



**Gender, WASH and education case study:**

**Working in partnership to improve education in Niger**

## **Introduction**

Niger, in West Africa, is one of the poorest countries in the world.<sup>1</sup> According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2009 report,<sup>2</sup> 63 per cent of Niger's 15.3 million people live below the national poverty line. Most people earn their livelihoods as pastoralists (animal herders), or combine pastoralism with growing crops (agro-pastoralists), although infertile soil and irregular rainfall mean that harvests are unpredictable. In recent decades, regular droughts have resulted in food crises, putting millions of people at risk of starvation and destroying their livelihoods. During the 2005–6 drought, for instance, pastoralists lost up to 70 per cent of their animals.

In 2010, more than 7 million people – nearly half the population – were short of food as a result of poor rains, widespread crop failure, and high food prices. Malnutrition rates are on the rise. In areas worst affected by the drought, one in five children under the age of five is malnourished.<sup>3</sup> An international appeal was launched to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe.

Oxfam GB<sup>4</sup> has been working in Niger since 2001, supporting the most vulnerable and marginalised communities in agricultural and pastoral zones. Our programme focuses on two of the biggest problems facing communities: food security and education. Due to people's daily struggle to survive, sending their children to school is not always a priority. Parents often have to choose between sending their children to school or keeping them at home to support the family's economic activities (cattle breeding, agriculture, etc.). Girls often stay at home to do household chores like fetching water and collecting firewood.

## **What are the key education challenges?**

In Niger, more than 70 per cent of adults are illiterate, and more than 60 per cent of primary school-aged children are out of school.<sup>5</sup> Of those who do enrol, most complete less than five years of schooling,<sup>6</sup> and girls are much more likely to drop out than boys. Providing education in a country as large as Niger, with widely dispersed communities, is a major challenge (for instance, many children from pastoralist communities, who lead nomadic lifestyles, have to walk long distances to get to school or have to stay with other (host) families due to seasonal migration of their own families. The host family (usually the head of the village) does not always have enough food to feed children who stay with them.<sup>7</sup>

However, achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE) is essential for a country's longer-term development. Niger developed a poverty reduction strategy in 2002 within the framework of its pledge to achieve the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015.<sup>8</sup> To guarantee the success of this strategy, it has created sectoral programmes, including the Ten-Year Education Development Programme (PDDE), from 2003 to 2013.

The PDDE set a target of 73 per cent gross enrolment rate (GER) in primary school by 2010. While this target has not been reached, the government has made significant progress towards it (GER was estimated at 72.9 per cent in the last PDDE review document).<sup>9</sup> However, this rate hides significant disparities between boys and girls, and between children in urban and rural areas. In 2010, for instance, 64 per cent of girls were enrolled at primary school compared with 82 per cent of boys,<sup>10</sup> and only 42 per cent of girls completed primary school compared with 57 per cent of boys.<sup>11</sup> Children in rural areas are more than twice as likely to be out of school as children in urban areas.<sup>12</sup> The PDDE 2010 review report revealed that only 44 per cent of children in rural areas were enrolled in primary school, compared with 65 per cent in urban areas.<sup>13</sup>

## **Oxfam's education programme**

Oxfam's education programme supports the government's Strategy for Development and Poverty Reduction (2007), which aims to ensure primary education for all by the year 2015. This paper focuses on Oxfam's programme in the Tillabéri region of Niger, where many people have little or no access to basic services. The programme aims to improve children's (and especially girls') access to basic education in the pastoral and agro-pastoral communities where we work, and to improve the school environment so that fewer children drop out. We are doing this by improving water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities, and motivating teachers and children to promote good hygiene in schools and in homes.

Female community workers (*animatrices*) play a central role in the programme, promoting positive role models for young girls, and working with schools and the wider community to tackle negative gender stereotypes and attitudes. We are also raising awareness within communities about the importance of education, working closely with school management committees and parents' and mothers' associations. Finally, we are building the capacity of officials from the Ministry of National Education by providing training and support to enable them to manage resources as effectively as possible.

Working with local partners, including the government, non-government organisations (NGOs), and teachers, parents and children in each community, we are supporting 16 schools in 16 villages.

## **Key challenges to education**

### *Access to water and sanitation facilities*

More than 80 per cent of people in Niger live in rural areas, and almost three-quarters of them have no access to clean drinking water. Women and young girls often have to walk for hours to fetch dirty water from the river or from wells that are contaminated. This makes it even less likely that girls will go to school.

Only 7 per cent of the population (just 3 per cent in rural areas) have access to adequate sanitation.<sup>14</sup> The lack of latrines in schools is a particular problem for girls as they reach puberty, which may be another reason why parents are reluctant to send their young daughters to school. Lack of access to clean water and adequate sanitation is also a considerable threat to public health. Basic interventions like providing latrines and encouraging people to wash their hands with soap after going to the toilet can reduce the incidence of diarrhoeal diseases – one of the biggest causes of child deaths in developing countries.

### *Gender inequalities*

Patriarchal attitudes and significant gender inequalities still prevail in Niger. In particular, the gender division of household labour, and cultural norms such as early marriage, still represent significant barriers to girls' access to and retention in education. Once girls marry and have children at an early age, they are pulled out of schools. Girls are also burdened with most of the household chores, and their attendance at school can be seen as a cost that poor families can ill afford.

### *Improving the education system*

The government has made considerable progress in improving some aspects of the education system. For example, the teaching workforce has more than doubled since 1999, improving the pupil/teacher ratio significantly.<sup>15</sup> But greater effort is needed if Niger is to achieve its Education For All (EFA) goals.<sup>16</sup>

### **Working in partnership to achieve our goals**

Oxfam works with others to take action to achieve the common goals of overcoming poverty and injustice, and the education programme in Niger has worked on the basis of this principle since 2001. The programme works with three national civil society organisations: the *Association pour un Développement Durable* (ADD), *Volontaire pour une Intégration Educative Kande ni Bayra* (VIE Kande ni Bayra) and *Association Timidria*. Their members come from some of the most disadvantaged communities, and they therefore have legitimacy to speak on their behalf. They are also best placed to identify problems and put forward solutions proposed by the communities themselves.

The programme also works in partnership with the *Réseau des Organisations du Secteur de l'Éducation du Niger* (ROSEN), a network of more than 30 national NGOs active in the education sector. In addition, Oxfam has developed a dialogue with more than 20 international and national NGOs involved in advocacy to achieve the six EFA goals in Niger. The Ministry of Education is another key partner. The programme provides training and support to help the Ministry develop its institutional and management capacities in order to meet the country's education goals by 2015.

### **What have we achieved together?**

#### *Building water points and latrines in schools*

In 2010, we built 14 latrines in 7 schools in Fogou, Ayoga, Ezack, and Boumbounga villages. The children will receive hygiene education and awareness raising sessions to sensitise them to good hygiene practices. We also supported local communities to build 13 latrines. Providing separate toilet facilities for boys and girls affords them privacy and security, which encourages girls in particular to continue to attend school. The programme has made considerable progress in increasing the number of girls who are enrolled in school in the communities where we work, and reducing the number of dropouts.

#### *Promoting improved hygiene practices*

Building infrastructure for water and sanitation facilities is vitally important to improve the school environment, but promoting good hygiene practices in schools and at home is equally important. The programme works through animatrices (female community workers) recruited by each of the three partner organisations. These are educated women from the community who act as positive role models for girls, demonstrating the benefits that education can bring. They help children to understand how to use latrines hygienically and the benefits of good hygiene, including the importance of washing their hands with soap before eating and after using the toilet. The animatrices also aim to change people's views about the value of education for girls in particular, and to encourage more children to enrol and stay in school. They work closely with parents and teachers to provide joint solutions to the problems children face.

The work of the animatrices has improved girls' access to schooling, as well as the retention rate- for example, in intervention schools in Foguou department, Tillabéri region, after the introduction of animatrices in intervention schools, no children who enrolled in 2004/5 dropped out after their first year.<sup>17</sup> In addition, parents and the wider community have become much more involved in their children's education – for instance, in all of the schools we support, there are now functioning school management committees (which include teachers), and parents' and mothers' associations. Some parents reported that they noticed

major changes in their children, who were paying more attention to cleanliness and hygiene. There was also feedback that children are acting as agents of change – encouraging other family members to practice good hygiene like washing hands, covering food, and keeping water containers clean.

### *Supporting community structures*

Achieving a good-quality education system requires trained teachers, but making schools more accountable to the local community requires the active involvement of parents and other community members. Therefore, Oxfam's programme supports the community structures mentioned above (school management committees and parents' and mothers' associations). Many women participate in these groups, often holding key positions such as treasurer.

Community groups in the 16 villages where we worked until 2010 have received training in a range of skills, including organisational and financial management, gender awareness, and income-generating activities. The training was carried out by VIE Kande ni Bayra, one of Oxfam's national partners, because of its experience and expertise in promoting adult literacy. In 2008–9, the organisation trained 254 adults (144 of them women) and school management committees have developed coherent organograms and annual operational plans.

By building the capacity of communities to participate in how local schools are run, the programme is helping to ensure that the benefits are sustainable in the longer term.

### *Making schools better places for children*

The programme's support for local community groups has already achieved some important results. For example, school management committees in all 16 schools in the districts of Téra, Bankilaré, Say, and Torodi have set up canteens so that they can give the children a mid-morning porridge of millet to compensate for the fact that many children do not have a meal at home every day. The canteens receive regular supplies through wholesale purchases made by partners throughout the school year.

### *Advocacy and lobbying work*

The work that the animatrices are doing to raise community awareness of the importance of educating children (and girls in particular) has been backed up by an advocacy plan at the local level, which involves community associations organising exchange visits between villages to share experiences and learn from each other. These provided much-valued opportunities to discuss common concerns and see what other communities were planning to achieve. In some communities, people have organised public meetings attended by local government representatives. This was a good opportunity for people to present their concerns about their children's education to those responsible for making decisions and allocating resources. In this way, the programme is also promoting greater accountability.

The three operational partners have also signed agreements with community radio stations to hold regular broadcasts to discuss the issues that prevent children from getting an education, such as early marriage and attitudes about gender roles. Many listeners call in to the radio shows to ask for guidance and advice.

### *Building the capacity of government*

Oxfam has been able to build a strong relationship with the Ministry of Education, locally and nationally. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed with the Ministry for 2008–9 and 2009–10. The first agreement allowed key officials from the Ministry of National Education to attend training on education resources management. Most of these officials have subsequently been appointed as heads of key directorates within the Basic Education

General Directorate, notably the Directorate of Initial Training, the Directorate of Curricula and the Directorate of Girls' Education. The person who was Director of Initial Training has now been appointed as Deputy Secretary-General of the Ministry. Key civil servants received training on gender issues, enabling them to address gender inequalities in their planning and decision-making processes.

The 2009–10 MoU covers key reforms around the 'quality initiative',<sup>18</sup> girls' education, and updating the curriculum. Programme partners sign a contract each year with the local Ministry to train new teachers in French and Maths, as well as providing regular follow-up by education advisers from the Ministry, and teacher-training sessions throughout the programme.

These strong partnerships, working towards shared goals, have contributed to good success rates for the pupils who sat their final primary education exam in 2010, enabling them to go on to secondary school.

Following field visits by Ministry officials in 2008, and after subsequent visits and meetings in 2009 and 2010, the government recommended that Oxfam's approach to partnership working in its education programme be benchmarked, and that other international organisations should adopt this approach.

### **Lessons learned**

Strong partnerships have been the key to the success of Oxfam's education programme in Niger, helping to achieve the goal of improving girls' access to education and addressing some of the barriers to parents sending their children to school. Partnerships with national and local civil society groups have been positive and helped to strengthen community structures. The fact that parents and other community members are now more involved in how local schools are run, developing improvement plans for the longer term, means that the benefits of the programme will be sustainable.

Partnership with the Ministry of Education has enabled us to strengthen the capacity of key staff involved in planning and decision-making, and some of those staff have subsequently been appointed to key directorates and the Office of the Secretary-General. Our strong working relationship with the Ministry, with field visits to see the impact at field level, resulted in the government deciding to use our partnership approach as a benchmark for others working in the education sector. Partnership with the government, nationally and locally, also helped to support reforms and training in key areas such as reviewing the curriculum, implementing the quality initiative to improve teachers' performance, and the provision of WASH facilities in schools as a means of addressing gender issues and other barriers to education.

### **Key challenges**

Taking into account the context of Niger, where the state is unable to provide basic services for the vast majority of its citizens, there is still a need for agencies to engage in service delivery while at the same time supporting the capacity of community-based organisations and government authorities. Part of this support includes helping community organisations to become more representative and accountable.

Lack of funding is also a significant challenge. Some donors (like MCC, IMAGINE, AED and USAID) have left Niger, and of those that have stayed, some donors have reduced their budgets, most likely because of the political situation. Oxfam and other agencies find it increasingly difficult to raise funds for their education programmes and WASH activities, which often require substantial inputs. In addition, most local organisations do not have

funds to support their own running costs, and they are therefore heavily dependent on external funding, which jeopardises their sustainability.

The recent decrease in Niger's education budget<sup>19</sup> also represents a significant challenge to maintaining the improvements made in recent years. Despite these challenges, Oxfam's programme will continue to work with our partner organisations to ensure that boys and girls in marginalised communities in Niger have better access to schools, and a better education service, which motivates them to complete their primary education and continue to secondary education and beyond.

---

<sup>1</sup> Niger ranks 167 out of 169 countries in the Human Development Index (HDI). See UNDP (2010) Human Development Report 2010, 'The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development', [http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR\\_2010\\_EN\\_Tables\\_reprint.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2010_EN_Tables_reprint.pdf) (accessed 12 May 2011).

<sup>2</sup> UNDP (2009) Human Development Report 2009, 'Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development', <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2009/> (accessed 12 May 2011).

<sup>3</sup> World Food Programme (WFP) (2010) 'Niger Background', WFP, [www.wfp.org/news/news-release/niger-background](http://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/niger-background) (accessed 12 May 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Oxfam is an international confederation of 15 organisations of which Oxfam GB is one. The work in this paper is that of Oxfam GB which will be referred to as Oxfam hereafter.

<sup>5</sup> UNESCO (2010) 'Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2010', United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), [www.unesco.org/education/gmr2010/ch2.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/education/gmr2010/ch2.pdf) (accessed 12 May 2011) p. 95

<sup>6</sup> Burk K (2006) 'Out-of-school Children: Sub-Saharan Africa', USAID Africa Bureau Information Center, [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNADR138.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADR138.pdf) (accessed 12 May 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Oxfam (2003) 'Education for all in Niger: Rich countries continue to neglect Africa's children', Oxfam Briefing Paper 42, Oxfam International.

<sup>8</sup> World leaders agreed the eight MDGs at a summit in 2000 to tackle poverty and hunger and address key development challenges such as achieving universal primary education, and reducing maternal and child deaths. See: [www.un.org/millenniumgoals/](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/) (accessed 12 May 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of National Education, 'Rapport d'exécution 2ème phase du PDDE (2008-2010) et Statistiques de l'éducation de base – Annuaire statistique 2009–2010' (Annual National School Statistics).

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of National Education, 'Statistiques de l'éducation de base – Annuaire 2009–2010', (Annual National School Statistics).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> UNESCO *op. cit.* p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of National Education, 'Rapport d'exécution 2ème phase du PDDE (2008-2010) et Statistiques de l'éducation de base- annuaire statistique 2009–2010'.

<sup>14</sup> UNICEF (2010) 'At a glance: Niger', [www.unicef.org/infobycountry/niger\\_53120.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/niger_53120.html) (accessed 12 May 2011).

<sup>15</sup> UNESCO *op. cit.* p. 115.

<sup>16</sup> For more information on the six EFA goals, see UNESCO, 'Education for All by 2015', [http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=42579&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=42579&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html) (accessed 12 May 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Oxfam (2005) 'Evaluation of the 'Animatrice Model' in Mali and Niger', West Africa Education Programme, Oxfam GB.

<sup>18</sup> This is an initiative put in place by the Initial Training Directorate some years ago to ensure that teachers are effectively implementing new teaching methods, thus ensuring that French and Maths will be adequately taught in schools.

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of National Education, Secrétariat Général du Ministère de l'éducation Nationale du Niger / 10 septembre 2010.

© Oxfam GB September 2011

This paper was written by Ndeye Marianne Tounkara. Oxfam GB acknowledges the assistance of Kathryn O'Neill, Hitomi Kuwabara, Carron Basu Ray, and Abigail Humphries Robertson in its production.

The text may be used free of charge for the purposes of advocacy, campaigning, education, and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full. The copyright holder requests that all such use be registered with them for impact assessment purposes. For copying in any other circumstances, or for re-use in other publications, or for translation or adaptation, permission must be secured and a fee may be charged. E-mail **[publish@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:publish@oxfam.org.uk)**

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail **[enquiries@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@oxfam.org.uk)** or go to **[www.oxfam.org.uk](http://www.oxfam.org.uk)**.

The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB under ISBN 978-1-84814-958-8 in September 2011.

Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

Oxfam is a registered charity in England and Wales (no 202918) and Scotland (SC039042).

Oxfam GB is a member of Oxfam International.