

# MONDAY DEVELOPMENTS

The Latest Issues and Trends in International Development and Humanitarian Assistance

ARTICLE ORIGINALLY APPEARED IN MONDAY DEVELOPMENTS ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2006



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## L I T E R A R Y   A D V A N C E S   I N   A   B E R B E R   C O M M U N I T Y

By Andrea M. Couture

“I don’t really like school...I’d rather be at home where I’m comfortable, but my father says I have to go to school,” says 13-year-old Rkia Angmar, a student in a Berber village in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco. Rkia’s father is a member of the village Parent Teacher Association (PTA) board—and that has made all the difference for his daughter’s education. “He says that if I don’t go to school, people will say he isn’t a good father. He used to not care very much about school,” she continues, “but since he joined the PTA he feels different.”

The support of this father for his daughter’s education and the social pressure he evidently feels are big breakthroughs. He lives in a country with 2.5 million girls of primary school age, more than half of them in the countryside like Rkia. Less than half of these girls attend school, and when they do, the drop-out rate between grades one and six is 80 percent.

The Moroccan government recently declared that education is a national priority for this decade. Their goal is to reduce illiteracy to less than 20 percent by 2010, with special attention on adult mothers in rural areas, and to eradicate illiteracy by 2015.

The announcement also comes in line with the continuing work of the Near East Foundation (NEF) in these remote Berber villages. The oldest international development organization in the United States, NEF has been engaged in the Islamic world since 1915, and in Morocco since 1987. That has included teaching women to read using NEF-developed Berber language materials (rather than the Arabic they do not understand). Gender sensitive education has greatly expanded over the past two years with funding from the U.S. State Department’s Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI).

There are now about 2,000 students—more than half of them girls—in the 17 primary schools participating in the NEF program. When NEF started, the majority of schools had no girls at all. In

some villages, school enrollment has leaped from zero to nearly half of all children. There has been a 30 percent increase in primary school graduations and a 40 percent increase in secondary school completions. Plus, there are 1,316 more adults—a 50 percent increase—participating in PTAs. These are truly remarkable numbers in so limited a time frame.

How did this happen in villages where virtually all adults are illiterate? Where women and girls were not even permitted to pass near the village schoolyard in some places? The turnaround required a wide-ranging approach:

### **Develop PTAs and community education advisory committees to support primary education:**

The mission for PTAs was clear: help parents take more responsibility for assuring their children attend school and receive the education they need, and help parents mobilize resources to improve schools and make secondary education available in nearby towns.

These challenges were compounded by the gender issue and confronted head on. Participation of women became a condition for participation in the NEF program. Women leaders were identified and organized in each village. In addition to the necessity of education with a special emphasis on girls and children who work, they were trained in community organizing, sociology of the rural milieu, participatory/gender approaches, even in school administration and financial management. Encouraged to attend PTA board meetings and participate in PTA activities, in turn, PTA boards were prompted to seek their advice and assistance. Gradually women leaders became ad hoc PTA board members—absolutely unheard of previously. Some PTAs now are nearly autonomous.

There is also much greater support of PTAs by local religious leaders and elected officials to improve schools and allow students to obtain secondary education available in nearby towns.

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## LITERARY ADVANCES IN A BERBER COMMUNITY (cont.)

### Provide adult education opportunities:

Where there had been a virtual total absence of adult literacy, classes were established in most communities. The majority of attendees are women and their numbers are increasing. Women are outside their homes and involved in their communities. They conduct education awareness campaigns and home-visits to investigate school absences and dropouts.

### Renovate school facilities, including important access to latrines and potable water:

Lack of proper sanitation facilities for girls proved to be a major cultural deterrent to their school attendance. That was remedied. Local schools were often simply uninviting bare shells of one or two classrooms. They lacked space, had leaky roofs, broken windows, missing doors, insufficient and often broken furniture, and no heat during freezing winters. Schools were physically repaired and rehabilitated. Schools were physically repaired, rehabilitated, and equipped with small libraries.

### Expand the role of rural educators, improving teaching and school administration:

Administrators and teachers are generally assigned to rural areas for a few years at most—and a remote, mountain posting is clearly hardship duty. PTAs can assist you, NEF counseled, breaking down barriers between insiders and outsiders. Gradually, school administrators and teachers helped plan and participate in project activities like preparing and posting promotional materials in villages. They assisted new

PTA members with unfamiliar responsibilities, and in organizing and follow-up of public events. Many served as instructors for adult literacy classes with NEF providing vital training and support for their new role.

### Design more comprehensive extra-curricular and summer school activities that encourage continuing interest in education:

This July students, both boys and girls, went to summer camp. They splashed around in the municipal pool of Ouarzazate, a strategic, southern crossroads for the country, and site for many of their excursions. Days of fun and games and the usual arts and crafts were capped each evening by a performance by a local artist. Sports came courtesy of U.S. Ambassador Thomas Riley in Rabat, and a radio installed in the camp's center by a local association beamed instruction and entertainment. Each child received a medical examination, nutritious meals, and computer training.

### Collaborate with PTAs on income-generating projects capable of sustaining local financial support for primary education:

NEF is working with government authorities and community residents to identify under utilized or neglected local resources, including expansion and diversification of crops; introduction of quality seeds and plant materials; rebuilding and improving herds; quality control and marketing of rural crafts; improving processing and packaging of goods; and developing local markets and transport facilities.

Much of this depends on putting in place simple, cost-efficient forms of water harvesting, reforestation, alternative sources of fuel and greater fuel efficiency. Required too is increasing community participation and encouragement of individual entrepreneurs of all ages, male and female.

### Encourage education policy reform at national, governorate and commune levels:

The General Director of the Moroccan Ministry of Education attended the launch of this initiative in early 2005, and government officials have been welcomed and included at every opportunity. The NEF literacy project recently was evaluated by the Regional Academy of Education of Souss Massa Draa, responsible for education in eight southern Moroccan provinces where over five million people live. The Regional Director requested that these new approaches to teaching, administration, and educational supervision be applied throughout the south of Morocco and the CD of the evaluation be posted on their website as well as sent to the highest level of the education ministry.

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*Andrea M. Couture is the Development Officer for the Near East Foundation. Photos: courtesy of Near East Foundation.*

