

## Original Research Article

# Impact of Bridge Classes on Access to Formal Education for Out-Of-School Children in the Cocoa Producing Communities in Cote D'ivoire

Gniondjibohoui Marc Ounnebo<sup>1\*</sup><sup>1</sup>Enseignant-chercheur, UFR Sciences Sociales et Humaines, Département de Sociologie-Anthropologie Université Jean Lorougnon Guédé, Daloa, Côte d'Ivoire**Article History**

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**Abstract:** Bridging classes are clearly today, one of the major educational offerings in Côte d'Ivoire. The bridge school provides a second chance for out-of-school children between the ages of 9 and 13 to enter or re-enter the formal school system. In this perspective, the initiatives taken by the NGO International Save the Children, have enabled many out-of-school children to have access to Education. This work aims to assess the impact of bridging classes on access to formal education for out-of-school children in cocoa-producing communities in Soubré. The methodology includes a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide for stakeholders in the Nawa region. The results indicate that the construction of bridging classes has enabled 453 children from the target communities who are out of school or out of school to have a chance of being educated or reintegrated into formal educational pathways. However, cultural and economic burdens pose major challenges in terms of their sustainability. It is therefore important to remove all these obstacles in order to facilitate the transition of beneficiary children to formal school.

**Keywords:** Impact, bridging classes, access to formal education, out-of-school children, cocoa-producing communities.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In Côte d'Ivoire, an estimated 2 million children between the ages of 6 and 16 are out of school (UNICEF, 2019). Although attendance in the preschool sector (SFT) tripled between 2012 and 2016, only 14.3% of children aged 36 to 59 months benefit from an organized preschool education program. Access to preschool remains very unequal and varies greatly depending on the child's place of residence. 51.4% of children in the richest households access it, compared to only 1.5% of children in the poorest households. While 39.6% of children in the Abidjan District and 29.8% of children living in urban areas attend preschool education, only 5% attend in rural areas and 4.6% in the Central West region, 5.8% in the Northwest and 7.4% in the North (UNICEF, 2021). Yet education provides diverse benefits to both individuals and societies. It is considered so important for individual development that the right to primary education is legally guaranteed in most countries of the world. In addition, international human rights conventions also recognize the right to education. This right was established by a series of UN

Conventions, ranging from the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948) to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which was granted international law status in 1990. Under Article 28 of the Convention, governments must ensure that primary education is compulsory and available free of charge to all (UNESCO, 2005, p3). Thus, in the face of the challenge of universal primary education, and with a view to reducing the lack of educational infrastructure, the State of Côte d'Ivoire has taken strategic and operational measures by considering in its medium-term action plan for the education/training sector 2012-2014, the "extension of the bridging class system" to take into account children who are behind in school (Koné, 2016). The first objective of the bridging classes is the intensive learning of the French language for children who do not sufficiently master this language. The second is "appropriate upgrading so that the student reaches the appropriate level of education as soon as possible" (CODE, 2010, p3). They are an effective way to achieve universal compulsory education, to enable out-of-school children to catch up with accelerated learning programmes, and to register or re-register

\*Corresponding Author: Gniondjibohoui Marc Ounnebo

Enseignant-chercheur, UFR Sciences Sociales et Humaines, Département de Sociologie-Anthropologie Université Jean Lorougnon Guédé, Daloa, Côte d'Ivoire

them, in the public education system and addressing child labour (TRECC, 2021). In this perspective, the International NGO Save the Children has implemented the “Project for the Protection of Children from the Worst Forms of Work, Abuse and Other Violence in the Cocoa Producing Communities of the Nawa Region” by basing its intervention logic on three major strategic axes: protection, education and community development as a response to the problem of child labour in 20 target communities. The initiatives taken in the field of Education with the establishment of Passerelles Classes, have enabled 453 out-of-school and out-of-school children in the target communities to have access to formal education (Ounnebo,2019). However, the most important challenge concerns the sustainability of this educational offer in these target communities despite the significant results obtained. This raises the following questions: How do bridge classes work? What are the challenges faced by those involved in their implementation? The answer to these different questions should allow us to propose suitable solutions

in the direction of their sustainability in order to facilitate the transition of beneficiary children to formal school.

## II. METHODOLOGY

Our methodological approach focuses on literature review, maintenance and observation as methods of data collection. Both qualitative and quantitative analysis was conducted on the data collected. Les investigations sur le terrain ont été menées durant deux mois (Juillet-Septembre 2019) notamment dans les localités de Sérigbangan (Grand-Zattry), Marckro, Sayo (Liliyo), Juleskro (Okrouyo), Zorouaho (Dabouyo), Yobouet Kouassikro (Guéyo) et Nouveau Quartier (Oupoyo) in the Nawa region. The choice of these localities is explained by the fact that they are beneficiaries of the «Child Protection in Cocoa Plantations (CPCP) project» and places of experimentation of the bridge classes.

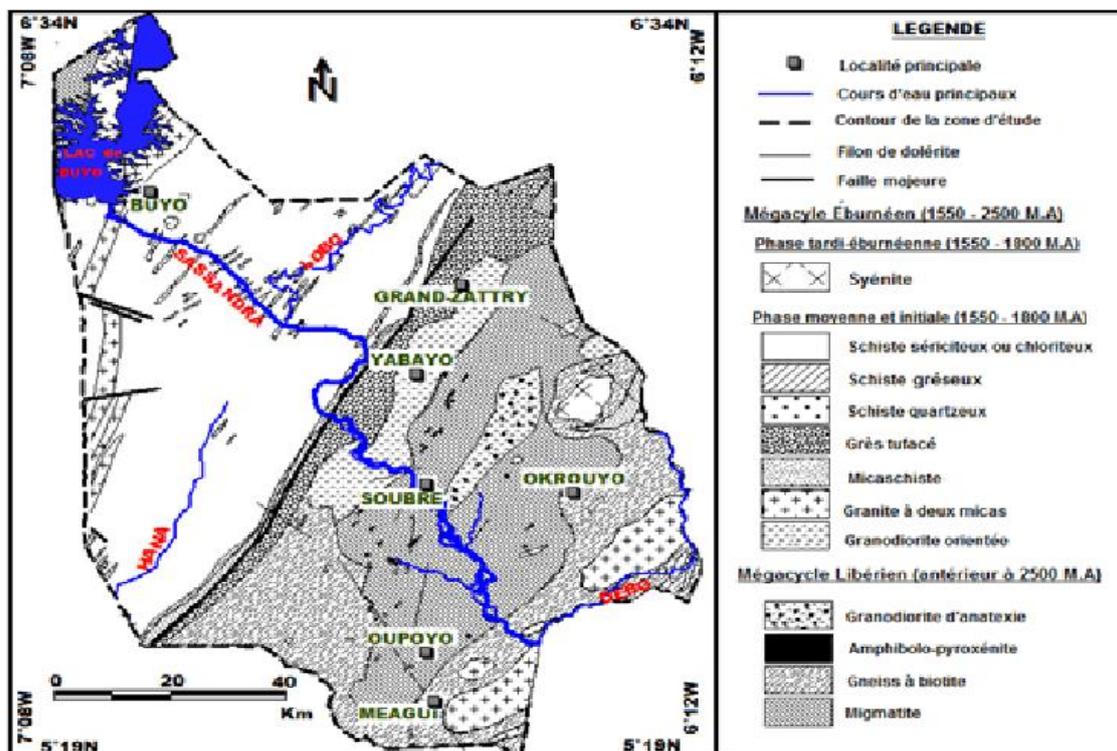


Figure 1: Mapping of the Nawa Region

### 1.1. Sample

We used the non-probability sampling method, including accidental sampling for the selection of sample elements. We chose this type of sample because our population meets the characteristics identified in this approach. It involves both quantitative and qualitative methods. Thus, the size of our sample is as follows: 120 children beneficiaries of bridge classes, 7 facilitators of bridge classes, 7 managers of School Management Committees (COGES), 7 managers of Child Protection Committees, 7 public primary teachers, 5 education system managers, 7 community

leaders, 5 project team managers, 5 administrative authorities. The sample is therefore 170 respondents.

## III. RESULTS

### 2.1. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

#### 2.1.1. Sex, age and education of children surveyed

Looking at sex, it can be seen that the majority of children in bridge classes are male 67% compared to a large proportion of female children (33%).

**Table 1: Distribution of children surveyed by sex**

Sex	Number	%	TOTAL
Male	80	67%	67%
Fémale	40	33%	33%
TOTAL	120	100%	100%

Source: Field survey (July-September 2019)

Taking into account age, they are between 9 and 17 years old. But most of these subjects are between 10 and 15 years old, or 68% of the children

surveyed. Depending on the age group, 39% are aged 13 to 15, compared with 29% aged 10 to 12, 17% aged 7 to 9 and 15% aged 16 to 18.

**Table 2: Distribution of beneficiary children by age group**

Age	Number	%	TOTAL
7-9	20	17%	17%
10-12	35	29%	29%
13-15	47	39%	39%
16-18	18	15%	15%
TOTAL	120	100%	100%

Source: Field survey (July-September 2019)

Analysis of the age indicator indicates that we are dealing with illiterate young people who are out of school (77%) for the most part and out of school (23%)

for some. Illiteracy is, however, a determining indicator of their exploitation in cocoa culture as a labour force.

**Table 3: Distribution of children surveyed by educational level**

Level	Number	%	TOTAL
Descolarized	28	23%	23%
Out of School	92	77%	77%
TOTAL	120	100%	100%

Source: Field survey (July-September 2019)

According to N'Guessan (2005, p27), illiterate and out-of-school children are the prime target for child trafficking. Indeed, these children are more vulnerable to the moral pressure of illusion sellers who promise them great things in Côte d'Ivoire." This situation of children with special needs therefore obliges the State to "Establish a mechanism to integrate or reintegrate children between the ages of nine and sixteen who are out of the system, in particular through bridging classes

for the ages of nine to thirteen and vocational training for the ages of fourteen to sixteen (Law No. 2015-635 of 17 September 2015, art. 2.2).

**2.1.2. Ethnicity of the children surveyed**

In terms of ethnicity, children enrolled in bridge classes belong to various ethnic groups. They are mostly ethnic Baoulé 46%, lobi 26% and malinké 18% against a minority of children concreted 8%.

**Table 4: Distribution of children surveyed by ethnicity**

Ethnic	Number	%	TOTAL
Lobi	31	26%	26%
Malinké	22	18%	18%
Bété	10	8%	8%
Baoulé	55	46%	46%
Autres	2	2%	2%
TOTAL	120	100%	100%

Source: Field survey (July-September 2019)

The preponderance of internal (Baoulé) and external (Burkinabe) migrant children results from the migratory tradition of their parents in this cocoa zone of Côte d'Ivoire. Indeed, Côte d'Ivoire, like most countries in Africa south of the Sahara, has an economy mainly based on cocoa production. In less than a decade, from 1999 to 2000, its cocoa production increased from 1,201,000 tonnes to 1,445,000 tonnes. This makes it the

world's largest cocoa producer (ENV, 2008). This production is carried out over the entire forest area: East, South-East, South, South-West and West with a loop that has stabilized for some years in the Nawa region around the city of Soubré.

Children are of course the first reported victims of this cocoa production. They are thus

involved in several tasks, the majority of which could be classified as dangerous work in family plantations and deprived of the enjoyment of their basic rights including the right to education. In this context, the bridge classes appear as a major response to this problem. “Reducing barriers to school and improving the quality of education to enable families to invest in the human capital of their children is a fundamental part of the strategy to combat child labour so that these children, once adults, have access to decent work. Investing in education is a relevant economic decision” (Semien, 2008). Similarly, the elimination of child labour and its replacement by universal education brings important economic benefits, in addition to social benefits. Overall, it is estimated that the benefits will be six times greater than the costs incurred, and each additional year of schooling, up to the age of 14, will generate 11 per cent additional income per year in the future (OIT, 2008).

**2.1.3. Functioning and Impact of Bridge Classes on Child Beneficiaries**

Bridging classes are a strategy to accelerate the enrolment of children aged 9 to 14, or even older, who are out of school or out of school. These children receive special education for 8 months in order to give them the necessary educational basics to reintegrate into

the normal school circuit according to their age and performance. They work in single stages: preparatory (CP1 + CP2 = CPU), elementary (CE1 + CE2=CEU), and means (CM1 + CM2=CMU). Moreover, they have a double advantage. Indeed, the bridging classes allow children to catch up at both the age and class levels. They are usually housed in public primary schools and are taught by volunteers. These volunteers are supervised by the pedagogical advisors and supported by the communities. In a word, bridging classes appear as an alternative educational offer. According to the community facilitators interviewed, the construction of the bridge classes has allowed several out-of-school or out-of-school children to have a chance to go to school for some or to return to school for others.

For this purpose, out of 453 learners in bridge classes integrated in formal or conventional primary schools, 319 or 70.41% learners actually continue their schooling to date of which 55.79% (178) boys and 44.20% (141 girls) under the supervision of the school directors of the target localities of the project. 289 children regularly attend the 10 community reading spaces. The idea is to offer them a smooth transition to school: support adapted to their age and enhancement of the role of parents with the help of an early childhood educator (Bergery, 2017).

**Table 5: Distribution of Bridge Class Learners Enrolled in Conventional Primary School by Project Target**

Locations			
Départements	Subprefectures	Communities	Number of children
Guéyo	Guéyo	Yobouet Kouassikro	30
	Dabouyo	Zorouayo	40
	Oupoyo	Nouveau Quartier	30
Soubré	Grand-Zattry	Keitadougou	43
		Sérigbangan	35
		Lakawekro	27
	Okrouyo	Juleskro	28
		Martinkro	29
	Liliyo	Sayo	29
		Marckro	38

Source: SCI, 2019

Through these statistics, we note that the bridging classes have an undeniable positive impact on the schooling of the children of the beneficiary communities of the project as evidenced by the comments of the actors interviewed: “The construction of the bridging classes has allowed many children to get back to school, to have a chance to be educated again and even to access the sixth-grade class today...” (DR Social Protection, Soubré).

“... Thanks to the bridge school one of the out-of-school children was presented as free candidate to the CEPE, he had his entrance in 6th, another pass in 5th and 3 others are registered in the CM1... a child from the Koranic school was even integrated into the formal school. The introduction of the bridge school has thus enabled a large number of children to know

how to read and write today” (E. B., CPE Secretary, Juleskro).

*In addition to allowing these children to know how to read and write, to continue their schooling, the bridge school also offers them a privileged way to get away from the Worst Forms of Child Labour (PFTE) in cocoa-culture. Article 3 of ILO Convention 182 defines “the worst forms of child labour” as all ‘Works which, by their nature or the circumstances in which they are carried out, are liable to harm the health, safety or morality of children, such types of dangerous work being determined by the national authorities. Servitude, economic exploitation, slavery and child trafficking are considered the worst forms of child labour.’ The Community actors interviewed stated that:*

*“The project strengthened the protection of children in the community... parents understood the problem... there is a change at the community level against child maltreatment. Children who bear heavy burdens no longer carry them. Children no longer work in plantations... they are now all taking part in the bridging classes to continue their schooling...”* (Village Chief, Serigbangan).

*“Parents were reluctant at first. But with the sensitization, they understood... To prevent children from working, a group of young people (town hall) was set up to serve as labour in the fields and sanitation of the village»* (President CPE Sérigbangan)

*“Children no longer serve as labour in the plantations, they no longer draw water for the masters, no longer send bundles to the masters... Malinké girls are no longer subject to forced marriage”* (Village Chief, Zorouayo).

According to the ILO (2008), “Reducing barriers to school and improving the quality of education to enable families to invest in the human capital of their children is a fundamental part of the strategy to combat child labour so that these children, once adults, have access to decent work. Investing in education is a relevant economic decision... the elimination of child labour and its replacement by universal education brings important economic benefits, in addition to social benefits. Overall, the benefits are estimated to be six times greater than the costs, and each additional year of schooling, up to the age of 14, will generate 11 per cent additional income per year in the future.” For Save the Children (2017), by giving students over the age of entry to CP1, bridging classes allow parents to send their children to school. This keeps children out of delinquency, lessening parents' worries about their children's future.”

Analysis of the functioning and impact of bridging classes shows that these alternatives to formal education have enabled the reintegration or schooling of several children out of school or never in school (70.41%) in several beneficiary communities of the project. However, these bridge classes face many challenges in their functioning in the target communities of the project.

### **2.1.3. Challenges related to the functioning of bridge classes in the project's target communities**

Despite significant successes in the implementation of bridging classes, the actors interviewed nevertheless draw attention to a number of difficulties encountered and mention some limitations that can be grouped as follows:

#### ➤ **The short duration of the project**

With a duration of 3 years, the majority of the initiatives carried out are considered insufficient if we

consider the magnitude of efforts to be made in the face of the complexity of the implementation of the bridge classes. Indeed, the actors involved find that the initiatives taken were essential to enable children who were on the margins of the education system to be reintegrated or integrated. However, they are still insufficient in terms of the number of children not yet beneficiaries in the project implementation area. For some actors, the duration of the project must be extended to allow these children to have access to education, as evidenced by their comments: *“... We want this project to be renewed for a few years so that it can have a lasting impact on the community... so that all of us may have the chance to be educated”* (C.V. notable, Yobouet Kouassikro).

*“... This project must be renewed and extended to all sub-prefectures including Buyo, Gueyo, Méagui, Soubré, Oupoyo, Okrouyo, Grand-Zatry. Everything that has been done in recent years in terms of education is like a drop in the bucket...”* (DR Protection Sociale, Soubré).

This is an approach according to Coulibaly (2018), which is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) number 4 dedicated to education, aimed at “ensure equal access to quality education for all and promote lifelong learning opportunities.”

#### ➤ **Repeated absenteeism of children attending bridge classes**

Each year more than one million children work in cocoa plantations at harvest time. Thus, preventing them from accessing school and thus perpetuating the poverty of the populations. It is therefore to stem this phenomenon while ensuring the quality of education provided in these areas that the Passerelle Class project was implemented (Dally, 2018). In this perspective, the community facilitators interviewed, revealed that the construction of the walkways has allowed several out-of-school or out-of-school children to have a chance to attend school for some or to resume school paths for others in the project area. However, many of them regularly leave the classrooms to accompany their parents to the fields.

*“... many children are often absent for field work... this is one of the difficulties faced by the facilitators of the bridge classes here... we continue to educate parents to let children come to class... it's for their own good”* (K.K. Animator LB, Yobouet Kouassikro).

#### ➤ **The small size of the allowances and the delay in their payment to the facilitators of the bridge classes**

The lack of education supply has led communities to find alternatives through the creation of informal education structures known as ‘Community

Schools or Bridges'. The educational organization of these schools run by unqualified volunteers, the small size of their allowances and the delay in their payment become challenges and challenges to obtain schools that can meet the expectations of the educational authorities of the Ministry of National Education and Technical Education in Côte d'Ivoire (SCI, 2017) and particularly in the CPCP target area.

*"Although they are volunteers, the payment of the small incentive bonus for Bridal Class Facilitators remains problematic... It is important that they are encouraged for the work they are doing for the benefit of the entire community,"* said Mr KR. Director of the Juleskro Public Primary School.

*"We are not properly rewarded for the work we do in teaching children in the community to read and write... we leave our activities to devote ourselves to passing classes but without reward... no real compensation... we also have our needs..."* said KT, Facilitator of Bridal Classes in Sayo.

➤ **Lack of government resources in funding bridging classes**

According to the social actors consulted, the construction and functioning of the bridge classes in the beneficiary communities are based exclusively on the resources from the project provider and the communities. This is a hindrance to the sustainability of these alternatives to education. For Mr Z.A. President of COGES de Zorouaho, *"... the bridge classes risk disappearing if the State does not take over after the project to help the community to sustain them... they have so far operated with the resources of the lessor with the help of community members but their sustainability is up to the authorities at the end of the project..."*

According to Bellier, Brisset, Claus, Jeanne-Rose and Tenne (2014), *"Meeting the needs of very young children requires specific equipment, space planning, adapted materials and a day-long program that allows them to live well at school while learning. Adapting the usual school response commits the local authority to bear capital and operating expenses for premises, equipment and jobs..."*

**IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study is to assess the impact of bridging classes on access to formal education for out-of-school children in cocoa-producing communities in Côte d'Ivoire. The methodology includes a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide for stakeholders in the Nawa region. The results indicate that the introduction of bridge classes has had a considerable positive impact on the beneficiary communities. Indeed, out of 453 learners in bridge classes, 319 or 70.41% learners of which 55.79% (178) boys and 44.20% (141 girls), are integrated into formal

or conventional primary schools and continue their schooling to date under the supervision of the school directors of the target localities of the project. The teaching/learning contents of the two years of the classical primary cycle (CP, CE, and CM) are condensed to be studied in one school year. Following this year, Passerelles Classes students enter or re-enter the formal system the following year based on results and levels (SCI, 2017). It works with three educational groups: CPU (CP1 and CP2 United), CEU (CE1 and CE2 United) and CMU (CM1 and CM2 United). And each level is done in one school year to allow the children concerned to catch up. In practice, an assessment of children's learning at the end of the school year with the possibility of transfer to the formal school, depending on the level in force. At the end of the test for the CPU level for example, children are classified into three different categories: super good with an excellent result, good with an average result and means for acceptable results. Those in the first category are admitted directly to the CM1, the second category to the CE2 and the third category to the CE1. For this last category left in the second grade, an additional pedagogical program called «Tutoring» will be initiated. This gives the CEU. So that in three years, any child enrolled in a 'Bridge Class' can catch up with their peers in the fifth grade. However, they face enormous challenges related to the short duration of the project, the repeated absenteeism of learners, the small size of the allowances and the delay in their payment to the facilitators and the lack of government resources in their operation to in the cocoa producing communities in Soubré in Côte d'Ivoire. These findings validate similar studies on the importance of the bridge school for children at the margins of the education system and the challenges associated with it in rural communities. In Côte d'Ivoire, the Passerelles Classes are presented as an emergency education program based on accelerated learning. The Bridge Class offers children between the ages of 9 and 14 who have not had access to education the possibility of doing both classes of one cycle (Preparatory Course, Elementary Course or Middle Course) in one school year to catch up and continue their schooling in formal education (SCI, 2017). Bridging classes take up the idea of ECEC that to ensure the development of toddlers, it is necessary to work closely with their families. They thus foster relationships with parents and invite them to get involved in their child's development at school. The idea is to create a reassuring environment where families feel welcomed, listened to and where children are able to separate smoothly (Bergery, 2017). They offer a chance to return to school for children who have dropped out early, or to integrate them at an advanced age, that is, children between the ages of 9 and 14, with the possibility of continuing the school curriculum in the normal Ivorian education system. In short, a transition from informal education offered by the 'Classes passerelles' to formal education by the Ivorian MENET-FP. Another important feature of the 'Bridge

Classes' is that they are located close to public primary schools. The idea is not only to adapt them to the socio-cultural context of the child but also and above all to make them benefit from the supervision of ordinary teachers and to facilitate the transition of children to formal school (Amann, 2018). Yet the challenges of education in Africa remain numerous. The issue of alternative education/training remains in Côte d'Ivoire because of the new and numerous challenges to be faced: the schooling of the girl, the school infrastructure to be rehabilitated or built, teachers to recruit and train in view of the growing population of children threatened by the age limit of access to primary education (SCI, 2017). It is therefore important to remove all these obstacles in order to facilitate the transition of beneficiary children to formal school in order to protect them sustainably from the worst forms of work, abuse and other violence in cocoa culture.

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