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SUCCESS STORY

Historic Shipment Reaches Retail Giant

Trade project connected Hallmark with artisans capable of export order



Photo: WATH/Eliza Barzakova

A seamster, one of nearly 500 Malians employed as a result of a large order for Hallmark, stitches a gift bag out of “bogolan”, a Malian mudcloth.

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Mali’s handcrafts industry is abuzz as artisans nationwide prepare thousands of handbags for Hallmark, the United States’ largest greeting-card company. The bags, made from “bogolan” (a traditional Malian mudcloth), debuted at Hallmark’s Gold

Crown stores under the (PRODUCT) RED label, part of a widespread commercial initiative launched by Bono and Bobby Shriver to raise money for AIDS relief in Africa. But for nearly 500 producers, mostly tailors and cloth dyers, the benefits have already materialized: months of steady work earning more than two or three times Mali’s minimum wage. The sheer size of the order, which included bags and bead strands for greeting cards, shipped weekly, makes it one of the largest single handcrafts purchases ever made in Mali.

The order is groundbreaking in other ways, too. It’s the first export Mali has shipped under a provision of the U.S. African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA) aimed at handmade textiles, which gives the order duty-free status in the United States. It’s also the first time Hallmark has done business in Africa – getting help from USAID staff along the way. “Without the technical assistance and on-the-ground support, this project would not have been possible,” said Frank Masterson, Hallmark’s capacity resource manager.

USAID’s West Africa Trade Hub provided information, photo samples and financial quotes from three West African countries before Hallmark selected the companies Mali Chic and Farafina Tigne, both Hub clients. To help the businesses handle the order, the Hub worked with Peace Corps volunteers to bridge the language and cultural gaps between Hallmark and the Malian businesses, while providing business education and on-going assistance to the Malian owners and staff. The Hub helped assess production capacity, assist with costing, accounting procedures and bank loan applications. Hub staff also provided cultural context during an evaluation by Africa Now, an international development organization Hallmark hired to determine whether bags were being produced under ethical working conditions (for example, a workplace not using child labor or having wages withheld) – with fully satisfactory results.