

From Desert to Green Pastures

Abrahamane Fondo is a farmer in the village of Koissa. Like many young men in the area, Fondo was driven to emigrate to the neighboring country of Niger after famine hit the area in 1989. He worked in Niger for ten years, earning money through odd jobs. He could not afford to send his kids to school in Niger, much less plan for the family's future.

Then in 2001, his childhood friend Salihou Halibou, governing board president of the Koissa perimeter, wrote telling him to come back home - his village was experiencing a renaissance with the creation of irrigated fields. An irrigated perimeter of the villages was developed through an agricultural project financed by USAID and implemented by World Vision, a U.S.-based non-profit organization.

Alongside the Niger River, 21.95 hectares of green stretch near the villages of Dongome and Koissa. Otherwise, the riverbanks extend flat and brown on either bank, empty and baking under the sun. The perimeter is just one of many oases of productive rice cultivation developed by USAID to help the outlying villages in the city of Gao, home to 39,000, achieve food self-sufficiency and begin developing the enormous agricultural potential of the Niger River Basin. USAID has invested \$11.8 million in irrigation programs, providing 50,000 arable hectares to over 180,000 Malians.



Photo: Alexandra Huddleston

Farmers replant rice-seedlings in the Dongome irrigated perimeter.

When USAID began working with communities in 1998, they drew all the active parties into the project: the mayor's office, the perimeter's general assembly, and the regional bodies responsible for the agricultural development. Each party had a voice in the final contract to irrigate the perimeter.

To ensure sustainability, the contract specified that the farmers of the irrigated fields must pay back, to the perimeter's governing board, the cost of the seeds, manure, and gas. These funds, along with the yearly fees collected for irrigated land use, are used to buy gas and replacement parts for the irrigation pumps. Since 2002, the Dongome and Koissa perimeters have become fully autonomous.

“The most important benefit of the irrigated fields is very basic: I now have enough food to feed my family the entire year. Dinner is no longer dependent on the uncertainty of rainfall.”

- Idrissa Mamadou

Fondo earns more from his investment in the perimeter than he did in Niger. He lives near his family, and can help support his elderly parents. Most importantly, all his kids go to school, are vaccinated, and receive regular health care. Living in his hometown, Fondo takes an active part in the local government and in the community's development.

Fondo says that his newly found personal sense of prosperity extends to the entire village. He knows that a majority of the young men who now live in the area and work in the irrigated fields have, like himself, returned from abroad to settle again in Mali. Now that his community feels a sense of economic security - they can begin to plan and develop for the future.