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# Producing Literacy and Civil Society: The Case of Senegal

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# Producing Literacy and Civil Society: The Case of Senegal

BJORN HARALD NORDTVEIT

Donor and financial institutions, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and others, often promote market-based solutions for the delivery of public services in developing countries. This article examines the use of such market approaches by the World Bank to hire for-profit and nonprofit nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to implement a Women's Literacy Project (WLP) in Senegal. This particular project has been touted as one of the "best" of the large literacy projects in Senegal, and it has been extended as a model by the World Bank in other West African countries, including Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Niger, and The Gambia.

Several recent studies have argued favorably for strong international support to set up local educational policies and economic frameworks (e.g., Resnik 2006). By examining the WLP, I seek to inform the debate on the role of international organizations, as well as for-profit and nonprofit nongovernmental organizations, as producers of women's literacy and builders of civil society. Prior to presenting the case study, I summarize the discourses related to the neoliberal economic rationale, the role of civil society organizations, and gender and literacy.

## Discourses

The increase of the use of NGOs for educational service delivery in Africa is a recent phenomenon and is associated with the conservative agendas of Ronald Reagan (in the United States) and Margaret Thatcher (in Britain) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The main facets of the Reagan/Thatcher policies are based on Friedrich Hayek's economic thought and focus on the restriction of government and the enhancement of individual freedom. This conservative ideology has influenced the development discourse, and its effects can be seen not only in developing countries' economic strategies but also on their civil societies, literacy, and gender policies.

## The Economic Rationale

Many funding agencies, among which the World Bank features prominently, have adopted a neoliberal discourse as a foundation of their development agenda and often consider governments of developing countries as obstacles to economic growth. Development, in this context, is almost syn-

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onymous with economic growth, and both the World Bank and the IMF promote the idea that market liberalization and the reduction of the public sector produce economic growth and, thereby, development. In this agenda for development, known as the “Washington consensus,” the private sector is considered to be a more effective and efficient means for providing social services.<sup>1</sup>

The World Bank and other agencies use various methods for the transfer of responsibilities from the public to the private sector. The use of NGOs instead of state agencies to implement literacy services can be seen as a method to circumvent government bottlenecks by the purchase of services from the private sector. Here, the government must be seen in a double light: on the one hand, as a manager of World Bank loans and, on the other, as a purchaser of NGO services. According to the proponents of the use of NGO implementation, such partnerships between public and private sectors are employed for three main reasons: (i) the government (sometimes through pressure from international organizations) wishes to concentrate on certain key sectors and uses nongovernmental providers to implement services for which the latter have a comparative advantage and where risks can be shared; (ii) in a number of countries public social services are inefficient and run-down due to lack of human and material resources, and donors believe that, instead of reequipping government institutions, private providers can be more cost-effective; and (iii) many stakeholders view private provider-implemented programs as less corrupt than traditional public delivery (Harper 2000). The stated objective is that in all three cases, through the use of NGO implementation of services, one may achieve a quicker pace of implementation, higher disbursement rates, and thereby a greater impact than government-planned and executed projects.

Reliable international data on the effect of these market-based solutions are scarce. A World Bank review of skills development in sub-Saharan Africa (including 14 thematic studies that covered 20 country reviews and 70 case studies) did not give any clear indication of how well the public sector performed in comparison to the private sector. Generally, the World Bank complained about the “appealingly weak statistical base on nongovernment schools and enrollments. . . . Relevant information on both the quality and the stability of nongovernmental training institutions is clearly lacking” (Johanson and Adams 2004, 106). Even strong advocates for the use of NGOs in an attempt to reduce costs and enhance effectiveness agree that such an approach may lead to flawed results. For example (as was the case in Senegal), providers may substitute short courses for expensive long-term teacher training semi-

<sup>1</sup> The term “Washington consensus” was first used by a World Bank economist, John Williamson, in an attempt to “distill which of the policy initiatives that had emanated from Washington during the years of conservative ideology had won inclusion in the intellectual mainstream, rather than being cast aside once Ronald Reagan was no longer on the public scene” (Williamson 2000, 254).

nars. In such situations, cost-cutting incentives may lead to ineffective outcomes: “ironically, the government sometimes becomes the efficient producer precisely because its employees are not motivated to find ways of holding costs down” (Schleifer 1998, 11).

The World Bank has promoted the use of a “short route of accountability” to tackle these problems. The “short route,” in which the provider is directly accountable to the recipients of services, contrasts with the “long route” in which policy makers hold providers accountable: “When the relationships along this long route break down, service delivery fails (absentee teachers, leaking water pipes) and human development outcomes are poor. . . . Given the weaknesses in the long route of accountability, service outcomes [are] improved by strengthening the short route—by increasing the client’s power over providers” (World Bank 2003, 6). The strengthening of the short route can be made through (i) making it possible for the clients (here, the learners) to switch suppliers; (ii) reputation building among providers; and (iii) where competition is weak, consumer choice is ineffective, and where reputational mechanisms are also weak, one can make use of nonprofit organizations as providers (Schleifer 1998).

In economic theory, the validity of these claims is relative to the accuracy of assumptions regarding the ease of service providers’ access to the market and the ready and inexpensive availability of relevant contract information: “the first assumption speaks directly to the existence of sustainable competition, and the second pertains to the ability to obtain low-cost and effective contract enforcement. To the extent that these conditions hold, contracting in a market-oriented society can typically be expected to be more efficient and effective than the work done by public employees” (Sclar 2000, 9). For implementation of services of most NGOs, the second assumption (access to information) has proved the most challenging. Asymmetric information problems, in which the government does not know how the provider performs, have in many cases made it necessary to set up costly (and often flawed) monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure contract compliance or have resulted in ineffective and unregulated service provision. Monitoring expenses and other variable transaction costs can be particularly heavy when using private implementation of services (Schleifer 1998; Sclar 2000; Furubotn and Richter 2003). M. Edwards and D. Hulme (1998, 8), in reviewing different studies on NGO implementation, found that “there is no empirical study that demonstrates a general case that NGO provision is ‘cheaper’ than public provision.” The economic rationale for the use of NGOs as service providers, therefore, is at best contested, even from a neoclassical economic point of view.

### **Civil Society**

Nongovernmental organizations and, more broadly, civil society associations have become new partners to the government and donor organizations

for delivery of education and other social services. Often, the terms “NGOs” and “civil society” are employed interchangeably. In many recent Western definitions of the term, civil society associations are understood as institutions that are independent of the economy and the state. For example, for Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato (1992, ix), civil society is a “sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication.”

In Senegal and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, civil society organizations are often publicly registered as Economic Interest Groups (or GIE: *Groupe-ment d'Intérêt Economique*) with a clear for-profit mandate. The current expansion of associations in West Africa is often constituted through assistance from government-financed programs, such as the Women’s Literacy Project (Thiané 1996). Using a definition of civil society as being independent of the spheres of the state and of the economy, one can debate whether such associations, whose main purpose is to capture finance from the state, should be included in the definition of civil society. Similarly, one can question to which extent NGOs are really nongovernmental when they receive most or all of their funding from government agencies. However, the notion of an independent civil society may seem too limiting when considering the multitude of associations that are less known to Western societies and that belong to daily life in Africa. For example, “in West Africa the following types of movements can be distinguished: [a] movements linked to cultural institutions, such as secret societies, prophets, diviners, sorcery, etc.; [b] religious revival movements and sects, Islamic fundamentalist movements; [c] new ethnic movements; [d] cultural, youth, and development associations, social movements” (Jacob and Lavigne 1994, 70). Based on the list provided, associations in Africa can be roughly divided into three groups: traditional mutual help groups (women’s village associations, economic networks called *tontines*, etc.); religious groups; and new, development-related associations that have as their aim the capturing of external capital for the purpose of setting up development activities.<sup>2</sup> The latter are most often for profit and can be differentiated from private businesses only through their (stated) development goals rather than (stated) commercial or industrial objectives.

In this article, I have used a Senegalese and project-related understanding of civil society, considering it as a sphere of social interactions that is linked to political and economic interests and composed, above all, of the sphere of associations, especially voluntary associations such as traditional grassroots organizations (both for-profit and nonprofit), faith-based groups, and development-related associations.

Civil society was at first not an item on the neoliberal agenda, which

<sup>2</sup> A *tontine* in the Senegalese context most often takes the form of an indigenous microfinance group.

preferred to speak in terms of individuals. As Margaret Thatcher said in a famous interview with the magazine *Woman's Own* (1987), "you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first" (Thatcher 2002, 426). During Bill Clinton's and Tony Blair's administrations, the search for an alternative way between capitalism and socialism became the topic of Anthony Giddens's influential "Third Way" (1999). As adviser to Tony Blair, Giddens was defining a so-called socially responsible capitalism where "civil society is an intermediary sphere serving to complement rather than to replace the state" and where it "offers a third route to welfare provision, which is neither private nor state" (Howell and Pearce 2001, 67). From the 1980s, the World Bank and other development agencies began to use NGOs in the implementation of its social programs. Recently, "partnership" with civil society has become a new buzzword in the debate on democracy and development and is now largely being adopted into the neoliberal discourse. In the 1990s, especially through the influence of Joseph Stiglitz and James Wolfensohn, the World Bank actively began to advocate policies that resulted in the creation of civil society (Todaro and Smith 2003).

Criticisms from different viewpoints contended that World Bank and IMF's structural adjustments programs had not gained conclusive results and lacked political and popular support. To overcome these problems, donors turned gradually toward civil society, "which by the late 1980s had already been constructed as a benign arena in contrast to the malign state. Housed within civil society was a potential agency in the form of NGOs and, later, other non-state groups" (Howell and Pearce 2001, 41). In this climate, NGOs were gradually conceived of as alternative deliverers of social services and welfare. In the 1990s, development programs not only began using NGOs but also set up programs that aimed to strengthen or even to create various forms of civil society associations. By the year 2000, key financial development institutions, especially the World Bank, began promoting NGOs as a main partner in the business of development.

This tendency has been criticized for different reasons. Edwards and Hulme (1998, 6) found that "much of the case for emphasizing the role of NGOs/GROs [grassroots organizations] rests on ideological grounds rather than empirical verification" and contended that the increasing use of such organizations

1. encourages NGOs to become providers of social and economic services on a much larger scale than thitherto, even though their long-term comparative advantage in this field is doubtful;
2. compromises the performance of NGOs and GROs in other areas of development activity such as institutional development and advocacy;
3. weakens the legitimacy of NGOs and GROs as independent actors in

society;

4. distorts the accountability of NGOs and GROs away from grassroots and internal constituencies, and overemphasizes short-term, quantitative outputs. (Edwards and Hulme 1998, 8)

Generally, it has been argued that the NGOs shift from being a partner and advocacy organization to becoming a contractor or a temporary worker, “implementing the funder’s agenda in the community . . . easily discarded as circumstances change, and consequently limited in their ability to challenge development practice” (Klees 1998, 50). The notion of such a shift may take for granted that NGOs are legitimate and independent actors in society and that the World Bank and other donors would subvert their primary mandate as advocates for grassroots’ level constituencies. However, NGOs constitute a heterogeneous set of organizations ranging from large international donor associations to small local groups operating on very limited budgets (Ginsburg 1998). For example, in West Africa it would be difficult to perceive NGOs and GROs as independent actors without connections to the economy or to the state.

Ostensibly, Senegal’s Women’s Literacy Project, which was later to become a model for other, similar literacy programs in other countries in Africa, corresponded to both a neoliberal economic vision of limited state involvement in service delivery and to a vision of strengthening and using civil society to deliver such programs. The idea was that the NGOs would help the state and offer more effective literacy courses, build a stronger civil society, and at the same time correct educational gender disparities.

### **Gender**

The debate on women’s role in development is of relatively recent origin. In particular, the 1970 pioneering study of cash cropping in Africa by the Danish economist Ester Boserup boosted interest in the area (Boserup 1989). This study was followed by a great number of studies from 1978 onward on women’s role in development. These studies were partly stimulated by a 1975 conference in New Mexico City, in which the United Nations inaugurated the Women’s Decade. A UN organization, the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), was created in 1976 as a result of the conference. A Mid-Decade Conference took place in Copenhagen in 1980, for which a collection of worldwide statistical information on women’s living conditions was prepared. Most of the initiatives related to these conferences underlined the fact that women were active contributors to development and important to economic growth. In doing so, it was claimed that investment in women was economically cost-effective and would lead to development. In short, “it focused on what women did for development, rather than what it did for them” (Heward and Bunwaree 1999, 1).

The effort to make women key actors in development efforts, labeled

Women in Development, or WID, was readily adopted by the donor community, and many WID projects were created, especially in the domain of income-generating activities. Generally, these projects were aimed at women exclusively. They were later criticized inasmuch as they often added to the already heavy workload of women and also tended to classify women as inferior or “vulnerable.” The notion of “gender and development” (GAD) gained momentum in the 1980s, rejecting WID for its focus on “Women’s development . . . as a logistical problem, rather than something requiring a fundamental reassessment of gender relations and ideology” (Marchand and Parpart 1995, 13). In other words, the WID movement focused on approaches that arguably would increase women’s effectiveness at work through policies related to health, education, and training.

According to GAD theories, the place of women in the community is linked to a female sphere and to female activities that are distinct from the men’s sphere. These activities and relationships need to be analyzed both as they relate to development activities and also how they are affected by them. However, it is argued that women and development must not be seen as a united, single “issue.” It is important to stress the heterogeneity of women and their interests, which lead to heterogeneity in their relations to development (Heward and Bunwaree 1999). Hence, proponents of the GAD movement insisted that development work should be based on a critical analysis of the relationship between gender and society and promote a fundamental social transformation of patriarchal power structures. In this context, the GAD movement addresses the inequity of women’s representation in administrative bodies in development countries. The challenge of GAD to traditional patriarchal power structures has made the approach less attractive for mainstream development and donor agencies, such as the World Bank (Marchand and Parpart 1995).

The GAD movement rarely criticized the Western model of development since it was rooted in the very same Western concepts. Other feminist movements developed at the same time as GAD, offering a different vision of women and development. Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) was one such movement, which was created in 1984 and which set up networks of women scholars and activists from developing countries. These networks engaged in feminist research and were committed to economic and gender justice as well as democracy. DAWN scholars not only critiqued development at a micro level (proposing gender projects, etc.) but were interested in the macro level, proposing alternative paths to development as compared to Western modernization views: “Under this theme [Political Economy of Globalisation], DAWN monitors and analyzes the systematic processes of economic globalisation and trade liberalisation and their impact on poor women of the South, working closely with other global development networks for greater accountability and radical restructuring of institutions like

the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations system and (from 1999) the World Trade Organisation” (DAWN 2005).

Analysis of the World Bank and IMF programs maintain that in many cases the neoliberal program changed the traditional patterns of family income, in which the men were responsible for cash income; they also changed women’s access to services, especially through the changes brought about by World Bank and IMF structural adjustment programs (SAPs). The first point is demonstrated by the globalization of the labor market: “as the process of expansion of capitalism continued, capital proved gender-blind and the cheap, efficient labour of women was found to be preferable to that of men” (Afshar and Barrientos 1999, 4). The second point is that introduction of SAPs is characterized by changes in service delivery that, it is argued, have negatively affected women (Stromquist and Monkman 2000). In particular, the SAPs have been criticized in regard to their push for the state’s withdrawal from the provision of many social services. From a social welfare perspective, it is contended that neoliberal policies have brought many of women’s economic and political gains to a standstill.

#### **Nonformal Basic Education and Literacy**

The term “nonformal education” (NFE) became widely used in the 1970s development discourse, characterizing “any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups of the population, adults as well as children” (Coombs and Ahmed 1974, 8). Using this very general definition, all literacy programs come under the NFE umbrella except formal primary education, self-study, and informal family instruction.

The World Bank often preferred investment in primary education instead of investing in literacy education. This preference rests on assumptions of budget constraint and a belief that primary education is more cost-effective than other types of education. Proponents of nonformal basic education have suggested that nonformal education is a necessary complement to formal education. Moreover, as Lauglo (2001) notes, the return on investment through primary schooling (of children) will take longer as compared to literacy education (of youth and adults). Recent research has found evidence of impact on of literacy on the following areas:

- Increased mothers’ support for children’s education;
- Empowerment;
- More effective communication (oral as well as written);
- Improved family health;
- More productive livelihoods. (Lauglo 2001, 16)

These areas of impact are complementing earlier research, which depicted literacy education as a means to “(1) provide education to those for whom schooling is not a realistic alternative; (2) make new skills and attitudes avail-

able to the rural poor; (3) circumvent cultural obstacles that prevent some people from utilizing school effectively; (4) use scarce educational resources more efficiently; and (5) modify the schooling system itself” (Papagiannis and Bock 1983, 8).

Access to education can be considered within a neoclassical economic framework as an investment that has the potential to lift individuals out of poverty through their increased returns in the labor market. This is the human capital version of education, heavily emphasized by the World Bank. The social return on investment, it is claimed, is higher for girls and women than for boys and men. Education for girls and women will improve productivity, cash income, and lead to positive externalities in terms of consumer behavior, health, family planning, and, to a lesser extent, asset management and migration (Cohn and Geske 1990). Based on this, “societies may also want more investments in women, because of the greater social returns (external benefits) accruing from women’s human capital compared to men’s” (Schultz 1995, 15). In this perspective, the Women’s Literacy Project in Senegal corresponds to a double desire to invest in women’s literacy and at the same time to build civil society.

### Methodology

To understand the functioning of the Women’s Literacy Project in the context of international aid, it is necessary to study both the policy (of partnerships between the state and nongovernmental associations) and its application. The historic focus of this article starts in 1993 with the creation of a Senegalese policy of using NGOs as service providers.<sup>3</sup> The geographical focus of the project is limited to half of Senegal, that is, the provinces of Dakar, Diourbel, Fatick, Kolda, and Louga. The World Bank project covered these five provinces, while a Canadian-financed literacy project, using a similar approach based on NGO service provision, covered the rest of the country. Both the World Bank and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) still (as of early 2008) continue the implementation of literacy services in Senegal, using much the same implementation approach.

To analyze the project, I have triangulated information from three main sources: documents, quantitative data, and field interviews. The documents include the World Bank Procedures Manual for civil society’s implementation of literacy services in Senegal (2000–2002), the project document from the World Bank, and various World Bank and evaluation documents. The quantitative data available on the women’s literacy program include statistics from the Department for Literacy and Basic Education at the Ministry of Education (Direction de l’Alphabétisation et de l’Éducation de Base: DAEB); the gov-

<sup>3</sup> In Senegal, the approach was called partnership (*le partenariat*) or, more commonly, *faire-faire*, literally “to make do,” indicating that the state “made” the civil society associations “do” something.

ernment's Project Coordination Unit (PCU); and the World Bank on yearly course enrollment, evaluation, and success rates. The data do not usually take into account the characteristics of new participants who replace participants dropping out from the course, so it is difficult to compare enrollment statistics with final test results. A longitudinal study that started in 2000 and, over a period of 5 years, investigated 20 providers (covering 60 literacy classes with a total of 1,500 participants), suffers from the same problems. However, interviews led me to consider that the profile of the dropouts is roughly the same as the ones replacing them. I have therefore used quantitative statistics in the analysis of the project.

During January and February 2004, I made an on-site visit and conducted 52 interviews with project stakeholders from the following categories: civil servants, consultants and staff of provider associations, as well as former and current learners.<sup>4</sup> The sample was intended to give as broad knowledge as possible of the case and was therefore stratified, covering all categories of stakeholders involved in the project. I mostly used open-ended questions, focusing on four areas: (i) project processes, including questions related to decentralization, monitoring, and evaluation, selection of providers, and implementation; (ii) project impact, including questions related to literacy, health, gender issues, and civil society; (iii) project costs, including questions related to opportunity costs and direct costs; and (iv) background questions, which were related to the stakeholders' lives, families, and relations with the project. The data were subsequently coded, using the same categories.

In addition to this fieldwork, I have had prior exposure to the project as a consultant for the World Bank, for which I have written two studies related to the project (Nordtveit 2004a, 2004b). My experiences with the World Bank gave me the opportunity to examine the establishment and financing of international education projects from the inside and to explore the underlying theories on which the projects are based.

#### **Senegal: The Country Context**

Senegal is situated in West Africa, sharing borders with Mauritania, Mali, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and The Gambia. It counted 9.8 million inhabitants in 2001, with a population that is concentrated in and around the capital city of Dakar and the center of the country. The country is divided into 11 regions, each of which is subdivided into departments and districts. The basic community organizational level is that of the village. A village head is the traditional leader of the community, although the role is based more on long-established prestige than on administrative duties.

Most village women belong to local women's associations, which can be

<sup>4</sup> I conducted interviews with 14 civil servants; 23 consultants, teachers, and providers; 14 learners; one person from the contract-managing association; as well as key UNESCO and World Bank staff.

nonprofit initiatives to organize local social events or legally registered for-profit groups (GIE) focused on economic activities, such as the production and sale of peanuts or vegetables. Women's affiliations with these associations have both a financial and a social role and may function as a social safety net or become a means to obtain some financial independence from their husbands (Kane 2001). As noted above, these associations, whether they are for-profit or nonprofit, are considered as core examples of Senegal's civil society. For practical purposes, there are virtually not any differences between for-profit or nonprofit associations in their function and ambitions.

The literacy rate in Senegal is very low and can be estimated at 34 percent after independence in 1960 (Camera and Sow 2003). Currently, about half of the present Senegalese population has attended school and is by government standards considered to be literate (Senegalese government 2003). However, most pupils attend too few years of schooling to become functionally literate. The World Bank estimates the average years of schooling of adults at 2.6 years (2000 data), and UNESCO estimates the illiteracy rate at 61 percent (in 2002) as opposed to 37 percent in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO 2007).<sup>5</sup> These data situate the literacy rate in Senegal among the lowest in the world. Furthermore, there is a significant gender gap in both formal school enrollment and attainment; 41 percent of young women in the 15–24 years age group are literate compared with 59 percent of young men (UNESCO 2007, 2002 data).

Education reforms in 1971 and 1981 aimed at moving national education from a colonially patterned system to a genuine national system, while at the same time boosting enrollment and attainment. However, the Senegalese authorities faced several problems, particularly in terms of planning the expansion of primary education. The government relied mostly on ad hoc planning without a clear policy or systematic approach to eradicate literacy: “faced with a truly endless array of problems, the public authorities decided back in 1988 to give up the idea of forward planning . . . [and] they adopted a new credo: to let problems come as they may, and to cope with or adjust to them as far as momentarily possible, one day at a time” (Sylla 1993, 371).

In this conjuncture of weak government planning and limited resources, global donors and, in particular, the World Bank became very influential in Senegal. Some teachers were not pleased with reforms proposed by the World Bank and disapproved of its increasing influence in the country: “The World Bank has taken over the bulk of funding for educational projects. Confronted with a staggering array of urgent problems while World Bank intervention increases steadily, the State stands open to suspicions that as far as the educational system is concerned, it has abdicated its sovereign responsibilities, and given up the planned management of educational investment and programmes. Some teachers, accusing the state of dereliction of duty, have taken

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.uis.unesco.org/profiles>.

to quipping that henceforth the system should be called the World Bank School System” (Sylla 1993, 370). This criticism has been reflected by a number of Senegalese intellectuals, especially those close to the circle of Samir Amin, director of the Third World Forum in Dakar. For nonformal education, however, most government officials and civil society associations were positive toward the World Bank’s intervention, since it led to increased financing of the sector.

Whereas the government’s management of educational investment in primary education is weak, it has been almost nonexistent at other levels. Literacy was claimed to be an official priority in the years after independence, but no institutions took charge of nonformal education and adult basic education as a particular mandate until 1971, when the Department for Vocational Training at the Secretariat for Youth and Sports was given this responsibility. Subsequently, the mandate fluctuated between institutions, none of which had a clear literacy policy or funding to implement literacy programs. It was not before 1986 that a Department for Literacy and Basic Education was created. As demonstrated by the low literacy rates in Senegal, the frail nonformal literacy and basic education structure in Senegal did not do much to improve literacy rates in the country.

#### **NGOs as Literacy Service Providers**

The government traditionally did not have a strong role in implementing literacy programs. Different NGOs and private companies set up literacy programs in the 1970s–1990s, most of which were small scale. These initiatives were often initiatives to fill local, specific needs, not partnerships between the government and civil society. In 1990, the government, partly as a reaction to the Jomtien World Conference on Education for All, became preoccupied with the low literacy rate of the population, which was now seen as an obstacle to development (Gueye 1999).

A new implementation method was defined during a colloquium in Kolda in 1993, which had as its central objective to define a national 10-year policy for literacy. Representatives from various donors, including the World Bank, were present at Kolda and participated in discussions about the relationship between the state and civil society. Some disagreement could be seen among the participants: the World Bank representative wanted to transfer the implementation responsibilities of literacy to a few large nongovernmental organizations with international recognition, while the Senegalese government, instead, opted to use many small (and local) civil society associations for provision of literacy services.

The national government had a triple incentive to use civil society associations: (i) these associations were already in the field, implementing or ready to implement literacy classes; (ii) the use of civil society would likely be a politically popular move to gain NGO support to the government; and

(iii) it corresponded to international donors' requirements for using market mechanisms to select organizations to deliver social services. The adoption of a policy based on partnership between the government and nongovernmental organizations strengthened the influence of external donors, without really strengthening local NGOs, because the latter became competitors for finance instead of promoters of a common agenda. At the same time, the partnership policy kept the government's authority at the same (low) level as before: the DAEB had always been a coordinating entity without direct implementation responsibilities and remained on the sideline of the literacy scene when it grew exponentially.

The World Bank would probably not have agreed to fund literacy services until the state had formulated a "fit" project involving nongovernmental organizations as service deliverers, in that the bank's project document explicitly mentioned its concerns about "the specter of the government using primary education resources [i.e., personnel and budget] for literacy" (World Bank 1996, 7). The bank did not seem overly preoccupied about the quality of the services offered but was mostly concerned with procedural aspects of the implementation. It was believed, as proposed by conservative economic theory, that delivery based on competition between different providers would automatically result in the selection of the best possible proposals, thereby improving literacy standards in the country. The donors assumed that there were enough providers operating in all parts of Senegal to ensure sustainable competition and that the government (or a contract-managing company) would be able to provide low-cost and effective contract enforcement.

#### **Organizing the Women's Literacy Project**

The World Bank and the government decided to use AGETIP [Agence d'Exécution des Travaux d'Intérêt Publique] to manage contracts with providers; AGETIP was a parastatal contract-managing agency that was set up as an NGO. It was chosen because it had prior contract-management experience with infrastructure projects financed by the World Bank and could modify its infrastructure-related procedures to be used in the literacy sector. These procedures required the prospective literacy provider association to establish a "subproject" proposal requesting funding for 10–20 learning centers, each of which were to enroll about 30 participants. In total, each project enrolled between 300 and 600 persons at a unit cost of CFAF 37,000 (about US\$77) per enrollee.<sup>6</sup> The subproject proposals were first checked for accuracy at the local level by government staff and were then sent to a selection committee composed of three government staff (one from the PCU; one from DAEB;

<sup>6</sup> Nominal unit costs of the WLP's "integrated" phase, using an average 2007 conversion rate of US\$1 = CFAF 479.

and one from the Ministry of Family, Social Action, and National Solidarity), one representative from civil society, and one from AGETIP.<sup>7</sup>

After selection, the proposals were sent to the contract-managing agency (AGETIP), which was responsible for establishing the contracts, paying the providers, and monitoring their use of the funds. For their parts, the providers were in charge of the daily follow-up and monitoring of their respective subprojects. The government was responsible for the subprojects' overall technical supervision, which was handled by a project coordination unit (PCU) in the Ministry of Education (staffed with civil servants but with administrative costs and equipment paid for by the World Bank). In addition, a provider coordination group (CNOAS: Coordination Nationale des Opérateurs en Alphabétisation du Sénégal) was created to represent the providers' interests and to help in case of conflict between any of the parties. The World Bank maintained a close relationship with the PCU but was not involved in the day-to-day management of the project.

A procedures manual outlined the selection process, defined the duties of each actor, and explained the procedures the providers needed to follow to obtain funding. It required the prospective providers to discuss the literacy course with the villagers, establish a proposal, and submit it for review. Then, if the prospective provider was selected, it needed to recruit, pay, provide initial training for staff; upgrade or construct community literacy centers in each target community; procure equipment; implement the literacy programs; and monitor and evaluate the services provided.

The literacy courses were of 450 hours' duration and were complemented with postliteracy training, income-generating activities (e.g., soap making, dyeing, vegetable growing, and shopkeeping), and management training for the leaders of local women's associations. The courses were not free; to participate, each learner had to pay CFAF 2,500 (about US\$5.2) to the provider. In most cases, the participants could decide the timetable of the course and would normally request that the facilitator offer three classes a week, during the afternoons. They would also decide on one or several topic(s) for the functional skills training.<sup>8</sup> After about 10 months of provider involvement (through the facilitator) in the community, a *relais* (a participant who had received special training as a substitute literacy teacher) was supposed to take over the teaching duties.

#### **Cost-Effectiveness and Wastage in the Women's Literacy Project**

Proponents of nongovernmental organizations as service providers maintain that this implementation method boosts both the quantity and the quality

<sup>7</sup> The representatives from civil society and the PCU were observers; they did not have voting power.

<sup>8</sup> This decision should in theory be facilitated by the provider, who arrived at a learning topic that responded to local needs and improved the living condition of the participants.

of literacy education in comparison to a (hypothetical) literacy program offered by the government. The quantitative increase in enrollment was real, although there are no comparisons to what government institutions could have accomplished with the same World Bank resources. The World Bank and local stakeholders saw the avoidance of heavy up-front investment in infrastructure as a proof of the cost-effectiveness of the system: the project could build on existing and start-up provider associations and thereby reduce infrastructure-related public investment costs.<sup>9</sup> Interviewees pointed to the increased quality of the services provided: whereas previous literacy courses had limited access to books and learning materials, the investment in such material was now a part of the PCU-established requirements to access funding. Again, it may be argued that the improvements in quality were due to the better funding for literacy services rather than to the use of a better implementation method.

According to the numbers provided by the World Bank's completion document, over a 5-year period more than 200,000 people (of which about 87 percent were female) enrolled in the WLP (World Bank 2004). The DAEB reported in 2003 that during the preceding 15-year period, over 1 million persons—or about 10 percent of the entire population in the country—had been enrolled in NGO-managed literacy projects financed by the World Bank, the Senegalese government, and CIDA. Most of the civil servants that I interviewed contended that these numbers could not have been reached through government-led implementation but could have been achieved only through partnerships with civil society. This was part of a broader discourse, led by government officials and representatives from many donors, especially the World Bank, about the need to work in partnership (*partenariat*) with NGOs to deliver social services in the country. The broad consent about the use of NGOs as service providers was due to the use of many small-scale local NGOs, instead of a few international organizations. Many government officials and local politicians created NGOs and competed for funds for literacy provision and thereby became inherent supporters of the system.<sup>10</sup>

According to government reporting and World Bank data, about 87,000 of the 200,000 enrolled participants learned to read and write (counting 15 percent dropout and 50 percent success at the end exam).<sup>11</sup> However, a closer look at budget reports from the World Bank and reports from the Senegalese government's longitudinal studies indicates that the aforementioned numbers may paint too optimistic a picture. The World Bank's cost figures show that the bank provided payment for enrollment of about 180,000 people (or

<sup>9</sup> It was assumed that the government already was using existing school resources at full capacity and could or should not deploy primary education infrastructure or other resources to the nonformal sector.

<sup>10</sup> Civil servants were not authorized to serve on NGOs. However, interviews indicated that many government officials set up NGOs anyway, using somebody in the family or a friend as a front person.

<sup>11</sup> World Bank data are based on DAEB's figures.

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TABLE 1  
SUCCESS RATES OF PAPP IN 1999 (%)

	Literate at Enrollment	Literate after Completion	Success
Reading	17	52	35
Writing	13	39	26
Problem solving	3	23	20
Functional skills	5	73	68
Average			37

SOURCE.—Based on DAEB 2001–3, 2003.

NOTE.—PAPP = Projet Alphabétisation Priorité Femmes (Women’s Literacy Project).

about 30 learners per community literacy course),<sup>12</sup> although field visits and the longitudinal study indicated that most courses enrolled fewer than 30 persons and that the dropout rate, at approximately 34 percent, was much higher than the officially accepted (and reported) number of 15 percent.

Moreover, if the persons who were literate at the start are not counted among those succeeding in the course, the results are even less impressive. For instance, although the Senegalese government’s longitudinal study found that 52 percent of the evaluated learners (enrolled in WLP in 1999) acquired the target reading skills, 39 percent learned to write, 23 percent learned problem solving (functional math), and 73 percent acquired the targeted functional skills (see table 1, “Literate after Completion”), the same source indicates that 17 percent of the learners already knew how to read at the onset of the program, 13 percent could write, 3 percent knew how to solve mathematical problems, and 5 percent had a sufficient knowledge of functional skills (see table 1, “Literate at Enrollment”). Using these numbers, the overall success rate (averaged across the differences between the literate-after-completion and the literate-at-enrollment rates) comes to 37 percent, while the success rate for literacy and numeracy alone (reading, writing, math problem solving) is 27 percent.

Considering an estimated enrollment of 180,000 learners and a dropout rate of 34 percent, only 44,000 learners can be considered successful. The costs to the government (not including the private costs) of one successful course completer would therefore be more than US\$300. If the functional skills category is excluded, the number of learners who acquire literacy skills during the course is less than 18 percent. In other words, the use of NGOs as service providers in Senegal does not seem particularly cost-effective.

Although the WLP is used as a model in other countries, there are some indications that the results from Senegal may not compare well internationally. Lauglo, using 14 different literacy cases reviewed by Oxenham and Aoki, found a median success rate of 60 percent of initially enrolled learners

<sup>12</sup> In other words, World Bank authorizations for payments of provider services, approximately 5.22 billion CFAF, divided with unit costs, come to about 180,000 learners. The providers’ payment was based only on unit costs, and each class had a maximum of 30 learners.

(Lauglo 2001). Using the same research data, Lauglo reported that the unit costs ranged from a high of about half of the cost of 1 year of primary schooling to a low of about one-seventh. In the WLP, the unit cost per enrollee corresponded to roughly 90 percent of 1 year in primary schooling, whereas its success rates were much lower than Lauglo's reported numbers (and also much lower than the success rates found in primary education). The WLP thus seems to be exceptionally well funded, but the high funding was apparently not leading to correspondingly positive results.

Why was the WLP relatively cost ineffective? Many interviewees attributed the lack of results to the low quality of teaching. The providers often cut costs on the literacy teachers' training and offered them a crash course (of about 3 weeks duration) that was too short and of insufficient quality to make them good teachers. Additionally, books (reading, writing, and math) used in the programs were often selected by criteria of cost and easy availability. Both the teaching methods and, in many cases, the books were derived from primary school curricula and unfit for adolescents and adults.

Moreover, the providers and participants were supposed to build literacy centers and to set up small village libraries. In many cases, they did a poor job of constructing and/or maintaining the centers, which were reduced to shambles soon after the project had ended (or, if it was well built, it was converted to other uses, such as food storage). Also, the library books were often distributed to learners or taken back by the provider at the end of a subproject period. While one could treat each of these as independent contributors to the WLP's limited cost-effectiveness, it is important to consider how all of them are linked to the fundamental problem of monopoly and asymmetric information, leading to providers cutting back on costs (and program quality) to increase surplus revenues.

#### **Monopolies and Asymmetric Information in the Women's Literacy Project**

The World Bank and the government took for granted that WLP beneficiaries had easy access to the "market" of service providers and could change provider if they were dissatisfied with services. Also, it was believed that contract information would be readily available to all stakeholders and that the government (or its designee) would enforce contract compliance. None of these assumptions appears to have been borne out in this case.

As for asymmetric information, interviews and reports documented the following problems: the selection procedures were based on evaluation of the subproject proposal submitted by the prospect provider but failed to take into account the providers' past performance. Each selection was constructed as a one-shot game, and a known "bad" provider could be reselected. In some cases, the providers did not create the project document themselves but subcontracted the production of the proposal to a consultant or to another association. A very poor provider could therefore obtain financing by devel-

oping or by buying a very good subproject proposal. Consequently, the best providers were not always selected, and the delivery did not improve because of competition. A second information-related problem was the inability of government and project staff to verify the subproject's statements; for example, whether the provider had discussed the subproject with the community members and whether the latter were interested in receiving a literacy course.

The intention from the World Bank was that the implementation of a subproject could generate a small surplus that would be kept by the provider organization. In theory, the competition between providers would make these latter spend more money to boost the quality of the courses and thus decrease the surplus retained. Instead, many providers—both for-profits and non-profits—tried to earn as much as possible, while competing to make the nicest-sounding proposals and to implement the subprojects in the most accessible areas, often enrolling “easy” learners who were already literate. Since the providers had important financial incentives to set up courses, many literacy programs were not responding to community demand but to the providers' persuasion of villagers to accept the course.<sup>13</sup> However, such provider-driven implementation was in part positive, since the providers in many cases stimulated local interest for literacy. But it also firmly established provider monopolies in the communities. The provider “converted” a community to literacy services, and then the same provider implemented the course. If the provider association performed badly, the participants had no way of changing it—their only option was to “vote with their feet” and leave the course, an action that (as mentioned above) did not hinder the providers' chances for obtaining future funding.

In principle, the project had designed a monitoring system that would prevent asymmetric information problems and address monopoly situations such as the ones described above. Yet, the design failed to take into account the incentives and disincentives of government agents and the parastatal contract-managing agency (AGETIP) to perform monitoring and evaluation work. The project management was dependent on political capability and seemed to work better when the government was stable and led by capable managers. New managers often had vested interests in financing civil society associations and also depended on the votes of the members of these associations. The agency could in principle have stepped in and, to a certain extent, have compensated for the government's lack of monitoring. However, it had no incentive to monitor and to stop payments on a contract: the association was paid on a pro rata basis (equivalent to 5 percent of the contract value) and thus mainly had an incentive to ensure quick contract setup and rapid transfer of funds. As the World Bank (2004, 16) noted, “AGETIP did

<sup>13</sup> In some cases the community in which the course was to be set up was not even consulted, although such consultation was required by the WLP.

well in managing credit special accounts and ensuring timely disbursements, but did not do well in supervision and monitoring of the contracts.” The ineffective monitoring and contract enforcement reduced dramatically the communities’ ability to change their provider association during implementation and virtually confirmed the providers’ monopoly situation.

Further information problems appeared in 1999, when the WLP began to decentralize the selection procedures as well as some of the supervision and monitoring activities. The decentralization was largely done as a desktop exercise, without taking into account the institutional, human, and material resources that were necessary to make it successful. As a result, there was limited exchange of information between the local and central levels, which made possible corrupt behavior. For example: (i) local government staff sometimes established provider associations, requested funds for implementing a subproject, and selected themselves for implementing it; (ii) in some cases the evaluation officers refused to report a positive evaluation of a subproject before receiving a “gift” from the provider; and (iii) some education staff refused to give an implementation authorization to a provider association that had not “paid its dues” to the local authorities. During interviews, the providers often cited cases of the two first forms of corrupt behavior, which seemed to have been quite widespread in the project (interviews with key informants and World Bank personnel led to the belief that these were widespread problems in all projects in Senegal and not limited to the WLP). The extent to which such corruption was common in the WLP is not known, but interviews with stakeholders led to the belief that it was fairly normal and could have affected as much as half of the subprojects.

In some cases, the corruption of local officials led to a duel between providers and local authorities. Some providers—for example, international NGOs or churches—were strong enough to bypass authorities, while many local provider associations had to comply with the demands for such “gifts” and “dues.” The corruption in turn reduced the quality of the course (because of less effective use of funds, some of which had to be used as “gifts” to the local authorities); it led to ineffective monitoring from the government’s side and reduced the providers’ funding and incentives to perform well. It had as a consequence a shrinking trust in the government and thereby further delegitimization of the state.

#### **Effects of the Women’s Literacy Project on Civil Society**

While its impact on literacy was less than hoped for, the WLP did have an effect on the nature of civil society in Senegal and its relationship to the state. However, even in this regard, the consequences of the WLP were different than is often projected (and perhaps desired) by social theorists and representatives of international donor agencies. The number of provider associations (mostly grassroots for-profit associations) increased, a develop-

ment that Stiglitz and other theorists see as positive, based on a belief that a strong civil society improves democratic processes in the country and contributes to economic growth. In the Senegalese case, though, the new civil society associations became dependent on state funds and were quickly converted toward a pure business function rather than being a control against corruption and a counterbalance to state power. Instead, the NGOs exerted pressure on the state for more funding. When the funding ceased, many of the implementing associations became inactive until they received additional funding to implement a new subproject.

The World Bank and CIDA provided financial support to create a provider coordination group, CNOAS. This organization could have represented civil society and exerted pressure to control the widespread corruption and to improve the standards for literacy provision. However, CNOAS was not capable of doing that, nor was it capable of strengthening civil society. Its leaders were directors of their own associations and were more interested in generating funding (for these associations) than in creating a strong CNOAS. The partnership between the government and NGOs thus evolved toward an uneasy collaboration in which the government and civil society both acted as opportunists—and where both providers and state agents (by setting up NGOs in their “spare” time or by asking for “contributions” from the service providers) could increase profits if they bent the system a little.

At the local level, the participants in the literacy courses were mostly women organized in women’s associations. The WLP strengthened these associations through training of their staff members (such leadership training was a mandatory part of the providers’ duties). Women’s associations in Senegal were often connected with financial networks and had both financial and social functions. Participation in women’s associations in the combination with literacy courses helped the participants to achieve more financial autonomy (through participation in credit schemes and through the lessons in income-generating activities). It also led to creation of networks of trust; for example, many interviewees said that meetings were used to solve conflicts among members.

Participating women’s associations obtained a legal status as a result of the WLP; this was one of the aims of the project. Legal registration enabled the associations to negotiate development activities (and funding) directly with national and international development and financial organizations. It also enabled them to submit proposals—and to receive funding—for implementing literacy projects (or for providing other services). However, the strengthening of the women’s associations was firmly based in a logic of what women could do for development (i.e., a WID perspective), instead of critically evaluating the power structures of the patriarchy. Accordingly, the project created an obedient and nonthreatening civil society that would not question government actions, development goals, or the status quo of society.

The NGOs involved in the project would rarely if ever challenge underlying development ideologies or the local patriarchal structures. The project-created civil society thus became an implementer that donors, the government, and the traditional social hierarchy felt comfortable with. In creating this comfort zone, little attention was paid to the proposed outcome of the project, that is, literacy, and questions of market failure were hardly addressed at all, neither by the World Bank, the government, nor project-related structures such as NGOs, the contract-management agency, or the provider coordination group.

### **Conclusion**

In this article I contend that some services, especially those for which there is no easy access to the market for providers and those for which there are difficulties of ensuring contract compliance (through either long or short routes of accountability), may not be suitable for privatization. The Women's Literacy Project offers several examples of market failure, especially with regard to asymmetric information. In evaluating whether partnership between the government and NGOs is an appropriate approach for delivering literacy services in Senegal and elsewhere, it is useful to look at the intended effects of the WLP (literacy, strengthening of civil society) and its unintended effects (sloppy delivery, low quality). As we have seen above, the use of NGOs to produce literacy led to an extraordinary donor activity and to widespread access to (mostly) low-quality literacy education for rural women in Senegal. As the comparison to international cases showed, the WLP was more costly and less effective than many other literacy courses. Its achievements in developing literacy skills at the local level were less than was planned or expected.

This project showed that monopoly and contract enforcement problems (lack of information) led to low-quality service delivery. The limited quality seems to have had a larger effect on literacy learning than on training for income-generating activities, maybe because it was easier to find local experts on dyeing, soap making, and on other practical skills than on literacy. Perhaps also the learners were more able to control the providers' contribution in practical fields, since they knew what soap would look like (whereas it would be difficult for an illiterate person to imagine what literacy would be like).

When considering whether NGOs should be used to implement literacy courses, it is important to evaluate the state's effectiveness in regulating the sector and its willingness to do so. In Senegal, both the state and AGETIP were unwilling (and possibly unable) to regulate the sector effectively. Some of the monopoly and information-related project flaws could have been corrected through a more effective use of "the short route"; that is, by increasing the clients' power over providers through the learners' management of the funds (making the learners responsible for payments to the providers upon delivery of satisfactory services rendered). Also, target communities could

have been preidentified, and representatives from the learner group could have been involved in the provider selection process. Such steps would have virtually eliminated the monopoly situation and would have improved contract enforcement. They may also have improved the distribution problems, namely, that the providers concentrated their activities in zones that are easily accessible. All these elements are suggested and developed in World Bank literature on partnerships with NGOs and service provision: one first step in the right direction would be for the World Bank to adopt these steps in its own projects. Its failure to do so leads to questions as to whether the use of NGOs is imposed to boost quality provision of services or if it is an ideological device to reduce the size of the government and to transfer the latter's responsibilities to private associations.

The WLP has shown several examples of how courses set up through large-scale private provision suffered from the low-quality offer of literacy services. When considering the use of civil society as implementing agent, it is important to question what type of civil society one would like to develop in the country. Is it an "economic" for-profit civil society that is dependent on state funding, or should it be a civic-oriented civil society promoting a sound democracy? In WLP, the business aspect was developed, literacy was set out on the market as a commodity, and nongovernmental organizations (mostly for-profit associations) were used to provide services. A redesign of the system could begin by questioning the underlying assumptions of the project and asking (a) to what extent literacy is a market commodity or a government responsibility and (b) whether civil society is a mere business partner in development or an important component of a well-functioning democracy.

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