

DIMITRA Relaunch Workshop – 23 October 2002

Speech of Mr Ali Abdoulaye Coordinator of ONG-VIE, Niger delivered at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Brussels

“Education for all in Niger: challenges and on-going efforts”

It is a real pleasure for me to speak to you on behalf of my country about the education situation in Niger.

This is quite a broad and exciting subject that I will try to explain to you in as succinct a manner as possible.

My country, Niger, is located in the very heart of Africa with a population estimated at around 10 million inhabitants, 51% of whom are female. The population is young and the population increase rate is one of the highest in the world, at around 3,3% per year. Health coverage is precarious and lies in the region of 48% with the number of health workers still insufficient with one doctor for 32.432 inhabitants and one midwife for 6.393 women of reproductive age. Food security is still a constant preoccupation with a drought cycle every ten years. Niger is also a country with a hostile and widely varying climate. The various UNDP reports on human development reveal a strong intensity of poverty amongst the population with 64,31 in 1997, 66,73 in 1998 and 62,16 in 1999. These ratios show that poverty affects 66% of people among which 36 % are extremely poor.

In 2002, the schooling rate did not rise above 41,7% and the literacy rate only reached 19,9%. Added to this are significant disparities between rural and urban areas and between sexes. Niger ranks definitively amongst the poorest countries from the point of view of the human development index.

As you are almost certainly aware, Niger is well-known for its legendary hospitality. It is a country in which the various communities live in harmony and where it is common to be multi-lingual. It is also a country known for tourism and craftsmanship. Niger is one of the rare countries in the world in which education was financed almost exclusively by the State until recently.

Finally Niger is mostly a country with an education system which is still under construction. This is in spite of the fact that education promotion has been a priority of every government since its political independence in 1960. At this time, Niger was the least schooled country in West Africa in terms of formal education with a total of 21.054 pupils, or 3% of the population having schooling. In the adult education sector, the rate was only 1%.

In spite of the Addis Ababa Plan's implementation which advocates extending primary education over the entire African continent within twenty years and in spite of the concerted efforts in education by the State of Niger, with budget allocations in the region of 20% of its general budget, the quantitative and qualitative improvements of the education offer will fall short of hopes. To take an example, for the period 1990 to 2000, the numbers in formal education have increased on average by around 4,4% while in the literacy domain numbers rose by only 1,8%. This tendency for stagnation and deterioration of results in education was due in part to the misunderstanding and confusion between the concepts of "basic education" and that of "schooling". This situation created an imbalance which translated into greater financing for formal education to the detriment of non-formal education, over a very long period of time.

At present the Niger education system is characterised on the one hand by a low schooling rate at the formal sector level, high levels of drop-outs and repeats, internal and external inefficiencies and a very high unit-cost per pupil. On the other hand, in the non-formal sector, one finds a very low literacy level, standardised programmes, a lack of visibility of actions and an absence of a framework for dialogue.

At the beginning of the nineties, Niger took part in the emergence of civil society organisations demanding to play a greater role in development actions.

At the end of the nineties, the country undertook a sweeping reform of its education system with the promulgation by the Government of law 98-12 of 1 June 1998 giving direction to the Niger education system. This law which opts for a bilingual society, with French as the national language, has bridged a legal vacuum by defining both the limits of basic education as well as the charges attributable to all the partners involved in the education process.

In April 2000, Niger took part in the International Conference on Education for All (la Conférence Internationale sur l'Education Pour Tous' in Dakar - EPT) and undertook to equip itself with an action plan for the EPT. The country then went on to develop its Ten-year Education Programme (PDDE-2002-2012) in a consensual way implying all the education partners. This action plan marks the beginning of a new era of partnership between the State, the development partners, civil society and the grassroots communities. This situation is conveyed in the non-formal education sector by the government's option for a 'push strategy', which confers on the State a role for impetus, coordination and action and an executive role on operators through contractual agreements.

As a result, the ten-year Education Development Plan in Niger reinforces the objectives of the EPT, by helping in the exponential recovery of the schooling rate to 84 and the literacy rate to 44 by 2015. Hence, amongst the strategic choices of PDDE one can retain: the improvement in access to basic education, especially for young girls, the correction of the disparities between rural and urban areas, the overhaul of curricula, and institutional and human capacity building.

The Poverty Reduction Strategy (Stratégie de Réduction de la Pauvreté -SRP), of which the Ten-year Development Plan is an intrinsic element was adopted by the Niger government in January 2002. This bears witness to its openly expressed wishes for the necessary conditions to combine in order to begin sustainable development, taking health, and in particular, education into account.

The production of regulatory texts and laws governs the working of the education system and reveals shortcomings such as: not taking specialised education into account; the lack of an integrated approach, or of taking nursery education in hand; the lack of diversity of the education on offer for adolescents and adults; the weakness of partnership in the spirit of Jomtien; the lack of ambition of the strategies and objectives in the programmes towards achieving socio-economic development objectives; the absence of a study on education demand; the lack of acknowledgement of new information and communication technologies; the unavailability of a reference curriculum for basic education; and especially the lack of acknowledgement of the capacity building of all the people involved.

Conscious of the fact that the proposed actions do not help attain the fixed objectives, civil society organisations grouped together in October 2001 in a leading network named: 'Réseau des Opérateurs du Secteur Educatif du Niger' (ROSEN) (Network of Operators in the Educational Sector of Niger), in order to campaign and develop synergy between the Ten-Year Education Development Programme and the National Action Plan for EPT, to which Niger subscribed during the World Education Forum held in April 2000 in Dakar.

In summary this network must ensure the democratic progress of education in order to offer equal opportunities to all women, all girls, all men and all boys in Niger.

Several activities leading to partnership between the State and civil society are already underway, such as:

- The mobilisation of civil society for the implementation of a national coalition in favour of the EPT ;
- The completion of a case study under the aegis of the regional coalition ANCEFA ;
- Investigations on budgetary resources in favour of education in Niger mainly concerning the PPTTE initiative;
- The organisation and recent commemoration of the world EPT week across all Niger.

This is a summarised profile of the education situation in Niger. I am sure you have been able to grasp its broad outline.

I cannot end this presentation without confirming to you that education in Niger is currently being overhauled and that everyone involved in this domain is of the opinion that its success depends on the mobilisation of everyone's energy, hence requiring capacity building for all the actors.

This depends on a sincere and lasting partnership between the different parties, i.e. the State, the technical and financial partners, civil society and the local communities. This impetus must lead to a harmonious bond between the educational supply and demand in such a way as to take everyone's fundamental educational needs into account.

To finish, I would simply like to say that this short talk should serve as an appeal to all the partners of Niger.

Thank you