

Sustainable development through education

Innovative program tackles illiteracy in Mauritania

In terms of human development, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania ranks among the lowest in the world. Annual per capita income is just US\$430, half the population is illiterate and life expectancy is no more than 55 years. Turning such gloomy statistics around is an uphill struggle, but one that the Mauritanian Government is resolutely tackling with the help of its development partners, including OFID.

Positioned on the western extremity of the Sahara, with a land surface that is 90 percent desert, Mauritania faces unique challenges. Poverty is endemic in this vast country. Arable land is limited and inadequate to support the rapidly growing population, and there is widespread environmental degradation due to deforestation and over grazing. Mining and fishing are the main economic activities, but unemployment levels are high and three out of four rural dwellers live below the poverty threshold.

As part of its national poverty reduction strategy, the Mauritanian government has, as a main thrust, the goal of building the country's human capital by strengthening the productive capacities of the population. Central to the achievement of this objective is improved access to basic needs, such as healthcare, education, clean water and energy.

Education, in particular, is seen as a key vehicle for equipping people with the means to secure jobs and make a useful contribution to society and the econ-

omy. It is a sector, however, that is in need of significant investment, not just in terms of physical infrastructure, but also in terms of the quality of teaching. Classrooms are dilapidated and overcrowded, the level of instruction is poor and there is a high rate of absenteeism

among teachers. The population in general has minimal understanding of the value of education, and parents feel little incentive to send their children to school. This sad fact is reflected in enrolment and drop-out levels. While 60 percent of primary-age children are enrolled in ►



Attending an education awareness session. One of the project's greatest successes involved sensitizing the population to the value of education.

PHOTO: FPSC



By helping to renovate 11 schools, OFID created comfortable learning environments for around 1,500 pupils in two underserved municipalities.

◀ school, barely two-thirds of this number get as far as fifth grade. During the 2003 – 2004 academic year, 60 percent of enrolled students dropped out of primary school while, currently, more than half-a-million Mauritanian children do not attend school at all. Over time, the cumulative effects of this situation have seen the average adult literacy rate stagnate at just 42 percent. And for women, this figure drops to 32 percent.

One of the many partners helping the Mauritanian government to strengthen the education sector is Spanish NGO, the *Foundation for the Social Promotion of Culture (FPSC)*, which has been working to improve social conditions in Mauritania for over 20 years. In 2006, OFID joined forces with the Foundation to co-sponsor a project designed to boost primary education in two municipalities – Ouadane in the northwest and R’kiz in the southeast. Today, 12 months after its successful completion, the project continues to deliver results that herald the prospect of permanent change.

The multi-faceted project set out to renovate schools, improve teaching skills and, above all, instill in the population an awareness of the importance of education. Ouadane and R’kiz were selected because of their unique problems and needs. Ouadane is one of the poorest dis-

tricts in the country, with higher-than-average illiteracy and unemployment levels. R’kiz, meanwhile, faces serious challenges in providing schooling for a disproportionately large youth demographic.

The two-year project was co-financed by FPSC, OFID, the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation and the Government of Mauritania. In all, a total of 11 schools were renovated and refurbished, creating comfortable learning environments for around 1,500 students. To improve the quality of teaching, a specialist education consultancy was set up to devise teacher training modules based on the Mauritanian Ministry of Education’s “Basic Competency Approach.” Among other things, the modules introduced a number of new subjects into the primary education system. So now, Gender Approach, Human Rights, Health and First Aid, and Environment Education are an integral part of daily lessons.

But, perhaps the project’s greatest achievement has been the success of the activities carried out to sensitize the population to the value of education. Led by the specialist organization *SOS Pair Educateurs*, awareness-raising sessions were held in villages across Ouadane and R’kiz. Using a combination of role-play, docu-

mentaries and personal testimonies, the sessions attracted a large number of participants, including parents, religious leaders and women community representatives.

To make the most of the enthusiasm generated by the awareness sessions, the project also launched an adult audio literacy program in cooperation with the pioneering NGO *Radio ECCA*. This innovative distance learning program combines 30-minute radio lessons with specially-designed workbooks that are completed by students in the comfort of their own homes. The lessons are built around the interests and needs of the partici-

pants, an approach that makes the learning process easier and keeps the students involved and motivated. Once a week, fellow learners get together under the supervision of a tutor to discuss their lessons and compare goals, and to ask questions and apply new knowledge. These gatherings are critical to the success of the program, as they enable the students to develop skills additional to reading and writing, and also help boost confidence and independence. Women, in particular, have expressed great personal satisfaction in improving their household management skills and developing more autonomy within the family.

FPSC reports that the literacy and education awareness activities have together brought about a noticeable change in attitude among the people of Ouadane and R'kiz. For the first time, there is an appreciation of the link between education and poverty eradication, and communities are motivated to ensure not only that their children go to school, but also that adult illiteracy becomes a thing of the past. FPSC is confident that the achievements of the project will be sustained and built upon as the government continues with its national strategy for development of the education system. ■

PHOTO: FPSC



The adult audio-literacy program has helped women greatly improve their household management skills.