

School dropouts get a second chance

No education – no vocational training – no job – no money to send the children to school (or to keep them there for long enough): the cycle of poverty and educational deprivation in India is so intractable that even the recent law guaranteeing basic education for all may not go far enough. A Lutheran World Service India (LWSI) project is trying to plug the remaining gaps.

All day long, Bandana Dalai has been looking forward to the next two hours. She sits on the ground, ramrod-straight and with wide, attentive eyes. The 13-year-old has spread out a discarded rice sack as a mat, and wears a red cardigan to keep the cold at bay – it’s winter in West Bengal. At the front, instructor Punam Hembran is writing a long string of figures on the board. Twenty pairs of eyes watch her hand intently as it plies the squeaking chalk across the blackboard. Lit only by a solitary light bulb, the open-air classroom is under the veranda of the small house where the young instructor lives with her parents (see box).

Despite the minimal facilities, Bandana Dalai and her classmates attend the course for school dropouts every evening. “I desperately want to go to school again.” So far, Bandana Dalai has only been to primary school. After the fourth grade her father wouldn’t allow her to go on to secondary school. It would have cost the equivalent of ten euros for books, plus the expenses of buying school uniform and paying school fees. As a day-labourer, he has to toil long and hard for days to earn

that much money. He is on his feet from dawn until dusk in the quarry, enveloped in a haze of dust, breaking up rocks with a heavy sledgehammer. For that he earns about a euro per day. The girl’s mother also risks her health in the quarry to supplement the modest living of her family of five. Which leaves Bandana Dalai with the full-time job of looking after her younger brother and sister. She also does the housework and cooks the meals. Only in the evenings, she finally has time for what she wants to do: reading, writing and arithmetic.

plot of land to call their own cannot live off that alone. The fields, sown almost exclusively with rice, are barely the size of a football pitch. If things go well, the yield is enough to feed a family for four to five months of the year. The rest of the time, the smallholders hire themselves out as labourers, working in the fields of large landowners, on road schemes, or in the region’s mines and quarries. Children from these families have to earn their own keep from an early age. Very often, the idea of going to school remains a pipe dream.

■ **Schooling: often just a pipe dream**

This is something that the Indian government is now determined to change. In the autumn of 2009, the

Of the five hundred inhabitants of Sukna village, two thirds scrape a living as day-labourers. Even those with a

Most parents in Sukna cannot help their children with homework. Sarojakha Mondol works as homework tutor for the Lutheran World Service India.

Klaus Sieg
 agenda –
 Photographers & Journalists
 Hamburg, Germany
 sieg@agenda-fototext.de

Photo: J. Boethling



Indian parliament passed a law giving all children between the ages of six and fourteen the right to schooling. Until now, according to World Bank statistics, around five million children in India below the age of fourteen have been missing out on schooling. Almost four out of ten adults cannot read or write. "We as a nation cannot afford our children not going to school" said the education minister Kapil Sibal, as quoted in the Indian press.

Within the next three years, state-run neighbourhood schools will be established across the country. Private schools, beyond the reach of all but India's wealthy middle and upper classes, must now reserve a quarter of school places for children from socially disadvantaged families. Full implementation of the law is expected to take three years. Whether all children will actually be attending school by then is more than doubtful, however. For the law cannot brush aside the greatest obstacle to better schooling: the abject poverty of broad sections of the population, especially in rural areas.

■ First impacts: one-third fewer school dropouts

"The children are highly motivated, but in most families they are needed as manpower," says Manisankar Mahato of Lutheran World Service India (LWSI). "Quite apart from the expense of books, fees and school uniform." That is why so many children drop out of school too soon. For two years, the Christian organisation has been working with school dropouts in Sukna and in other villages in West Bengal and in the neighbouring state of Orissa. Part of the support it receives comes from the German aid agency, Bread for the World. As a result of courses to encourage dropouts back into school, backed up with guidance for their families, the number of dropouts in Sukna has fallen by a third, for example. The organisation has only

The village's own trailblazer for better education

Punam Hembran could easily be mistaken for a schoolgirl, standing at the blackboard, writing numbers and letters with an almost childlike smile. But at the age of just 18, she is working as an instructor. She prepares children to start school or teaches women to read and write. The courses often take place in Sukna's dusty village square or in the inner yard of her parents' house, a simple building made of clay.

The snowball effect

Just two years ago, hardly anyone in Sukna could read and write. Today the women are organising their own self-help groups. Pupil numbers at the village primary school are rising. Without Punam Hembran, this success would not have been possible. "Even as a child I enjoyed helping my fellow pupils. In the sixth grade, I organised the book money for pupils whose parents couldn't afford it." She did this with support from her father. As a salaried public employee, he earns a secure income – unlike the majority of people in Sukna, who live from hand to mouth as smallholders or day-labourers. "I grew up in quite a privileged situation and was able to stay at school until tenth grade. Now I want to pass on some of that good fortune," says Punam Hembran.

When Lutheran World Service India (LWSI) advertised for local instructors in Sukna, she approached the role with enthusiasm. Although she was only sixteen at the time, she started attending LWSI courses, educating herself in subjects like civil rights, teaching skills and organisation. Nowadays she teaches for three hours a day on average. "Opportunities for education are very unequal; it hurts me to see children from poor homes dropping out of school because they have to work or can't afford the money for books and fees." The courses for dropouts give them a second chance to pick up their schooling. But to do so, they need parental support. Often Punam Hembran visits their homes and tries to convince the parents that education is a necessity.

Punam Hembran belongs to the Santals. All the people living in Sukna belong either to indigenous tribes or the lowest castes in society. Under a quota system, they are entitled to a certain percentage of university places and civil service positions – provided that they have the necessary education. Many children in the village dream of careers as nurses, teachers or engineers. "They need self-confidence to reach for these dreams," says Punam Hembran. And what about her own dreams? "Travelling – I want to find out how people in other countries live."

But before that, Punam Hembran is getting married. Behind her, a neighbour is already painting the walls of the inner courtyard with fresh blue paint. Her husband-to-be is from another village in the region. Will she move away to join him? "No, he's coming to Sukna." So the village won't be losing her just yet, and Punam Hembran intends to carry on teaching women and children.

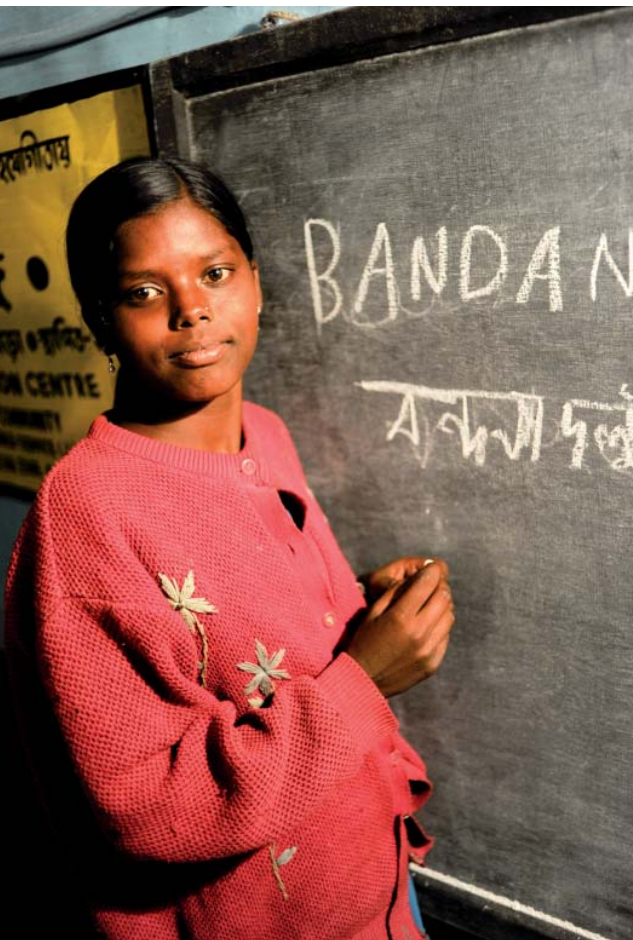
Punam Hembran tries to convince the parents that education is necessary.



Photo: J. Boethling

achieved this by helping the families to improve their economic situation at the same time, by laying on courses in vegetable production for instance or helping to establish cooperative rice banks.

"We are delighted that pupil numbers are rising." Gouri Shanker Banerjee folds his arms and smiles through his horn-rimmed spectacles. Behind the primary school headteacher, a noisy crowd of children spills out of



Bandana Dalai has only been to primary school. Now she is glad to attend the course for school dropouts in the evenings.

"In the old days, the poorly paid teachers simply failed to turn up and I'd be here on my own with the children," Gouri Shanker Banerjee recalls. "Today there are four of us teaching, and colleagues have completed a two-year teacher-training programme."

But as ever, members of the indigenous population and the lower castes are last in line to benefit from all this progress. Girls and women are especially disadvantaged. Regional disparities are also enormous. Non-governmental organisations like LWSI try to reinforce the positive initiatives of the Indian central government.

"We make sure that the children really go to school and that they don't have problems there," says project manager Manisankar Mahato. As well as the course for dropouts, the organisation provides help with homework for children at secondary schools. "Most of the parents have never been to school. They can't help with homework," explains homework tutor Sarojakha Mondol.

the simple stone building for playtime. "Seven years ago, we barely had fifty pupils; today there are over two hundred." This is partly thanks to a series of programmes and laws brought in by the Indian central government. For example, under the nationwide "Education for All" programme in 2004, primary school teachers' training and pay were improved, new teachers were appointed and teaching facilities built.

Zusammenfassung

Viele Eltern in den ländlichen Regionen Indiens schicken ihre Kinder gar nicht oder nur für wenige Jahre zur Schule: Sie können das Geld für Schulgebühren, Bücher und Schulkleidung nicht aufbringen oder benötigen die Arbeitskraft ihrer Kinder, um das Familieneinkommen zu sichern. Ohne Schulbildung jedoch ist es schwer, einen Ausbildungsplatz, geschweige denn einen qualifizierten Arbeitsplatz zu finden. Der Lutherische Weltbund Indien (Lutheran World Service India) hat in Westbengalen ein Projekt ins Leben gerufen, das vor allem Schulabbrechern eine zweite Chance

gibt. Parallel dazu werden den Eltern Möglichkeiten aufgezeigt, wie sie ihre Einkommenssituation verbessern können. Das Ergebnis nach zwei Jahren Projektlaufzeit: die Zahl der Schulabbrecher ist um ein Drittel gesunken.

Resumen

Muchos padres en las áreas rurales de la India no logran conseguir el dinero necesario para las pensiones escolares, los libros y los uniformes de sus hijos, o no logran prescindir de la fuerza de trabajo de éstos para asegurar el ingreso familiar. Por tal motivo, evitan enviar a sus hijos

■ From illiterate to financially adept

A person who can read and write can understand the instructions for use of seed and fertilisers, avoid signing misleading contracts with money-lenders, and open an account. "Together with the other women in Sukna, I applied for grants and microcredit loans from the government so that we could buy a few goats and cows and upgrade our houses." Sandhya Orang stoops forward, and swishes her sickle through the rice stalks. "We had to organise ourselves, fill in application forms and submit accounts. If we had still been illiterate, how could we ever have done it?" Sandhya Orang is another girl who was taken out of school during the fourth grade. "My parents thought I'd already been there too long: they never went to school at all." Everything she had learnt was soon forgotten. But now she has reactivated her skills, and is glad she can help her daughter with her school work. For about a year, she and a group of women from her village have been meeting regularly in the evenings after work. With an instructor's help, they are learning to read and write and being trained to calculate costs and manage their association's budget. On the other side of the village, Bandana Dalai sits on her sacking mat in the class for dropouts, copying the columns of figures from the board. If she keeps this up, she too will be in a position to help her own children with their school work one day – and probably a great deal more besides.

a la escuela o sólo les permiten estudiar unos pocos años. Sin embargo, es muy difícil obtener un puesto de formación sin educación escolar, y menos aun encontrar un puesto como trabajador calificado. La Federación Luterana Mundial en la India ha lanzado un proyecto en la provincia de Bengala Occidental para otorgar una segunda oportunidad a todos los que abandonan la escuela. Paralelamente se informa a los padres sobre diversas posibilidades para mejorar sus ingresos. Dos años después de iniciado el proyecto, el resultado es notable: las deserciones escolares han disminuido en un tercio.

Teach A Man To Fish – financially sustainable schools for entrepreneurs

Teach A Man To Fish is a UK-based NGO that promotes a new approach to education in developing countries. We believe that education is the key to tackling global poverty. At the same time we challenge traditional education as we know it. We want to eliminate the problem of limited access and poor quality of education. Our innovative model combines teaching agriculture and business skills within school-owned enterprises. It is sustainable as businesses run by the schools generate income to cover 100 percent of their operating costs, so that they don't need any external funding from governments or charities. The graduates of these schools are then equipped with the necessary skills to support themselves and their families.

■ Sustainability as a main principle

Students firstly learn the underlying concepts of business and agricultural activities alongside general education. Then during field-based classes they learn how these concepts work in practice and how to use them. Thanks to the "learning by doing" approach they gain the practical technical skills needed to master each discipline. Rotating through the school's business units, students specialise and take on greater responsibilities. Finally, they are taught how to manage financial transactions, monitor



Photo: Teach A Man To Fish

The "Teach A Man To Fish" model combines teaching agricultural and business skills in a learning-by-doing approach.

profitability, learn to market and sell their produce. At the end of this education students receive a nationally-recognised High School Degree.

The innovation that distinguishes Teach A Man To Fish from other education charities is in the approach to financial sustainability. Our schools teach business through running their own businesses. These school enterprises – from beekeeping to carpentry workshops – earn the schools money, which covers facilities and teaching costs. Over time the schools become financially self-sufficient, meaning even the poorest kids can attend for free. We call this model 'Education That Pays For Itself'.

■ The flagship school in Paraguay

The first Financially Sustainable School for Rural Entrepreneurs was created in 2002 in Paraguay by our sister organisation Fundación Paraguaya. This model is now being replicated internationally by Teach A Man To Fish as the school proves to be a practical model for the provision of high quality education in developing countries:

- Generating over 300,000 US dollars (USD) in income annually through sustainable income generation initiatives, the school is now able to cover 100 percent of its operating costs.
- The school which takes no government money, does not need to charge fees to provide a first class education to students from some of the poorest communities in the country.
- Because the quality of its teaching is so high, within two months of graduation almost every one of the students are either in good jobs, including with some of the country's leading agribusinesses; at university; or successfully running their own businesses.

In broad terms, this model is suitable in almost all other regions. However, every school will need to adapt the model to its particular market, culture and other particular requirements. For example, a school in a coastal area with marine resources would probably look very different from the school in land-locked Paraguay. Nevertheless, every school could use the same model to train successful entrepreneurs and achieve financial self-sufficiency.

The main challenge related to implementing the model is having sufficient vision and leadership; qualities which are not determined by how much money the school has at the beginning of the process. However, this too has a major effect on whether a school is able to obtain the necessary resources to start different businesses. Strongest challenges are: bias against combining education and making money, unfamiliarity with the "learning by doing" approach, lack of teachers with good experience in production or business, governments imposing their own curricula and the fact that youth are needed to work at home.

■ The role of Teach A Man To Fish

We work with partner organisations in a number of countries and implement educational projects which have the capacity to become self-funding. Once a project proposal has been accepted, we help develop and write a business plan alongside the local partner and where possible help secure sufficient funds for its implementation.

To share our knowledge and proven strategies, and to create a forum to build relationships and discuss ideas and challenges, we established the Teach A Man To Fish Member's Network. It now numbers over 1,700 education institutions and experts in more than 110 countries and is a rapidly growing forum supporting sustainable and relevant education.

To find out more, please visit www.teachamantofish.org.uk.

*Justyna Siejka, Teach A Man To Fish,
London, United Kingdom*