

The story of MVF-SNE partnership

South-to-South exchange can work on big issues.

Africa Tour 2008: Planting the seeds of principled stand against child labour

Fes, Morocco – Slowly but surely, global campaign against child labour is gathering steam. And crucially, Africa as perhaps the most challenged of all continents in this respect is to play a role in it, too, from now on.

As you are reading this, Stop Child Labour Africa Tour 2008 is drawing to a close in Nairobi. For one entire month a small delegation from India, Nepal and Morocco has been touring the continent, meeting with various stakeholders in the fight against child labour, campaigning, brainstorming, proselytizing and doing all in its powers to drive home the point that the best place to work for the children is school.

They may seem to be an improbable threesome at first sight – two social activists from India and Nepal and a trade unionist from Morocco – but this small team has proved itself to be as effective as anyone when it comes to creating a momentum for a decisive action against child labour.

Venkat Reddy of India's M.V. Foundation (MVF) has a proven track record of a child rights crusader par excellence, having helped to bring hundreds of thousands of children from work to school, giving them another start in their life. Radha Koirala from neighboring Nepal achieved similarly laudable results with her NGO Asamaan and makes no secret that it was mainly MVF where she and her colleagues got the inspiration from.

This seemingly leaves Driss Elyoubi from the Moroccan teachers' union SNE as the odd man out, but in fact the opposite is true, as proved over the course of the delegation's trans-African journey.

It was precisely the element of a teacher's uncompromising commitment to children's education which has made Driss's contribution to the Africa Tour so valuable. The central role that the teachers have to have in the global fight against child labour now seems to be so obvious that it is hard to imagine it could be otherwise.

SNE and the government – from nuisance to partner

Yet, as the Moroccan example shows, nothing is to be taken for granted. SNE members were initially getting cold shoulder from the government, which had made it clear to them on more than one occasion that the fight against child labour was none of the union's business.

Not to be easily discouraged, the SNE teachers in five schools in the city of Fes rolled out their ambitious program of drop-out prevention, trying hard to make their schools as child-friendly as possible. And the results were quick to come. In the short period of time the number of kids quitting school early decreased dramatically. The schools where the program was implemented developed a near cult following and with it came a long overdue nod from the officials.

Sitting in a leather arm-chair in his dimly lit office decorated with marble stone, Minister of Education Mohammed Akhchichan, seems slightly embarrassed when asked about the SNE's initially lonely fight, and takes pains to give it a proper context:

"Of course, concerning the issue of child labour, in the beginning when the union came up with these new ideas it was quite normal that it was confronted by some people who still believe in the traditional role of a union," he explains.

"But the good result that the union has achieved, the added value that the union has brought and the new ways of managing problems of this kind the union has put forward have convinced everybody to work together with the union. So I hope that the union goes on being suggestive force, inventive in its ways of working and coming up with new ideas that will convince not only the government but also the whole society to work with the union."

Minister Akhchichan goes even further, suggesting a clear shift on the part of the government, or at least his ministry, in perception of the union's role:

"It may lead us to an even larger question which is - what is the role of a teacher's union in the management of the educational system as a whole? I think that a union is more than simply (a vehicle of) representing the teachers. For me, a union should give opinion about the important problems we are having in the educational system.

MVF to SNE and vice versa

It will be of interest to the reader to know that Netherlands' own AOb facilitated a crucial exchange between SNE and MVF back in 2003, which is when the foundation's national convenor Venkat Reddy first visited Morocco, sowing there the seeds of the teachers' union's principled stand against child labour.

Next year, the now legendary conference in MVF's powerbase Hyderabad took place, where SNE - as well as Moroccan government – sent its delegation and from then on, the efforts to tackle the issue of child labour through the prevention of the hitherto alarming rates of dropping out really started taking off in Morocco.

It was only natural now for the SCL campaign's African Tour 2008 to kick off in that country. And the Moroccans gave the delegation a truly grand sendoff in Fes on October 10, the day before the tour has moved further south (and east) to Ethiopia.

Speaking to the assembled crowd of education professionals, local representatives and media, sociologist and yet another veteran from the famed meeting in Hyderabad, Ahmed Bouziane, reminisced about the lessons learned in India

"The first important thing that the MVF experience gave us is their clarity about the issue (of child labour) and how to fight it. Clear idea is crucial, because in Morocco there are few people who are really convinced that the child labour is a very bad thing. In the mind of a great part of the population – and also a great part of those responsible, on every level – it is not clear that the child labour is a real problem," he said.

"The right to a formal, full-time education is non-negotiable. That was a very important realization for me that I got from MVF in India. It has helped us immensely to see that a child out of school is a child labourer and we have applied this approach here immediately after we returned from the conference in Hyderabad in 2004," Mr. Bouziane explained.

"And the second point is about advocacy – they (MVF) have an impressive manner to make things being said, to gather people around it, share it and to make it happen fast. Through song and dance, through celebration, through shared experience. We do not (yet) know how to do it. It was impressive to see it and see it is possible. Here we also need to make people

convinced about the need to fight child labour and do it with happiness and joy. In the first case we are already practicing it, in the second we are still learning," said Ahmed Bouziane.

But Moroccans can now give lessons too. According to MVF's Venkat Reddy the SNE has made their erstwhile gurus from India proud with their program, which has now expanded – with the support from the government - to a total of 30 schools in different regions of Morocco.

"This will be the message I will be bringing back home to India," Mr. Reddy declared on stage in Fes. But he knew he would first have to do his pitch in Africa on a month-long campaign tour. How many of the seeds he has now planted there will grow to the likeness of the one in Morocco remains to be seen.