

In Guinea, West Africa, "Everything is Possible if You Just Dream"



Guinean acrobat Yamoussa Bangoura performing with Artcirq in Ottawa in 2009.

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Guinea, on the Atlantic coast of West Africa, is one of Africa's least developed nations, in spite of being rich in natural resources: It holds half the world's reserves of bauxite, plus gold and diamonds. Its population is 10 million, rapidly increasing a decade ago when it became home to half a million refugees fleeing fighting in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Nearly everyone in Guinea is impoverished, living on less than \$1 a day.



Malnutrition is rampant. Most people lack such basic services as electricity and water. Fewer than one adult in three is literate (one in five for women) and there is no comprehensive educational system or apparent incentive to do anything about it.

This has much to do with the political turbulence that's defined the county for the last half century, following Guinea's independence from France in 1958.

Like its unstable "narco-state" neighbor Guinea-Bissau, Guinea is a key transshipment point for drug traffickers; cocaine floods in from Latin America en route to Europe. The country has never had democracy and at present, it's ruled by a provisional government which purports to be overseeing a transition to civilian rule. It hasn't gone smoothly. The first round of presidential elections were held in June but the second round was postponed amid accusations of vote-rigging. The election has been rescheduled for this week – Oct. 10 – though many are skeptical it will actually take place.

Needless to say, this is not the most nurturing environment for children.

In some regions, schools are so scarce that there may be 85 children in a classroom, and some children walk 15 miles a day to and from school. Though tuition is free, parents must still pay for books and uniforms, and as a result few kids actually complete schooling and many don't even start.

There have been outsider efforts to shore things up. Actress and UNICEF ambassador Mia Farrow did a five-day mission in Guinea in June ahead of the elections and UNICEF announced it will build 1,000 schools and invest in teacher training and improved curricula in Guinea. Others have concentrated on the refugee population, building schools for children orphaned as a result of civil war in neighboring countries. (In one notable example, the

Mohomou Refugee School in Nzerekore, Guinea, has about 2,000 students: The only subject it teaches is math.)

Then there's Yamoussa Bangoura's solution.

Bangoura is a circus acrobat and drummer who was born in Conakry but lives in Montreal, Canada. He spent four years traveling around the world with Cirque Eloise, and now makes his living teaching African percussion and performing with his own circus troupe, Kalabante. Much of his earnings, though, gets sent back to Guinea where he and his family are building their own brand of school to help the country's children – part academics, part circus school.

“In Guinea, it is very difficult,” said Bangoura. “Many children don't read. I have friends in my own circus company who don't read. You have to find a way to approach them to go to school, otherwise they wind up on the street, doing bad things. But so many kids in Guinea, they like music, they like circus. So I tell them, “OK, you can do that, but you have to learn, too.”

The school, also called Kalabante, has only five students so far but will eventually be home to 50 kids; children actually live there because so many of them are orphaned. Right now, though, the school is still small – “the size of an igloo,” said Yamoussa.

The comparison to an igloo is not as strange as it might seem. Bangoura has made several trips to the Canadian Arctic, where a fellow acrobat from Cirque Eloise has started his own project to help impoverished youth improve their lot in life by learning circus skills. Guillaume Saladin co-founded Artcirq, a circus made up of Inuit young people who live in Igloodik, Nunavut, an isolated community beset by an epidemic of youth suicide, drug abuse, and hopelessness.

The similarity of their missions, albeit on opposite sides of the planet, has not been lost on Saladin and Bangoura. For years, they've dreamed of creating a unique cultural exchange – bringing the Inuit kids to Africa, where they can share their aboriginal traditions, create a joint performance, and take their unusual hybrid circus around Guinea. In November, they will finally be doing it.

“Living in a remote area, we don't have much chance to see a wider world with our own eyes,” said Saladin. “We want to inspire other people, and to show them that everything is possible if you just dream.”

Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting grantee Linda Matchan is part of a documentary film team at Northern Light Productions in Boston producing a film about Artcirq. The film grew out of her 2009 Pulitzer Center project with photographer Michele McDonald about the suicide epidemic among Inuit youth in Nunavut, Canada, and about Artcirq's effort to combat suicide.

They've launched a fundraising campaign to film Artcirq's visit to Africa. For information, and to make a donation – by Oct. 21 -- go to www.artcirqthefilm.com.