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Partnerships for female education in Burkina Faso – perspectives from Evangelical Churches and FBOs

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Introduction

Many obstacles – historical, social, cultural/religious and economic – have hindered, and continue to hinder, the development of girls' and women's education in Burkina Faso. However, churches and faith-based organisations (FBOs), especially evangelical institutions like the Assemblies of God Church and Christian FBOs such as the Association Evangélique d'Appui au Développement (AEAD), have shown, and are continuing to show, innovative ways to improve girls' and women's education in the country.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, there has been recognition that improving the education of both girls and women in the developing countries of the world is essential for the socioeconomic development of these countries. Not only does female literacy lead to improved healthcare, better family life expectancy and improved motivation in employment, it also leads to greater confidence among women, who are as a consequence more likely to become involved in the political decision-making processes, locally or nationally. That is why targets for girls' enrolment in schools and improvements in female literacy have become key aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In this essay, I present the experiences of Evangelical Churches and Christian NGOs in female education in Burkina Faso. By making use of in-depth narrative interviews conducted in an inquiry into this topic in 2006, I allow the voices of key actors in female education, educators and pastors to be heard. In the second part of the essay I describe the form of partnerships for education between evangelical organisations and other faith actors at the local and national level in Burkina Faso. Moreover, I reflect on the role of international organisations and the type of partnerships that are necessary to improve the collective effort of improving female education in contexts such as Burkina Faso.

Experiences of Evangelical Churches and Christian NGOS in female education in Burkina Faso

Assemblies of God

I interviewed a senior staff member of the Assemblies of God Church who worked in formal education for over 40 years to hear his opinion on why the church got involved with female education. The Assemblies of God Church came to Burkina Faso in January 1921. Formal education and transcribing one of the main national languages (Mooré) was one of the primary activities of the missionaries. The Assemblies of God Church promoted formal and non-formal education. Later, those who benefited from such education also set up schools and organisations to support the church vision for the benefit of the nation. According to Innocent Kientega, an educationalist of the Assemblies of God Church, this has to do with our social context.

In our context one prefers to invest in the life of boys because the boy will carry on bearing the name of the family. Also, because of the limited resources, if one has to choose between educating a boy and a girl, one will choose to educate the boy. This is why to remedy this imbalance the church decided to care for those that were seemingly neglected by society, that is girls' education. I think the church was right in opening girls' schools.

For Kientega, education has more impact on girls than boys because they are the mothers, responsible for their family, and struggling to impart value they have learnt.

On the question of why the Assemblies of God started schools, Pastor Simporé, a senior leader of the church, explains:

I believed this was led by God. It was in 1921 that the gospel came to Burkina by the Assemblies of God missionaries. From 1921 to 1948 we have no information about evangelical schools. I was not born then. But I believe God wanted the church to have a good foundation before talking about schools. From 1948 God allowed Pastor Pierre Dupret from France to open the schools. We were told that he received that vision from God to open schools though not all of his board members agreed with him in this project especially concerning the opening of the secondary school. He even showed us the place where he said God spoke to him to open the schools. He was convinced of that idea. It seems that God was preparing people for the church's future generation. With the progress of today the church will need capable leaders. At the time the primary school was opened there were not many intellectuals in the church, apart from the American missionaries. The gospel is for all the population and the church needed intellectuals. Those intellectuals could also reach their peer groups as well. That is my opinion. Today we have brothers and sisters with different levels of education who can reach others both

intellectually and spiritually. There are other intellectuals who did not go through the evangelical schools, but the majority of those who impacted the church came from the evangelical schools.

(interview Simporé 2006)

Flavien Tapsoaba, a pastor in Ouagadougou and General Treasurer of the Federation of Evangelical Churches and Missions as well as the former president of the Apostolic Church in Burkina Faso, joins the above voices explaining the reasons why the church should promote girls' education:

After leading the church for many years, the vision I had was to prepare future leaders by setting up schools. I had the privilege of opening the first schools of the Apostolic Church in Burkina and led them for twenty-one years. Then I opened another school called Raoul Follereau that also is twenty-five years old. The motivation behind all this is to prepare future leaders of the church to cope with the growing capacity of the church. In order to do this, we need to prepare the coming generation. The Bible says 'teach the child the way he should follow and when he becomes older, he will not forsake it' (Prov. 22:6). I am the product of the evangelical school run by Pastor Pierre Dupret of the Assemblies of God. I did not come from a Christian background but going through that school was an opportunity for me to become what I am today. Referring to the importance of evangelical schools, whether they are opened by the church or individual members we see the importance of that ministry. This is why we promote evangelical schools to run the official teaching programme. But alongside that programme we have the right to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. Such a message will help the children become able and responsible good citizens of tomorrow. These children will be the future church leaders and by setting examples of good leadership and citizenship they will bring their contribution to the development of Burkina Faso. These are the main reasons that motivate us in setting up evangelical schools.

(interview Tapsoaba 2006)

All these leaders who were interviewed benefited from the education provided by the Evangelical Church and are now promoting the establishment of new schools and Christian organisations which promote literacy and socioeconomic development for girls and women. Tapsoaba outlines the objectives of the church's educational work:

Our evangelical schools are a means by which more children will hear the word of God and as a pastor we want the number of Christians to increase. If the young people are not well trained intellectually and spiritually, they will not be in position to face many challenges of life awaiting the church and the entire nation.

(interview Tapsoaba 2006)

However, Assemblies of God's activities for the promotion of girls' education in Burkina Faso are not without difficulties:

It depends on where you are from in Burkina Faso. Basically, in the central plateau people understood that sending the boy to school was especially a good investment. But in areas such as the Northern region, North-East and West not all parents see the importance of sending their children to school. These obstacles are also seen with the geographical location of the school. One obstacle is that many of these children leave the school without being prepared to integrate in life. We then need to think about secondary schools that will allow these girls and boys to increase their educational level and be better prepared to find gainful employment. Some education provided such as the Assemblies of God Church, AEAD and other Christian NGOs have set up secondary school where girls and boys can study together. In this school, there are opportunities to learn life skills to prepare them to enter the job market. The church was not an obstacle to girls' education. On the contrary during the missionary period girls' homes were opened to receive anyone who had difficulties and needed help. However, the church still needs to do more for girls.

(interview Tapsoaba 2006)

The contribution of FBOs to female education

AEAD

The AEAD, the organisation of which I am the director, is an FBO which has worked in Burkina Faso since 1992. Its vision is to 'improve life through the love of God'. AEAD's mission stands for creating and developing integral approaches to improve life through education, training, socioeconomic development and evangelism. In the education section of AEAD, formal and non-formal education are combined in an integral approach to give opportunities for children and adults to receive appropriate education in the Centre West, Centre and Northern regions of the country. During the 2016/2017 academic year, AEAD was running 11 formal schools, reaching 2,102 girls and boys. Some 1,000 persons are cared for in non-formal education centres where, through adult literacy and special education programmes, men and women are exposed to an education that enables them to contribute to their own development.

AEAD seeks to find innovative ways of working from grassroots communities' point of view to fight against poverty of all sorts, whether economic, social or spiritual. Non-formal education allows women and men to learn how to read and write in their mother tongue and use the acquired knowledge to improve matters such as agriculture, basic health, gender, entrepreneurship, and cultural and religious values at community level.

In its integral approach, AEAD intends to contribute to overcoming the root causes of girls' and women's difficulties in education by assisting communities to

have access to clean water, by engaging in environmental protection with tree planting and anti-erosive systems, by contributing to the increase of food production and by running a medical centre which provides support to HIV/AIDS victims. AEAD works peacefully in a multifaith context in Burkina Faso, remaining true to its nature in supporting the capacity building of the local churches, which in turn are agents of a community's transformation.

ANTBA

Another Christian NGO engaged in educational work in Burkina Faso is the National Association for Bible Translation and Literacy (ANTBA). It is responsible for a large portion of the syllabus used in the literacy classes in the church literacy centres. According to Sabine Compaoré, a financial officer of ANTBA, the target groups in their ministry are girls, women and children that did not have the opportunity to go to formal school. Each year they run over 500 adult literacy courses across the country. ANTBA translates the Bible into local languages. The organisation sees literacy programmes as a key necessity to enable people to read the Bible in their mother tongues. What benefit would it bring if they translated the Bible and brought it to a group of people who do not know how to read? Their literacy programmes actively contribute to development. Moreover, the different literacy programmes contain modules on civic life and health-related issues. Hence, they connect the educational component to capacity building on other dimensions of development as well.

It is interesting how Sabine Compaoré describes the work of the organisation in relation to its Christian identity:

ANTBA is in partnership with the government Department of Literacy especially with the production of the national curriculum (Institut National d'Alphabétisation, INA). We also have our own syllabus. ANTBA can use the government syllabus but it has its own that it uses in their programme. We have the right to use our syllabus. As a Christian organisation the content of our syllabus comes from the Bible. When we partner with others in literacy, we use our own syllabus because we pursue an objective that is to evangelise and this has resulted in people accepting Jesus Christ during the literacy programme by using our syllabus. We do not have any problems with Christian partners but with others we share with them the way we work, and this is accepted. Our organisation is well appreciated by the government who evaluates the work we do in literacy and sees the results. The government looks at us as a credible partner in non-formal education to the point that we have benefited from the public funds for literacy and the support from UNICEF.... The government does support us and invites other partners to support us in our effort in providing literacy classes and training to the population.

(interview Compaoré 2006)

Partnerships for female education

The need for quality education is universally acknowledged by governments, international organisations and NGOs around the globe. Many organisations have recognised the need for partnerships with civil organisations to participate both in the planning and the implementation at grass-roots level. However, very few recognise the role played by churches and FBOs. It sounds as if national and international organisations are avoiding an important piece of the puzzle that will keep local and national governments accountable. These groups, such as registered Christian FBOs, are viable partners who are acting as advocates for access to and quality in education for girls and women. Can these churches and FBOs be left out in their support for education? In many cases, they have been integrated into the public systems, where they share the commitment of the state to provide universal services to all, regardless of their identities.

With this in mind, the next section of the article focuses on the nature of partnerships that can exist at the local level. The way partnerships are perceived reflects their importance, both at the national and global level. To illustrate the point, I will refer to an early example of the Assemblies of God as well as to more recent examples of the FBOs mentioned above, AEAD and ANTBA.

Local partnerships

In order to be accountable and transparent in quality service delivery in girls' and women's education, local governments need to build solid partnerships with established national NGOs and churches which are already active in education to help them deliver quality education without religious and gender discrimination. Organisations such as AEAD and ANTBA have a good track record in terms of formal and non-formal education. The Education Orientation Law is explicit on the fact that civil societies and churches can create and run education systems. AEAD has, for instance, a close partnership with the local government in the areas of education and health. The local city government of Boulmiougou town, Ouagadougou, has worked in partnership with AEAD to provide formal and non-formal education for the communities. The mayor and her council provided lands to build schools and a medical centre. AEAD looks for funding and hires and trains the personnel, and the whole community is served. Nearly 50 per cent of the beneficiaries in formal education and 60 per cent of patients in the health sector are female. The churches and Christian FBOs are at the heart of the community's development, and AEAD is frequently invited by the local administration to give workshops with the elected council members to discuss strategies for development at community level.

Partnership at the national level

At the national level there is a political will to meet the SDGs, particularly the educational targets under SDG 4 (Quality Education). This is clear from the

Education Orientation Law. It is stated in section 1, chapter 2, Article 3 that 'Education is a national priority' and Article 8 'the private education system is recognized'. Private education can be secular or confessional. Parents have the right to give religious, moral or traditional education to their children according to their own conviction and under the reservation of respecting the republican law.

These sections of the Education Orientation Law show the legal scope for churches and Christian FBOs to work within these legal frameworks. The same openness and collaboration found at local and regional authorities' level within the country are recognised at the national level. Different interviews conducted by the author with several authorities, such as the Director of Private Basic Education and Literacy and the officers at the directorate of Private Secondary Education Department, attest to the same willingness of the government to accompany Evangelical Churches and Christian FBOs in their common effort for girls' and women's education.

During my inquiry, I was able to meet the Director of Private Basic Education at the ministry level, François de Paul Sédégo, and the Ministry Delegate of Basic Education and Literacy, and had an audience and a letter from the Minister of Basic Education and Literacy. His Excellency the prime minister sent his Ministry Delegate of Education to act as chairman and read his speech for the official opening of the Speed School on 7 December 2007. That day the prime minister received the secretary-general of the Stromme Foundation and our three partner organisations in his office and appreciated, on behalf of the government, our contribution to girls' and women's education. He promised to do all he could to facilitate our contribution to the government's programme of education.

The Minister of Basic Education and Literacy, Odile Bonkoungou (2008), wrote a letter in the daily newspaper *Les Editions Le Pays* No 4080 to thank all the NGOs and associations that were working in education to help increase provision during 2007. She also congratulated the Cadre de Concertation pour l'Education de Base and the coalition of NGOs and associations for all their initiatives in favour of providing education to Burkina Faso children and promoting the development of the education system. Her letter indicated the good relations that exist between the government and the civil society, which includes the churches and Christian NGOs. This attests to the excellent partnerships between government, churches and FBOs for education in Burkina Faso. From the national level, I shall now proceed to analyse the situation from the international donors' perspectives.

International partnerships

To bring girls' and women's education in Burkina Faso to the desired level, more is required than the goodwill of churches and NGOs. Currently two-thirds of the female population in Burkina Faso are illiterate. The access to and the quality of education still needs substantial improvement. Even the policies of

the government of Burkina Faso and its reformed education law need genuine and flexible support from the rich countries in order to make these policies a reality at community level.

Although great promises have been made by international donors, they need to be implemented, followed up and assessed.

Myths about FBOs

The allegation against FBOs that they might use development funds to proselytise needs to be explored, especially when dealing with communities that are deeply religious. Some FBOs offer a high quality of education without religious discrimination. They provide excellent educational services in compliance government policies and norms. They are seen as social partners by the government. For the Evangelical Churches, Christianity is a way of life that comes from a choice based on free will. Tolerance and freedom characterise its peaceful coexistence with other faiths in Burkina Faso. There is harmony between the faiths in Burkina Faso, and their leaders collaborate to maintain peace at the national level.

The issue of faith in development has been raised with the World Bank and the churches in Africa (Belshaw *et al.* 2001). If the World Bank and other related donor agencies acknowledge the pertinent involvement of the churches in education, then the Evangelical Churches and Christian NGOs in Burkina Faso, promoting an integral approach to education, should not be left to struggle on their own. How much greater will be the results towards achieving the goal of high-quality education when they work in partnership with government and international organisations?

There are some promising initiatives on the collaboration between development agencies and faith-based actors. The British Department for International Development, for example, has increased their funding for faith-based groups.

The efforts of the religious groups, such as the evangelicals, need to be matched by additional support through partnerships. This needs to be a true partnership that enables them to care for all, with religious sensitivity and with the respect of others. These FBOs will continue to support government educational plans, especially in rural areas where the demands are greater, if they are allowed to keep their religious distinctiveness – which is the source of their quality. Another aspect that should not be overlooked is that in addition to fulfilling the official programme, evangelical schools make a significant contribution to moral values, such as tolerance, gender, respect for public goods, love and care for one's neighbour, and good citizenship. These values are transmitted within these communities, and they cannot be negotiated with money. In the light of global security, Burkina Faso is a good example of a country where multifaith communities live in peace and all try to get involved in the educational development of the country alongside the government. The leaders at different levels work in harmony to resolve conflict in the neighbouring countries and want to preserve these cultural values through education.

There must be a fundamental paradigm shift on the part of the government and international donors to enable the faith-based sector to achieve more. With more resources and training, churches and NGOs could open many schools in towns and villages, bringing education to all communities alongside the efforts of the government through innovative and best practices. UNICEF supports Muslim-based initiatives for girls' education. They could do the same with evangelical schools and networks. The author recalls over the last 20 years dialogues between the evangelical formal education bodies and the government's Department of Private Education asking them to reconsider their support for the church-related schools. At the time of writing, good initiatives are in prospect on the part of both the church and the government. When that happens, the support should be on an equal footing, allowing them to continue expanding their contribution to all children and speeding up the national plans.

Conditionality in partnerships

Partnerships between organisations or governments in the global North and the global South are often established by the northern partner organisations and agencies to fulfil a northern agenda. Critics such as Crossley and Watson (2003) have argued that it is time to consider local knowledge and context when referring to a productive partnership. Part of their argument questioned the relevance of a top-down approach. They argue that

the most powerful international agencies have come to dominate the development discourse with scant regard for local knowledge, local context and local research capacities. The way that international educational research and consultancy initiatives are often established and pursued can also be seen to help ensure Northern domination through new processes of neocolonial control.

(Crossley and Watson 2003, 115)

Some donor countries impose heavy conditions on their support for education. One problem is the practice of tying aid to the purchase of goods and services from the originating country. This undermines local economies. Moreover, very few international donors are willing to help countries to meet the running costs of education, especially the teachers' salary bill – even though this is the core of quality education! Rich countries and international financial institutions must work together to ensure that predictable resources are available over the long term to employ these indispensable professionals and provide classrooms, books, teachers and food. Moreover, the use of expensive consultants remains a problem. Many donors remain far more willing to supply developing countries with expensive consultants than help to pay teachers' salaries. Some figures indicate that the main donor countries provide more than 70 per cent of their aid to education in the form of technical assistance: study tours, seminars, capacity building, workshops and policy advice which may or may not be

wanted. A good deal of this ends up generating lucrative contracts for foreign experts. These funds should rather go to the activities and programmes of actors, both faith-based and secular, who are rooted in the local communities.

Conclusion

Evangelical Churches, especially the Assemblies of God, and Christian FBOs work alongside the government to provide education that is non-gender discriminatory to local communities across the country. These religious actors' valuable initiatives in the promotion of female education merit the support of both the government and international donors. The collaboration with faith-based actors for education in Burkina Faso can contribute significantly to reaching the target spelled out under SDG 4. It should be based in equal partnership and respect the FBO's religious identity.

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