

An NGO with the consultative status for the Economic and Social Council, ECOSOC - United Nations

NEWSLETTER – June 2011

Dear members and friends,

Times flies and our obligations on the field in Kenya never stop either. This year started relatively calmly for MAA, with a reduced number of sponsored pupils, about 180 in total. These cuts were dictated by the new financial situation imposed on MAA. Sadly, the needs of the young Maasai girls in Kenya have not decreased and I would like to share with you a letter (email) sent to us by our Maasai collaborator only a few days ago

« The truth is, in Kenya in general and in Loitokitok specifically, there is a big need to help poor parents who have not means to support their children education. Unfortunately in Kenya the whole educational system is quite expensive and there is not “free education for all”. In addition parents are illiterate themselves, they don’t understand the value of education. They prefer to keep children at home to look after the cattle or to get married very early, for the girls. Girls who finished compulsory education by 14-15 years, they are given to marry off immediately after the school ends. A number of M.A.A. grantees, girls, have succeeded to pass the national exams and got a place in a Secondary school (High School), but, unluckily these schools are very expensive, 1/3 of the fees offered by the State and 2/3 supported by the parents. These girls have no chance to follow secondary education because of that. Please MAA donors, don’t let down these girls and continue supporting them. Many of them call me over the phone often to ask if, by chance, MAA has a grant for them. Some other got a few money through « Harambee » the Kenyan collective system of solidarity and so they paid a part of term-1 or 2 school fees waiting in the meanwhile to get a MAA grant. Please mind of them.»



Photo exhibition

**« Les Massaïs vus par les Massaïs »
(« The Maasais seen by the Maasais »)**

at the Café du Grütli in Geneva

during the month of June.



➤ **Schooling of Maasai children thanks to sponsorships**

We are still schooling **180 children in several districts all over the country**, from nursery classes up to the end of high school, in spite of the budget cuts that MAA has to face.

➤ **Our project: campaign and actions against FGM**

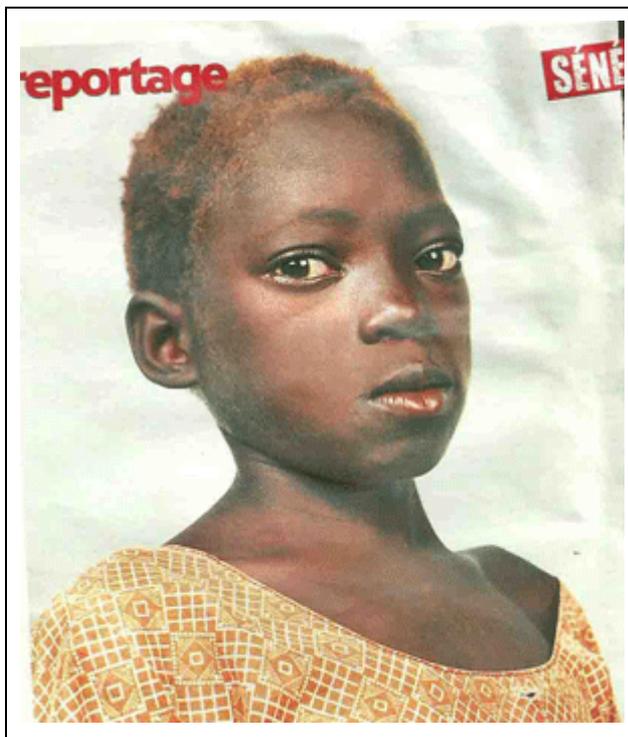
Within the project « **Campaign for the progressive eradication of FGM in Kenya** », our president Annie is soon going to conduct a new mission in Kenya. Indeed, the SSI (international solidarity service) of the state of Geneva has given us the third and last part of the support amount promised to this project that will end in June 2012. We hope the project will bear its fruits in the short and long term: the practise of FGM given up by a majority of enlightened parents and well informed young girls.

➤ **Our project of literacy teaching for rural Maasai women**

This is a project for which a support request has been sent to « **Giving Women** » **Switzerland**, a Geneva based network of women committed in humanitarian actions that focus particularly on children and women education. If this project is approved and gets financed, **18 women (30 per village in 6 different villages)** will attend literacy courses for one school year (2 hours, 3 days a week). The courses will be given by the primary school teacher whom we will pay accordingly. Furthermore, the school stationery will be taken in charge of, and at the end of the course a village gathering and party will crown the efforts of these women aged from 20 to 90 years old, who took up the challenge of starting to learn literacy as adults. In the curricula: learn to read and write Kiswahili (national language), a little English (2nd national language), et mostly learn to count (the 4 basic operations) and how to establish and keep up with a budget in order to set up a small business that would bear a small income.

➤ **The story of the young Syra, believed to be « curst » in Senegal**

In the women's magazine « **Marie-Claire** », **April 2011 issue**, appeared the following story:



SYRA, 8 years old, the bewitched

Senegal: *Syra lives in the family hut with her parents and her elder sister. In her village, in the heart of the bassari land, it is said that she doesn't speak much and that she never smiles because two witches have stolen her soul. A curse which forbids her to wed. Adult and condemned to celibacy, Syra will not be allowed to live in the women's community and will be chased out of the village. Her only hope today is to leave her mother, who is also cursed, to go and live with her grandmother.*

Moved by this story and the injustice towards this child, I decided to go and look for Syra. A month beforehand, I got information by contacting Marie-Claire's publisher, then a photo agency in Great-Britain, and finally the photographer who had taken the pictures. «*The village is in Bassari land, two days away from Dakar, near to the Guinean border. No, I don't remember the name of the village, you will have to search for it... The picture shows Syra aged 8, it was taken 4 years ago*».

So I left during the Easter holidays for Senegal with the firm intention to find «Syra the cursed girl». The journey: Dakar- Tambakounda, Tambakound- Kedougou by bush taxi. In Kedougou, province capital, I started to show the photo of the girl to a few people who seemed trustworthy: «*She's not a Bassari girl, on of them told me, her name is Peul. Syra means "the firstborn in the family". In Bassary it would be Chira!* ». The next day, I rented a taxi for the day and I started to visit the villages, in the east of Kedougou, with the help of a translator who spoke a bit of everything! Peul, Basari, Bedik and French. A chance! In the 4th or 5th village, we met a woman who recognised her because she is her cousin. But, to cap it all, Syra lives at the top of a hill where no vehicle can go, in a village called Iwol, inhabited by the Bedik, a branch of the Peul of Senegal.

The taxi remained parked on the asphalt road, and I started to climb up the hill with my guide, it was 10 in the morning and the temperature of about 32 degrees. The thermometer can go up to 38°C in the region at that time of the year. I was dripping with sweat and fearing that my hypertension would finish me off. An hour later, we got to the village at the top of the hill. And there, finally, I was nearing my goal. Before I was able to show the photo to the women, I was pushed towards a hut, «*yes, yes, that's where Syra lives* ». I then saw her, extremely shy, she was hiding her face with one of her hands. It was her indeed, the girls from the photo with no doubt. I told her straightaway that I had come for her, because her story had moved me a lot.



Syra, Annie (MAA) and Marie-Claire, Syra's mother



Syra is now 12. She has finished the first year of primary school and cannot attend school anymore.



Syra's hut and her father (Joseph). He lives in a separated hut, facing the one Syra and her mother occupy.

I won't retell here the extent of the rejoicing, the exchanging of gifts and the chatting with Syra and her mother in the cool shade of the women's hut. All in all, Syra had lost her younger daughter, and was therefore the only child of a family that had had 7 children, 6 of which died because of a lack of care and treatment... The village had not long before opened 2 school classes, a nursery one and a primary one. But from next year on, the pupils who were supposed to pass into 2nd grade are going to have to stop school permanently because of the lack of classes. The closest school is situated 3 hours away on foot, including walking up and down the hill.

I shared my thoughts with Syra: she's a good girl, extremely lucky. Not only had she survived up to now, but she is also beautiful and would be sponsored from now on by MAA. With her young age in mind, we decided, me, her mother and her uncle who is considered an educated figure in the village, to send her in September to the Catholic Mission school in Kedougou. The sisters offer food and shelter to the children, but one has to pay the teacher, the stationery, etc. I told them that MMA would take care of it. The ideal would be for Syra to attend school until about 15 (3rd or 4th primary grade), she could then do a tailoring apprenticeship in Kedougou. Syra was very excited, her eyes twinkled. I told her she had a beautiful smile and that she shouldn't be so shy! She let me take a picture of her with a slight smile. I explained to her that it was very important for her to become an independent woman, in order to be able to earn enough money later on without depending on anyone else. I didn't know how to come on to the subject of the "curse" and I understood quite quickly that in Bedik the death of relatives was taboo, as were the stories of curses. I therefore didn't insist on the malediction story. In the afternoon, I visited the primary school of Iwol:



Iwol primary school: 1 teacher, 1 classroom, 2 level (nursery & primary 1st grade)



The good old slates, always useful!



Iwol. The Bedik village sitting on the top of a hill.

The amazing view is well deserved after the hard climb-up.



In class.

I talk with the school teacher:

- It's urgent to reinforce the watertightness of the single classroom's roof; that would mean to cover it with corrugated iron, or to put plastic cloth under the straw that keeps the classroom cool, in order to prevent the rain to fall on the pupils' heads... I promised him to think about it.
- They need school stationery for September 2011 (notebooks and pens) because the pupils' parents are very poor.
- If we could manage have another classroom built, that would force the Minister in Dakar to send another teacher there, and would permit to open 2 more primary levels in the village.

I left Iwol with the feeling that Syra's curse was settled for good. Maybe MAA can change «Syra the curst» into «Syra the blessed»! Syra's parents seemed to believe so anyway. They walked me to the exit of the village, I was very honoured.

I told myself that as soon as I would be back home, I would find a sponsor for Syra, maybe someone who could go and visit her in Senegal one day. If not, I may have no other choice than to climb the terrible hill again...

Annie Corsini-Karagouni

For MAA committee

www.e-solidarity.org