

The Development of an Agricultural Union in Mali: Increasing Levels of Local Empowerment

In the early 1990s, the members of the village associations (*associations villageoises*, or AV) in the Koutiala region of southern Mali had an issue to sort out with the Malian Textile Company (*Compagnie Malienne des Textiles*, CMDT). A rumor was circulating that the CMDT planned to increase the pay of its field staff (i.e. their share of the profit from cotton), without raising the price paid to producers. Representatives of the different regional associations had already joined forces in 1989 to demand annulment of a policy adopted by the CMDT regarding the financial responsibility of producers' associations, a case that the producers eventually won.

Encouraged by this success, they united efforts again to address the pricing problem and created the Coordination Committee for the Village Associations and Tòns of Koutiala, composed of representatives of the various local associations. Members of the coordinating committee included farmers trained in literacy courses and experienced in the movement for local takeover of markets under way in southern Mali since the 1970s, plus a few representatives of a new stratum of the population that had appeared over the preceding decade: graduates of secondary or post-secondary education who had returned to their home communities to start their own farms.

Changing the institutional landscape of rural areas

A series of meetings and local hearings led the group to draw up an official list of claims and grievances. At the same time, the political events shaking Mali triggered upheaval in the village associations, diminishing already-narrow profit margins on the sale of the crop and impelling the committee to action. In 1991, the group decided to delegate the most highly educated of its members, a graduate of a post-secondary agricultural institute who had returned to farming, to speak to members of the village associations, calm their fears and present their claims and questions to the CMDT. The initiative directed at the AVs was very successful: the association representatives gave their full support to the coordinating committee. But CMDT management, worried by the unstable political conditions, refused any negotiation with the peasant movement. As a consequence, the committee called for a strike by cotton pro-

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ducers, and its members canvassed the zone to rally the AVs to its cause. For two months, the associations refused to deliver their cotton to the CMDT, until the Minister of Rural Development came to Koutiala in person to mediate the conflict. The outcome of the negotiations was that the CMDT accepted the principle of collective bargaining by a non-governmental organization representing cotton producers and agreed as well to its participation on the National Agricultural Pricing Board.

In this manner, SYCOV (*Syndicat des Producteurs du Coton et du Végétarien* or Union of Cotton and Food Crops Producers) was born, though it was not legally established for another year, due to the administrative formalities required. Its leaders immediately took care to open the doors of the new agricultural union to all of the village associations of southern Mali, and even decided, with his consent, the candidacy of the principal leader of the 1991 movement for presidency of the new organization in favor of a representative from one of the regions that had not previously been involved. The Union, which operates bilingually

(Bambara-French), has continued to grow, notwithstanding some resistance by the CMDT and internal difficulties caused by the uncertain evolution of the AVs themselves, some questionable decisions of the leadership and rifts between local and central levels. It is now a part of the institutional and political landscape of Mali, incarnating at a national level the legally-established right of peasants to participate in all decisions that concern them. SYCOV is also organizing training courses in oral and written French for Bambara-literate representatives of the AVs and has required bilingualism in all documents it uses and all sessions in which it takes part.

**Roots of change:
the transfer of economic power into local hands**

In fact, with all its strengths and shortcomings, the SYCOV experiment already represents a second stage in local empowerment in rural areas of southern Mali and illustrates some of the benefits possible through the actual transfer of economic authority into the hands of farmers' associations. While cotton has been cultivated and marketed in these areas for over thirty years, the situation has evolved, in the space of the last fifteen, from one where staff of large cotton firms like the CMDT and its affiliates controlled the purchase of farm output at the local level and its transport to processing centers, to a system where these functions have been almost entirely assumed by village organizations. Representatives of these local associations or their federations are now fully responsible for weighing the crop, paying producers, stocking the products, transporting them to processing centers, and reselling them to the processors, as well as for the necessary organizational and accounting tasks and the establishment of related policy. The feat was accomplished thanks in large measure to literacy and nonformal education programs implemented with the support of the cotton companies themselves (or sometimes inherited from earlier government and NGO efforts), which enabled a core of adolescents and adults having little previous schooling to acquire reading, writing and accounting skills in their own languages and to master vernacular or bilingual management systems.

It is no exaggeration to say that such efforts have saved cotton companies billions of CFA francs (approximately 500 CFA = \$1 US). A sizeable portion of the proceeds has

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returned to the community organizations and been apportioned by them between individual rebates to farmers and collective investment funds. The latter, in turn, have stimulated a whole series of other investments such as the establishment of credit and savings unions, purchase of more sophisticated agricultural equipment, drilling of new wells, construction of community clinics and schools, etc. This phenomenon of local takeover is not unrelated to the major increase in cotton production in Sub-Saharan Africa over the course of the last decade, a development that has moved the region into fourth position on the world market and replenished national budgets severely strained by the demands of structural adjustment programs.

Cotton can scarcely be considered the ideal driving force for sustainable development, given the devastating effects it has had on soil fertility, at least under the very deficient regime of crop rotation and soil conservation applied in West Africa. Nevertheless, the cotton experience served to demonstrate, on a large scale, the ability of local-level producers to organize commercial and management operations themselves—provided appropriate training was made available at the same time. And it has given birth to a set of reinforced rural institutions that are providing “templates” for local development in a number of other domains.

**A favorable context:
the interaction of economic challenge and social capital**

The village associations in fact arose from the confluence of two factors, one “traditional” and the other modern; and the interweaving of the two currents accounts for much of the impressive results. Southern Malian communities are generally organized into “tòn” (the Bambara-Malinké term) or equivalent structures among neighboring ethnic groups. These age-stratified initiation groups are often very strongly knit together and internally regulated to a high degree. The “tòn” were the associations that became directly or indirectly responsible for the assumption of marketing and reinvestment responsibilities when the CMDT undertook its experiment; and their new functions prompted them to evolve in new directions, developing in the process systems of accountability and training far in advance of those that characterized the traditional initiation groups.

In a sense, therefore, the failures, successes and pioneering efforts of SYCOV represent simply a “second tier” in the campaign for local capacity development and increased empowerment of village organizations that began with the reorganization of the cotton marketing system several years ago, and driven by the mobilization of existing social structures. And at the same time they have helped fuel other initiatives.

Carrying local development to the second tier

Another telling example: to improve their management performance, the village associations of southern Mali, with the support of the CMDT and foreign aid, created in 1993 an institution charged with auditing their accounts and providing technical assistance to local leaders in financial matters. The unit was named the “Koutiala Management Center”; several additional branches have been established since that time. The center is staffed by personnel recruited from the village associations, who are responsible for providing third-party audit of AV accounts. Local staff are trained and supported in turn by external technical assistance, which is designed to play a diminishing role. Policy oversight of the Center is carried out by an Administrative Council, which is linked in turn to the Federation of Village Associations of southern Mali. Theoretically, the center is supposed to operate entirely on a budget funded by the revenues generated from sale of its services to the village associations. It is thus half-way between being a “wholly owned subsidiary” of the Federation and a private auditing firm.

In reality, the Center was created, and is still partially dependent, on external funding. But it does seem to have survived a first phase of establishment, operation and preliminary institutionalization and is in fact providing needed services and generating revenues. The Management Center thus demonstrates the ability of local associations to move up a substantial notch in the sequence of activities required to become financially independent. It also reveals an important niche and opportunity for second-tier organizations that are able to provide critical technical support to the new enterprises of civil society. The seeds sown by the actual transfer of resources and marketing responsibility to village structures has thus begun to yield multiple fruits.

This article is based on data gathered by Peter Easton, Guy Belloncle, Cheibane Coulibaly, Simon Fass, Laouali Malam Moussa and five national research teams during conduct of the PADLOS-Education Study, an inquiry into “Decentralization and Local Capacity Building in West Africa” funded by the Club du Sahel/OECD and the CILSS. For copies of the full study, contact Peter Easton, Center for Policy Studies in Education, 312 STB, College of Education, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306, USA; phone (850) 644-5042; fax (850) 644-1595; e-mail easton@coe.fsu.edu