

"Brick by Brick: Rebuilding Public Schools in Côte d'Ivoire," January 23, 2019

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Last October, the school year at Ecole Primaire Publique (Public Elementary School) of Konan Koffi in Côte d'Ivoire began with music. Dancing, clapping, singing, beating *Djembes*, or drums, and beaded *Shekeres*, or shakers, all welcomed the start of a new school year as students received brand new school kits with basic school supplies.

The school kits were funded, and the school itself was built in 2014, using Fair Trade Community Development Funds: funds earned every time you purchase Fair Trade Certified™ chocolate. The school currently offers six elementary school classes for children in the area. This school year (2018-19), 145 students are enrolled, a nearly even split between the number of boys and girls.

Rebuilding schools and expanding access to education, including availability of textbooks and basic teaching materials, is the first step in a long road to recovery since the civil war which started in 2002 in Côte d'Ivoire, destroying the country and its education system. According to the Education Policy and Data Center (EPDC), before the civil conflict, 31% of girls and 49% of boys completed primary school; after the civil conflict, only 14% of girls and 18% of boys completed primary. The country's literacy rate is 48% among the youth population; lower than the average youth literacy rate in other lower-middle income countries.

It would be easy to become discouraged, but parents like Conan Kouassi, a cocoa producer in a Fair Trade cooperative, still believe in the importance of education and want to be able to provide that for their children.

When he spoke to us, Conan had recently returned from training in the field where he learned how to improve his plants and received fertilization resources to help improve quality and volume. He said he appreciates the opportunities to learn and looks forward to providing similar opportunities for his children.

"I began working in the cocoa fields in 2000," he says. "Both of my parents are gone, so I take care of ten people in my household, including my six children. The oldest is 27 and works with me in the cocoa fields, but my two youngest are in their senior year of school. I am excited to see them graduate."

Whether children stay to work in the cocoa industry or pursue further education and jobs away from home, a basic quality education enhances the quality of life, according to UNICEF. "It ends

generational cycles of poverty and disease and provides the means for sustainable social, economic and political development."

Education is a crucial component of an effort to end child labor in Côte d'Ivoire. In combination with Fair Trade standards that help protect the mental and physical development of children and their right to attend school, accessible education provides incentive for children to be in school instead of working in the fields.

"Fair Trade USA insisted on the fact that no child should work in the field and helped us ban child labor altogether," says Phillippe Kouakou, a cocoa producer. "They helped us build a school in our zone, which has positively impacted many children in the area."

Even so, shortage of teachers continues to be a challenge. The EPDC reports that in Côte d'Ivoire, on average, there is one teacher for every 41.7 primary school students, whereas in other lower-middle income countries, it's more like one teacher to 29 students.

"It's a big concern for many families," says Koffi Kouame, a teacher at the newly opened Public Elementary School of Botindin in the Oumé section of Côte d'Ivoire. Due to the lack of teachers in the area, the school needs to send some children to other schools located farther away. "But I am confident that someday soon we will have more teachers and be able to create enough classes for all of the children in the area."