
Burkina Faso is building on education

*Alfred L. Sawadogo, director of Burkina Faso's Eastern Region in the ministry of primary education and alphabetisation is talking to Richard Gerster**

R.G.: According to international measures Burkina Faso has a lot of catching up to do in the educational sector. Less than three out of ten Bourkinabé know how to read and write. Only two out of three children are enrolled in school. The Eastern region, of which you are in charge, covers some 46'000 km² – slightly bigger than Switzerland – and has 1,2 million inhabitants. Where does it stand compared to the rest of the country? What progress have you achieved?

A.L.S.: The East is among the country's poorer regions, which is why the challenges are particularly marked. When it comes to school enrolments our rate of 54 percent remains far below the national average of two thirds. On the other hand we have made enormous progress. Five years ago (2002/03) the rate was only 29 percent! To be more precise: During the school year 2007/08 we had 111'246 students distributed in 2368 classes, compared to then 49'748 students in 1199 classes. There are still less girls than boys being sent to school, but also in this re-



Between 1990 and 2000, Alfred Sawadogo was the national secretary of the African teachers' union (SNEA-B) in Burkina Faso. Due to the supported of the Swiss Labour Assistance for the union he came in contact with Switzerland. Between 1999 and 2003 the Swiss teachers' association implemented a further education project for teachers, for which he was responsible on the SNEA-B's side. Since October 2007 he is a regional director of the primary education ministry in Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso.

spect things have improved thanks to intensive campaigning.

This sounds promising. Can the formation of teachers keep up with this massive expansion of school attendance?

About a third of our 3000 teachers is very young without the necessary experience. But all of them do have a basic training which they received during one year – which we consider insufficient. Due to the lack of untrained teachers, some of them were originally employed by the parents and are now taken over by the state. But teachers' salaries are not attractive. A trained teacher receives a starting salary of less than 145 US dollars (70'000 CFA) – allowances excluded. If they are included, it raises to 200 dollars (100'000 CFA) per month. At the moment the atmosphere is tense. Teachers refuse further education if their additional expenses are not covered by a daily allowance. We do not have the means of transport and petrol to accompany our teachers pedagogically. In the context of decentralisation communities have been created in the entire country. Primary schools will be handed over to these communities in the near future. Together with the responsibilities, the authorities also need training and the transfer of resources so they can fulfil their new tasks.

Children often need to walk a long way to get to school. Are there enough classrooms? What about the quality of the classes?

Teaching often takes place in precarious straw huts, in tents or churches. Tables, chairs, toilets – basically everything is lacking. On the other hand we have asked the parents to send their children to school and now the state cannot keep up with building new schools and training new teachers. This creates disappointment. When it comes to building schools, we are still behind. In 2004/05 it turned out that numerous schools only existed on paper or were

of very poor quality. The entrepreneurs who had received the construction contracts did not do their jobs. There were problems with foreign donors and some construction sites are still unfinished. At the same time state control was very weak and the responsible minister had to leave his office. Now there are new tenders and control is more effective. So school infrastructure is still weak, but we are catching up.

But we not only have to enrol children in school, but also keep them there until at least the end of primary school, better until the end of the third year of secondary school. Parents want their children, particularly the girls, to work at home and they stay away. The quality of the teaching is insufficient. While we have managed to provide a reading book for all children for the first time on 2007/08, our resources are not enough to cover all subjects. What we have found out is also, that children in spite of attending school, do not know how to read by the time they reach third grade. We have to re-examine our pedagogy. But with more than 50 children per class, it is difficult to do justice to every single one of them.

How was it possible for Burkina Faso to expand its educational system at such a scale in the first place? Like in Switzerland, there are no costs for attending kindergarten and primary school – who covers the expenses?

The government builds on education for our future and spends between 15 and 20 dollars of each one hundred for primary education. In our eastern region the state's expenditure (current costs, salaries, investments) has increased from some 118'000 dollars (58 mio CFA) in 2004 to well over 200'000 dollars (104 mio CFA) in

2008. These state expenses are covered by its own resources, but they are also co-financed by general budget support provided by many friendly countries such as Switzerland. In addition to that there is tied programme aid for the schools of the entire country in order to finance the ten year development plan for primary schools (PDDEB). These contributions go to a special account with the treasury (CAST) and have increased from 4000 dollars (2 mio CFA) in 2004 to 14'000 dollars (7 mio CFA) in 2008. Further project contributions provided by a variety of international donors who coordinate among themselves and collaborate very closely with us complete the picture. By the way, Switzerland has particularly promoted adults' alphabetisation in their local language.

Switzerland also directly contributes over six million dollars (8 mio CHF) to Burkina Faso's state budget. Would it not be better to use this money directly for the schools?

From my experience there are several reasons why general budget support is important: On the one hand it allows the government's national planning to balance out regional differences. This balancing mechanism is strengthened. On the other hand there are international donors' favourite regions, while others, even though they are also poor, miss out. Furthermore, projects have proven to be rather short lived, while the state has a perspective of ten years of more. And finally, we should not forget that budget support is tied to fulfilling concrete performance indicators which have previously been agreed upon. This motivates the government to really implement its priorities and to increase its share of financial resources allocated for the primary sector and to measure the achieved progress in schooling.

* The author, Dr. Richard Gerster, is an economist and works as independent consultant and publicist (www.gersterconsulting.ch). This interview is part of a series commissioned by the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO) to take a closer look at budget support from various points of view. They reflect the author's personal opinion.