



Photo: Alpha Gano

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Passerelles to the Last Mile:

From Alternative to
Formal Education



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How USAID Passerelles helps out-of-school children and youth transition to schooling

Southern Senegal has distinctive historical, social, and religious traditions that create multiple shapes in the education landscape. In Ziguinchor, the Diola community is matriarchal and places a high value on formal education. In Kolda and Sédhiou, the Peul and Sossé ethnic groups put a higher value on religious education, frequently placing their children — primarily boys — as talibés (Quranic students) in daaras (residential schools focused on Islam).

Many communities have traditionally rejected formal schools, have not had physical or economic access to them, or are simply fearful of the changes that formal education could bring about. Since its creation in 1935, the large town of Medina Gounass has not allowed formal schools within its boundaries.

The USAID-funded Passerelles project in Senegal, implemented by FHI 360 addresses challenges to increase access to education and retention for remote and vulnerable children and teens in four regions of southern

Senegal: Kédougou, Kolda, Sédhiou and Ziguinchor. To do so, Passerelles builds bridges for out-of-school and nonformal school learners to join the formal school system and offers learning remediation services. Its operating principles are to be inclusive, conflict- and gender-responsive, and to offer children and teens the opportunity to catch up on education and forge a new future.

Can social and cultural barriers be overcome to enable children to learn French and mathematics in a safe environment, and to possibly enter the national education system? Can nonformal education services lead students to transition successfully to formal education and continue to middle school? These are the complex challenges that the Passerelles project, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), has been addressing since 2019.

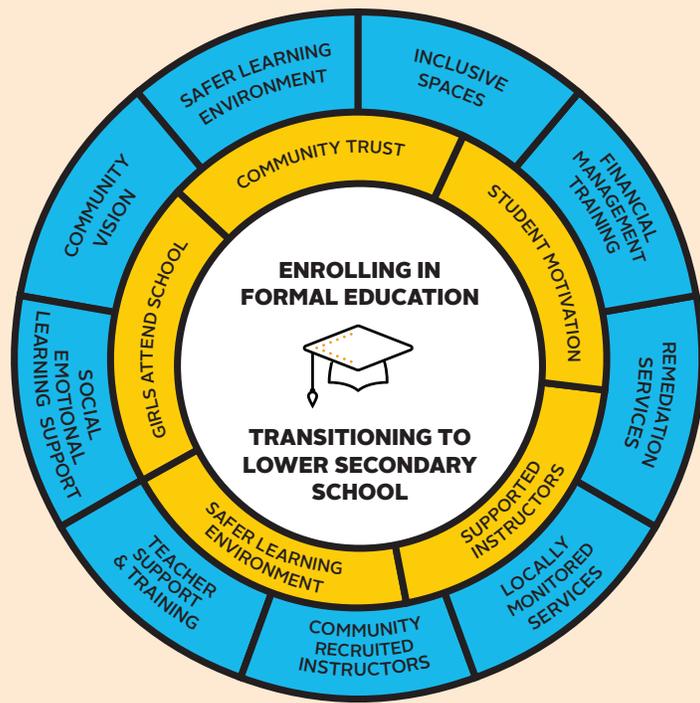
The Passerelles project intentionally avoided the “one size fits all” approach to address these complexities, instead investing in localized, contextualized and community-centered strategies. This brief focuses on the ways that the project has molded its interventions to address the social, cultural, and historical factors that act as barriers to education and shape behavior change.

Working closely with local authorities, the Passerelles project team designed an ecosystem of interventions to address the noncognitive factors that contribute to low enrollment in, or dropping out from, formal education. All the interventions are interdependent and lead to a series of outputs and results, which in turn lead to longer-term outcomes.

This ecosystem is presented in this graphic and described below.

The Passerelles education model is shaped by the communities themselves, their resources and needs, and their vision of what development means to them. Some communities with religious leadership — headed by marabouts (Muslim holy men), with borom daaras (Quranic masters) as religious instructors — have asked the project to supplement the teaching of the Quran and Islamic law (Shariah) with mathematics and French. Some communities have prioritized integrating out-of-school children and teens into the formal education system through bridging classes that teach 15 hours of French and mathematics per week. Still other communities have requested that their young people receive training in entrepreneurship and financial literacy so they have the skills needed for economic activities relevant to their local context and market forces. Daaras and schools with bridging classes have set up school management committees that receive training in financial management, thereby giving them control over their vision and local education plan.

Teacher training and coaching are locally led and locally monitored. Communities feel safer when their children are taught by teachers they know — ones who speak their language and come from the local community. In line with careful localization approaches, locally recruited volunteers teach the nonformal school students. Retired education experts who are locally known by the education districts serve as coaches to the teachers. These coaches also work with school leaders to facilitate the movement of students



from primary to lower secondary school, a traditionally difficult transition.

The learning environment is made safer for students.

Passerelles works with regional education stakeholders to train formal and nonformal school teaching staff and coaches to ensure a supportive school climate, using positive discipline techniques in place of corporal punishment. Students from formal schools report feeling more motivated to go to school now that teachers no longer practice corporal punishment, and some schools have come together to ban the whips that have sometimes been used in schools. Children know how to recognize violence and replace it with conflict-resolution strategies. Children in formal schooling reported feeling safer at midline than baseline.¹

1. See Table 23, "Differences in gender and school safety scores for formal students," pp. 40-41. USAID Passerelles Activity: 2021 Midline Report (January 2022).

Education spaces are increasingly inclusive.

Schools are accommodating students with disabilities by shifting some pedagogical practices that prevent bullying and turn exclusion into support. As teachers are trained to identify children with disabilities and refer them to relevant health services, children have become increasingly supportive and help their classmates when they cannot walk up the stairs, jump, hear or see well.

Second chances for all. Students from daaras are eager to learn French, as they already speak and write Arabic. They progress quickly in French and mathematics, and some teachers in daaras, such as those in Medina Gounass, state that the students have performed at an accelerated level and are ready to move up in grades sooner than expected. Out-of-school children who take the opportunity to join a school are the most at risk for dropping out if they struggle academically.



Photo: Alpha Gano

As a result, Passerelles provides students who experience academic difficulties with remediation services, helping to prevent attrition.

Shifts in perceptions, opinions, traditions, and beliefs take time. Passerelles proves that they can be triggered effectively and open new possibilities. These opportunities are creating positive changes:

- Out-of-school children can attend school and achieve their dreams to go to middle school.
- Girls can marry later and have a chance to finish primary school and even complete middle school.
- Boys and girls can go to a learning space and not be beaten by the adults who are supposed to care for and educate them.
- Authorities can bring the children who have been out of reach into the national fold.



Photo: Ndeye Ba