

IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE A CHILD!

Communities unite to bring children to school.

Ten-year-old Ali* was an “enfant *talibé*,” as young Qur’anic students are called throughout the Sahel. Like his peers, he was often found at street intersections, store entrances, or other areas where people assemble, soliciting donations of food or money in the metal bowl suspended around his neck.

Ali was assigned by his father at age four to attend a Qur’anic *daara* (school). Leaving home and family, he lived with his instructor and other talibés. In the daara, he received an informal Qur’anic education, learning by rote to recite sacred texts in Arabic. By tradition, the talibé must rely on the greater community to feed and clothe him.

While this religious instruction instilled moral and traditional values, it did not prepare him for individual success in the ever-evolving Ivorian economy. Unable to read or write, and with limited numeracy skills, he had no future opportunity but to become an imam or marabout – an itinerant “holy man,” often believed to have special powers to cure disease. Unemployment and illiteracy could also make him more vulnerable to recruitment by the violent extremist and criminal organizations operating nearby.

The USAID (United States Agency for International Development) funded Resilience for Peace (R4P) project, implemented by Equal Access International (EAI), launched a pilot activity in a small town in northern Côte d'Ivoire to integrate children like Ali into the formal education system in the upcoming school year, while still maintaining his Islamic studies.



Qur’anic teachers participating in community dialogues.

The community process was launched in a local mosque, and engaged parents, imams, government authorities, teachers, the Ministry of Education, Human Rights Associations, women and youth leaders, the Ministry of Women, Family and Children, traditional leaders, local radio, and many of the impacted youth. Candid discussions about the consequences of informal education on children’s futures led to the identification of challenges and recommendations.

Armed with this information, R4P began awareness raising activities and dialogs in

local communities. Leaders agreed that changes were needed, and Qur’anic teachers agreed to a hybrid model, where children attended formal schooling, but also received religious instruction, which was well-received. One parent stated, “*I am so pleased that my child will benefit from both systems of education!*”

*Name changed

The Ivorian government, in support of the initiative, committed to an expansion of the primary school system in the town, to accommodate new learners. They also agreed to provide school kits, including backpacks, books, and other learning essentials and to



Community round table discussion on local radio

introduce a free meal service for the new enrollees.

This intervention resulted in over one hundred formerly unschooled children joining the mainstream education system in the coming year, enhancing their future. Other towns in northern Cote d'Ivoire, noting the approach and results, have asked that we duplicate the process in their communities.

Ali is beside himself with joy, *"I know I have some catching up to do with other students, but I can do it!"* This activity demonstrates

the power of community to design locally owned hybrid interventions to solve issues, as well as the power of engaging all stakeholders early and often throughout the process.