Summary

Inspired by the 1990 Jomtien World Conference on Education for All and by the experience of non-governmental organisations such as BRAC, Save the Children/USA established a community schools project in southern Mali, working with 777 villages to establish and run their own primary schools between 1992 and 1998. These schools enrolled over 45,000 pupils who would otherwise have had little chance of going to school. Nearly half of these pupils were girls. School Management Committees (SMCs), composed of community members, had several responsibilities for the schools, including enrolment and retention of pupils.

This monograph, based on a doctoral thesis written by one of the project leaders, which uses a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the following questions: How did the activity of the SMCs influence enrolment within the community school villages? How were gender-equitable enrolments arranged and maintained? Though it had originally been expected that the SMCs would be effective at promoting persistence in school, initial levels of dropout were high. What were the reasons for dropout from the community schools? How effective were the SMCs in reducing dropout and promoting persistence?

The study found that the SMCs carried out their enrolment responsibilities effectively and that enrolments were equitable not only in terms of gender but also in terms of household wealth and parental educational history; enrolments did however show a bias against the pastoralist Peulh minority. While parents were very willing to enroll many of their children in the new schools, they were not receptive to the idea of "education for all" as they consciously oriented some of their children toward house and field work. This orientation of children away from school was slowing down expansion of the community schools in some villages. Parents were found to be willing to enroll girls, despite a traditional preference for enrolling boys, in exchange for a school being established in their village. But indications are that boy-preference is still prevalent, and that it reoccurs where the SMC ceases to insist on gender parity.

SMCs were much less effective in preventing dropout. Dropout occurred principally for reasons outside the school. Many of the pupils had been enrolled over-age, and the transition to early adulthood led to the decision to leave school. In the parents' and pupils' "hierarchy of commitments", schooling was not as important as marriage for girls and the exode (going off to seek work) for boys.
The three SMCs studied in depth provide useful insights into the capacities and limits of community based school support associations in fulfilling their responsibilities for enrolment and persistence, for example the variability of leadership and dynamism among the SMCs, and the key role they played in maintaining gender equity in the schools.

This paper argues that the Education for All discussions on access to schooling have become too focused on the policy level, and concludes by calling for more dialogue, reflection, and partnership with parents and community associations.

Full paper URL: http://www.create-rpc.org/pdf_documents/PTA14.pdf