

Cup of coffee anyone? Education of a lifetime in Somalia for a \$1

By Christy Dow Murray

In a South African restaurant, one dollar will buy a small salad. In the United States, a dollar will buy a cup of coffee. In Kenya, a dollar will buy some milk or a few loaves of bread.

A dollar doesn't stretch the way it used to, and while many little things can be purchased with that small sum, the buyer will either consume, break, exhaust or eventually discard whatever has been bought.

Along the east coast of Africa, however, a dollar has begun to go a long way. With the help of UNICEF, a dollar will now buy schoolbooks for two children in Somalia, for a full year... and an education that will last a lifetime.

It seems impossible, but with between 60 cents to a dollar each, UNICEF and partners have produced textbooks that are used by two children each year and that will last for three years or more before having to be replaced. And these are not just any textbooks. Bringing together Somali and international education experts, UNICEF has spearheaded the creation of books that combine vital cultural considerations with contemporary issues and teaching methods. The results are colourful, interactive, child-centred learning materials, suitable for boys and girls, with images that are familiar to the children and excite their interest.

In the last year, textbooks have been distributed to just over 1,100 schools around Somalia and the impact has been immediate. Enrolment is increasing, excitement is growing, and communities are rallying to support teachers and ensure that their children benefit from the new materials. Many are raising the money within their communities to support school rehabilitation and teachers' salaries.

"The excitement is almost palpable," says Geeta Verma, the UNICEF Education Officer for Somalia, "communities and teachers are reporting significant increases in involvement of parents, commitment from communities and, most importantly, eager response from children and teachers in the classrooms. For the first time in over a decade, we have a standardized Somali syllabus and accompanying textbooks that cover six subjects – Social Studies, Mathematics, Science, Arabic, Islamic Studies and Somali Language – for grades 1-4. UNESCO is developing textbooks for grades 5-8 and we now have the means to make a quantum leap in the provision of quality primary education for Somali children at affordable costs."

For the first time ever, the books contain strong images of girls and women and promote gender equality. Somali teacher Mustafa Mahumoud Ismael says, "The new textbooks are wonderful; the children love the coloured pictures and there are images of girls!"

In a wide effort to encourage equal education opportunities for girls, other than the new textbooks there is also gender sensitization of teachers, education authorities and community education centres.

The books are also strictly non-violent, with no images of conflict or the weapons of war, and were created in close consultation with Somali communities and educationalists. They are Somali owned and geared around Somali themes and culture.

In a country as marginalized by conflict as Somalia, and with so little internal support for social service initiatives, UNICEF has started from scratch by completely revamping the curriculum and syllabus for Somali schools. UNICEF with partner agencies, including UNESCO and local authorities, initiated the enormous task of revitalizing the primary education system in 1998. When the lower primary textbooks were printed and distributed, the next challenge began – training the teachers. To date, 6,500 have been trained in the use of the new materials, which are generally the only teaching tools available in the schools. Many of the teachers did not have previous training and are enthusiastically learning. Says Ismael, “The new method is child-centred. Now we involve children in activities...and they participate. We work in groups, we use role play and drama. The children love playing games and are getting more enthusiastic.”

And the children agree. Mohamed Askar, one of the bright young students, is enjoying the new books and teaching style. “Before the new books came, the teachers were just telling us to repeat things,” says Mohamed. “Now we have the nice pictures and we play games and have good ways to remember things. We are learning by fun!”

Without exception, every child living in Somalia has felt the effects of the conflict. Within this context, UNICEF believes that education is not only a right, but also a tool that provides children with tangible skills and the subsequent desire to use what they’ve learnt in the pursuit of a stable future for themselves and their families. Quality education makes them stakeholders in the pursuit of peace and gives them the tools and motivation to invest in ending the spiral of violence. They also gain a basic understanding of and respect for social rules and order in a country where there has been too little of either, and learn to appreciate the value of dialogue, rather than violence, as a way of resolving differences.

But significant challenges remain. The enrolment rate, though growing, is still amongst the lowest in the world. The gross enrolment rate currently stands at around 17 per cent as per the 2002 school survey. Gender-related disparities remain an area of major concern. Only 35 per cent of primary school pupils are girls. Female teachers make up only about 12 per cent of the total number of all teachers.

Still, things are changing. There is a definite upward trend in the number of schools and the enrolment of pupils. The local ownership and financing of education and the involvement of communities is steadily on the rise. Much of this is due to the introduction of the new textbooks, the teacher training and other efforts, which have brought hope to children and their communities. Students across Somalia are learning in new and exciting ways that the world is full of opportunity and that they just might see a brighter future for themselves and their country.

All that, for the price of a cup of coffee.