

Solid foundations: Building better schools for Togo's pupils



Islamic Development Bank Group

A good education has many ingredients. Children need a teacher who is knowledgeable, enthusiastic and motivating. They need resources – books, stationery, and science and maths equipment – to test and reinforce their newly acquired knowledge. And they need a safe, stimulating environment in which to learn.

Unfortunately, many developing countries struggle to provide such an environment for all their pupils. When education budgets are tight, there is not enough money to properly develop and equip every school. In countries where teachers' salaries are not always paid, funds to improve school buildings are a long way down the list of priorities.

In 1999, the Minister of Planning of Togo asked the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) to help fund 675 new classrooms to provide a secure environment for learning. Phase 1 of this ambitious project was completed in 2003; Phase 2 was completed in 2011, and the project is now in Phase 3, with a fourth phase at the planning stage.

A struggling sector

Education in Togo was under severe pressure at the end of the 1990s. The country's teachers had held a six-month strike as part of trade union protests against political turmoil at the time. A freeze on public-sector recruitment meant that retiring teachers were not replaced. Many teachers had no formal qualifications.

Rural areas were particularly affected. Teachers were leaving schools to take up positions in towns and cities, where resources were usually better. As a result, classes in some rural schools were far too large. The average pupil-to-teacher ratio throughout Togo was 57:1, but some rural schools had up to 200 pupils per class.

All the children prefer
the **new classrooms**, naturally



Old versus new: modernizing Togo's classrooms

Togo's traditional *apatam* classrooms are simple to construct but unsuitable for learning. They are built using branches for the frame, and the thick roof made of leaves and grasses means they are dark and hot under the baking sun, despite the open sides. Pupils, often sitting on logs or tree stumps rather than chairs, are easily distracted by noise from outside. And the classrooms quickly fall into disrepair or are destroyed completely in the rainy season. Parents are usually asked to help rebuild them.

In contrast, the concrete classrooms built under the IsDB project are cool, resilient and well equipped. The walls on two sides are open, allowing air to pass through. Combined with the high ceilings, this maintains ventilation and keeps the rooms cool. The open design also ensures the classrooms are well lit during the daytime – an important factor as few rural schools have electricity. While most of the schools where the new blocks were built still have some *apatam* classrooms, it is hoped that modern buildings will eventually replace them.



Traditional *apatam* classrooms (above left) are constructed from grass and leaves. The new ones (above right) have high roofs to keep them cool, while hollow lattice walls provide light and ventilation.

The buildings in many schools were also unsuitable as a result of low investment over many years. A lot of classrooms were built from just leaves and branches (see box). Few schools had acceptable teaching resources or pedagogical equipment, with some having just one book for every 15 pupils. As a result, many teachers had to conduct their lessons using a simple blackboard at best.

In 1999, 72 per cent of Togo's children were enrolled in school, a figure that left considerable room for improvement to meet the Millennium Development Goal of universal education by 2015. It was hard for parents to justify paying

fees when schools had so few facilities and resources, especially in a country with a high incidence of poverty.

When parents stop paying fees, a child's education is disrupted and, at that time, many pupils – especially girls – had to repeat years or dropped out of the school system completely. At the start of the project in 1999, only 22 in every 1000 pupils were completing their primary education without repeating at least one year. Not surprisingly, this limited their abilities when they left school; in 1999, fewer than 15 per cent of rural women were literate.

Laying the foundations

These problems were choking Togo's education system and, in 1999, the Minister of Planning in Togo asked IsDB to help fund a project to improve the country's rural education infrastructure. Part of the Government of Togo's education policy was to increase school enrolment in rural areas for both girls and boys, and improve education standards. Better quality classrooms were seen as central. The hope was that providing a secure environment for learning would enable more children to complete their primary education in one cycle and in one school, rather than having to drop out, move school or repeat years.

IsDB agreed to provide a loan of US\$9.53 million to fund the construction of 225 new school blocks – 675 classrooms in all, as well as pedagogical resources including teaching materials and textbooks, and benches, cupboards and blackboards. Some schools also received sports equipment such as football goals, basketball nets and balls.

The money would cover nearly 90 per cent of the expected total cost, the balance to be met by the

government. However, the project costs were lower than originally anticipated (US\$8.26m). In the end, IsDB disbursed only US\$7.49m.

While every level of Togo's education system needed investment at the time, the government prioritized the primary sector, as this is when children acquire the basic skills they need for life – reading, writing and arithmetic, and social skills. The focus was on rural areas due to the extreme shortage of teachers and variable quality of teaching. The hope was that, with better classrooms and equipment, the quality of education would improve and teachers would be happier to remain in rural schools.

Built to last

Construction work for Phase 1 began in 2001. Despite a few delays caused by site changes and contractor issues, all 675 classrooms were finished and in use by September 2003. Each classroom block followed a standard design: three large classrooms, one block of latrines, an office and a storage room. Two consultants from Togo oversaw construction, which was done by local firms.

The hope was that the **quality of education** would improve and teachers would be happier to remain in rural schools



Mr Okpodj pou Komlan, a director at Agbonou Koéroma school, in his office, constructed as part of the block of new classrooms. "All the children prefer the new classrooms, naturally," he says.

The government assumed responsibility for maintenance, but a project post-evaluation report written in 2007 found that, in many places, routine maintenance had not been carried out. At this stage there were concerns about the project's long-term sustainability.

Some problems persist in 2014. For example, in Togo's Plateaux region, where 49 classroom blocks were built during Phase 1, termite damage to wooden cupboards has been a problem. Future phases have learnt the lesson and responded to this, providing more durable metal cupboards instead. But overall, the classroom blocks are still in very good condition.

Taking care of the equipment is a necessity, as there are limited funds to pay for replacements. For example, Agbonou Koéroma school, which is just outside Atakpame, the largest town in Plateaux, receives just 87,000 CFA (US\$120) a year from the government to run the school. Once essential resources such as new books and paper have been bought, there is nothing left to pay for basic repairs.

A safe place to learn

The new classroom blocks have had a positive impact on the communities they serve. For example, Agbonou Koéroma school had new classrooms built by 2002. According to Okpodj pou Komlan, one of the school's directors, the main benefit is that the classrooms are secure: "Parents are happy to send their children to school knowing that they are in a safe environment."

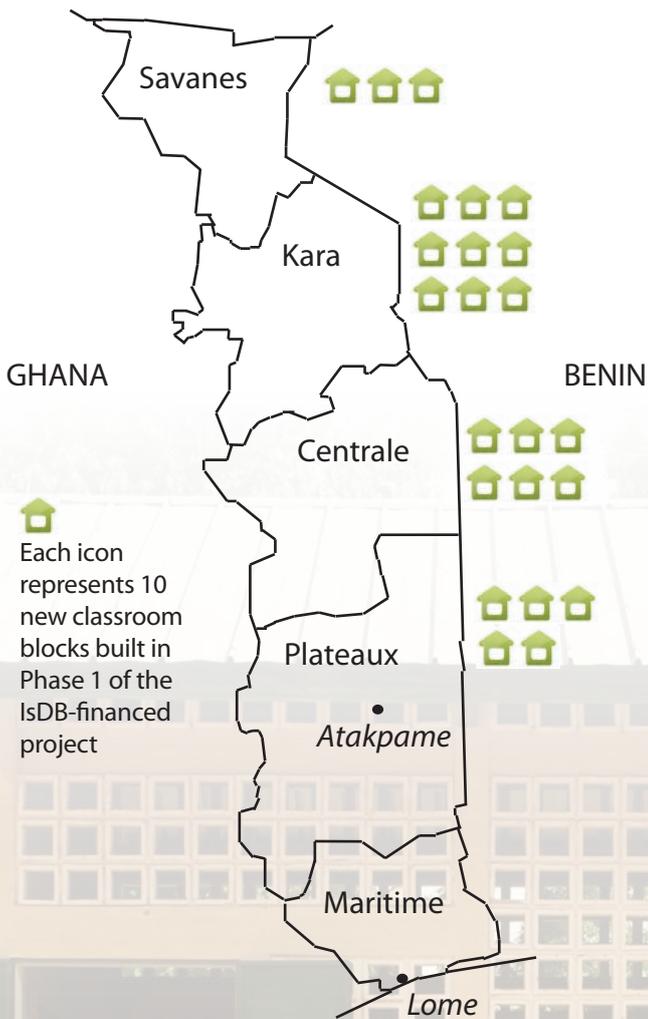
Being secure means different things to the people using the schools. For teachers, the classroom's cupboards provide a safe place to store their equipment. For the pupils, it means protection from 'anything bad' – from storms to snakes. And both parents and teachers are happy that all the children are under one roof – meaning less chance of the youngest ones running off.

The classroom blocks also reduce distractions in lessons – from other classes, from passers-by and especially from the weather. Wind and rain regularly disrupt lessons in open classrooms, especially during the rainy season. The IsDB-funded classrooms ensure lessons can continue year-round, with improvements in the students' results. Continuous, undisturbed teaching enables children to learn more steadily and achieve better results. This is especially important in Year 6, when children sit the national exam.



"Now I can hear my teachers better," says Avindu Holali.

BURKINA FASO



Where are the new classrooms?

Four of Togo's five districts were included in Phase 1. Togo's school construction programme is divided into lots, with a mix of regions in each lot. Other donors, such as the European Union, funded different lots. During Phase 2, classrooms were built in 100 schools across the Savanes, Centrale, Plateaux and Maritime regions (see map of Togo, left). Overall, more than 500 schools across Togo will have new classrooms built by the end of the project.

To select the locations in each region, the Regional Inspectorate for Education asks each district to identify the priority schools in their area, based on three criteria: the age of the existing schools, the number of students at the school, and the number of existing durable buildings.

The state of the buildings is the most important criterion, according to Mr Gnani Kpanté, the director of education in Plateaux. "It is important that every school has at least one secure building in case of emergencies [such as fires]," he says. Once the schools are prioritized, those that are not included during one phase are on the list for the next.

The project has encouraged the government to **invest** in new classrooms

Pupils appreciate the changes. According to Year 6 students Afedikou Ronsard and Avindu Holali, both 10, the new classrooms provide a much better environment to study in. "I can hear my teachers better," says Avindu, who hopes to become a doctor, "and I am confident I can finish my studies at this school."

Avindu also likes the fact that the classrooms have more materials in them. Part of the IsDB loan was used to provide books, globes, maps, scales and other equipment. These resources help pupils to reinforce their knowledge and achieve a better understanding of the subjects they study. This school places Years 4 to 6 (ages 9–15) in the new classrooms because this gives the younger pupils a target to work towards. "All the children prefer the new classrooms, naturally," says Mr Komlan.

As a result, enrolment rates have gone up. Before the project began, Agbonou Koéroma school had 276 girls and 254 boys. In 2007, this had increased to 426 girls and 367 boys. The school had to construct further basic classrooms to cope with the increased numbers.

But one problem lingers in Plateaux: the bright lights of nearby towns quite literally draw

teachers away from rural schools that have no electricity. "Many teachers still want to leave the rural areas, where there are so few facilities," says Mr Adjadja Kossi Elom, a Year 6 teacher at Agbonou Koéroma school. Hailing from the region, he has worked at the school for four years. "Future projects should consider including solar panels on the buildings, so teachers can charge their mobile phones. This might encourage them to stay in the villages."

The IsDB-funded classrooms are appreciated throughout the communities they serve. Mr Assogba Koffi, the chief of Foukote, a small village near Atakpame, is proud that every child in the village goes to school. "Many more children now continue to secondary school and some of the children who used the classrooms first have gone on to study at university and to have successful careers – one is now a university professor," he says.

There has been considerable progress at the school since the classroom blocks were built in 2001–2002. According to the school's director, Tanoufeyi Kossi, it is the only school in the district where there are just two children to each school bench. Other classes suffer from overcrowding, with up to five children squeezed onto one bench.

Rural schools in Togo by numbers...

57:1 Average pupil-to-teacher ratio in Togo in the 1990s

15% Maximum proportion of rural women able to read in 1999

US\$8.26 million Final cost of the project

US\$7.49 million IsDB loan financing

675 Classrooms built during Phase 1 in **225** schools

300 Classrooms built during Phase 2 in **100** schools

25,000 Pupils using the classrooms by 2007

(Figures refer to Phase 1 of the IsDB-supported schools project unless stated otherwise)

Communities were very open to the new classrooms and quick to help

The new facilities have had a clear impact on pupils' performance. "Ours is always the top school in the district for the Year 6 exams," says Mr Kossi, a fact confirmed by Gnani Kpanté, the director of education in Plateaux. Such is this success that the community is hoping to turn some of the old classrooms into a kindergarten, so children can begin their education at an even earlier age.

Revitalizing education

The main impact of Phase 1 was to start the long process of restoring Togo's depleted education sector. The new buildings filled an important gap: before, there were simply not enough adequate classrooms in the country. Since the project began, there has been a marked upturn in enrolment rates across Togo. In 1999–2000, there were 914,919 pupils enrolled in schools in Togo; by 2012–13, this had increased to over 1.4 million (i.e. over 53 per cent). Performances have also dramatically improved during that time, with the number of children passing their Year 6 exams rising from 76,355 to 115,027.

In 2012–13, there were 34,365 teachers in Togo – 9,941 more than in 1999–2000. The government has also appointed thousands of new auxiliary teachers and revitalized teacher training, making it compulsory for all teachers. In 2008 primary school education was made free at the point of use for every child in Togo.

The project has also encouraged the government to invest in new classrooms itself. Each year, it pays for the building and maintenance of classrooms in each region – in 2013, the government supported two new classrooms in Plateaux, as well as the maintenance of five existing classrooms. The figures may be small by comparison, but represent an important step forward: before this project began, the government was not able to provide adequate investment in school buildings.

Phases 2 to 4

Phase 1 was just the start of an ongoing and cumulative process to reform Togo's education sector and there has been considerable progress

since its completion. Phase 2 ran from 2008 to 2011, and IsDB provided US\$7.2m. This covered the building of 300 classrooms in 100 schools across the Savanes, Centrale, Plateaux and Maritime regions. One of the problems identified in Phase 1 was a lack of boreholes for fresh water, so Phase 2 construction process incorporated this aspect. Other small changes were made to the project – for example, metal cupboards instead of wooden ones.

Phase 3, which IsDB is supporting with US\$15m, began in 2012 and is due to be completed in early 2015. This covers the construction of 150 primary classrooms across the country. The focus has broadened to include lower and upper secondary schools too, with 200 new secondary classrooms. Several secondary schools will benefit from new laboratories and libraries, and some schools will have latrines and boreholes for the first time.

Further developments are under way as the scope of the project expands. A regional office building is being constructed in Kara, and four managers from the Ministry of Education are receiving training at UNESCO in Paris. Another important step forward is a training programme for primary and secondary school teachers. New motorcycles will enable pedagogical supervision in the more remote parts of the country. These all help to ensure that the improvements to Togo's education sector are sustainable beyond the end of the project.

A fourth phase is already being prepared and IsDB support has been requested. With the Bank's continued support, the school experience for Togo's pupils and teachers will keep getting better and generations of school children in Togo, both primary and secondary, will be educated, increasing Togo's contribution to the Millennium Development Goals.

Success factors

Continuity

Since the successful completion of Phase 1, IsDB has provided continued support for Phases 2 and 3, with Phase 4 now being planned. This has enabled the project to move forward quickly, and the lessons from each phase have helped to guide the next, meaning the project keeps improving in what it delivers.

Project management

Similar projects in other West African countries have not always adapted the standard classroom design to suit each location. This has led to such problems as poor foundations and building classrooms in areas at risk from flooding. In contrast, the project in Togo employed two local consultants to oversee the construction of the classrooms and adapt the design to local conditions as necessary.

Priority

IsDB was the sole funder of Phase 1, other international donors having withdrawn due to the prevailing political problems. As a result, IsDB negotiated directly with consultants, contractors and regional officials. In addition, this was the Ministry of Education's only significant project at the time, making it a top priority.

Reform

The new classrooms were an important part of a wider set of reforms, as the Government of Togo began investing more heavily in education. In 2007, about US\$90m was allocated to education, and the government is set to allocate a much higher percentage of the national budget to education in the future.

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Contact:

Manager, Operations Policy and Compliance Division
Operations Policy and Services Department
Islamic Development Bank Group
PO Box 5925, Jeddah 21432, SAUDI ARABIA

Email: idbarchives@isdb.org | Tel: +966 12 6361400 | www.isdb.org

