of what he described as political opposition to the program within the government. The center is about to move to new buildings with vaulted roofs and airy rooms, a handsome and efficient UNESCO design. The World Bank provided $3 million to build 30 such centers, but only 15 are now projected.

The director is worried about whether the government will extend power lines to provide electricity for the school, but the gravest problem is water. Many of the wells have turned salty and most are running dry although the rains are two months away. The school's garden is withering despite the students' efforts to keep it watered. Without a drilled well and a pump to run it, the center won't be able to support the hundreds of students planned for the new dormitories.

At Toubacouta, 250 kilometers from Dakar, the water shortage is critical. I saw women lining up their pails to wait while water trickled into the bottom of a well at least 25 meters deep. Other women get up at 3 a.m. to find water. The students have given up tending their garden. Beekeeping efforts have also stopped because of lack of supplies, and almost everything else seemed at a standstill. I was told there were only 21 students because of the lack of primary school graduates in the area, but another director told me many of the students had gone home in disgust and the Toubacouta director had applied for a transfer.

The E.M.P. centers provide a graphic illustration of the problems confronting Senegalese development. First of all, the country doesn't have the money to support all the programs it needs to advance the welfare of its people. The problem is aggravated by mismanagement and corruption. I have no evidence that these faults are responsible for the disappearance of the monthly allowance last year, but the E.M.P. program would be a glaring exception if it was graft-free. As an example of the kind of practices which are accepted as routine here, a high school teacher told me his principal had spent the school's 45 million franc ($225,000) annual operating budget in two months, while his predecessor used to return an unspent portion every year and was considered a kook. Also in the financial realm, the misdirected largesse of the World Bank was evident in Toubacouta, where another $200,000 center with a half-dozen buildings is going up for a school with no prospects of having more than 50 students even if it continues to exist.

The second problem is historical. The colonial administration left Senegal with an educational system ill-designed for its needs. It is too late to try to divert the educated youth from the city at the secondary level. From the first grade he imbibes the belief that the good life is gained only by imitating Western culture. In Toubacouta the children want to be taught to drive so they can go to Dakar and drive taxis. No wonder, then, that there is parental resistance, especially in Moslem communities, to sending children to the European-style schools. However, the government has made little real effort to bridge the gap between educated and uneducated citizens, and some bureaucrats are intent on maintaining it, which is probably the reason for the "political" impediments cited by the Nguékokh director.

But most distressing because it seems the most insolvable is the water shortage, which has been acute for most of the last decade. While the Senegalese recognize the other problems, this is the one they hold paramount. More than once I was told that Senegal could manage despite the many other obstacles if only there was enough water to grow food.

Best regards,

Bowden

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