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Prosperity Takes Root in Mali

The Alatona Zone of Mali's Ségou region traditionally has been a poor and vulnerable area, marked by low and variable rainfall. Residents have limited access to health, education services and land rights. But thanks to the Millennium Challenge Corporation's five-year, \$460 million compact with Mali, the region is being transformed into a thriving hub of rice and vegetable production that will improve the lives of farmers and strengthen the country's food security.

The \$235 million Alatona Irrigation Project aims to develop a model of farmer-driven agricultural development to spur economic growth and reduce poverty. Key components of the project include the development of about 5,000 hectares of irrigated land and canal improvements that boost agricultural production and productivity in another 90,000 hectares.

The investment also includes improvements to the main road; rehabilitation and expansion of the irrigation system; construction of villages with agricultural warehouses, schools and health facilities; training in agricultural techniques; better access to financial services; and improved land-tenure security for small farmers. The project also helps beneficiaries manage their economic and social assets more effectively and sustainably through participation in farmers' organizations, water-user organizations and village committees.

Almost 650,000 people are expected to benefit from the project, and household incomes are projected to rise \$273 million over the next 20 years—but the project is already making an impact in many people's lives.

Mougnal Cooperative: Successful Teamwork

Residents of Toule A, a Fulani hamlet in the Alatona zone, admit their community was not united in recent years. Most villagers worked independently as laborers in neighboring villages and towns. Others were semi-nomadic animal herders.

But 10 men and two women are working to change residents' attitudes about working together. Because of MCC's Alatona Irrigation Project, they started the Mougnal Cooperative, an agricultural group that meets frequently to discuss common problems and find solutions.

The group received organizational and technical training from the MCC-funded project to launch the cooperative in 2010. The cooperative strives to improve farm management to maximize income. To achieve

this, organizational management, improved farm practices and member participation are required—so it is fitting they named their cooperative “mougnal,” the Fulani word for patience.

The members are excited about the chance to maximize their profits while helping the village’s development. The project dramatically changed members’ livelihoods and economic potential because they became owners of irrigated agricultural land and adopted the skills to work collectively to achieve economies of scale in the purchase of farm inputs and the harvesting, storage and marketing of their crops.



Mougnal Cooperative members (from left) Beidari Kontou, Boucary Diallo, Issa Kontou, and Bouraima Traoré meet to discuss common problems.

Toule A is one of 33 villages participating in project’s Resettlement Action Plan, which provided new homes, schools, water pumps, and health clinics for those resettled by the project.

Cooperative members received training on improved production techniques, pest management, entrepreneurial endeavors for post-harvest activities such as threshing, and approaches to incentivize youth to engage in farming.

The training helped the cooperative earn an additional \$1,600 in 2010, a significant increase in income compared to their previous work as laborers and herders.

In preparation for the 2011-12 agricultural season, the cooperative helped members purchase fertilizer and other necessary inputs. The group also coordinated payment of water and land fees for members—including some who had difficulties meeting their financial commitments.

The cooperative also strives to improve the community’s attitude toward gender inclusiveness. Women are involved in the group’s leadership; the men say the women have begun to take more initiative both publicly and in the home since the cooperative began. Its members also recognize that school enrollment, particularly girls’ enrollment, benefits the entire community and promised to let their girls attend school as long as possible.

Members say the cooperative has helped improve the community’s cohesiveness and fostered a strong team spirit. They are encouraged by the initial success of their cooperative activities and are actively recruiting additional members. By taking small steps together, they believe, everyone can benefit.

Djoulde Coulibaly: A Mother's Hope for Her Family

Djoulde Coulibaly is from Toule A. She explains how the project impacted her life:

I am a mother of seven children: four girls and three boys. With the exception of my youngest daughter, who is in school, all my children help me in the field. Before receiving help from the Alatona Irrigation Project, I grew beans, millet and groundnuts on my farm. The little I earned barely allowed me to meet my family's basic needs.

Thanks to the project, I now have access to five hectares of irrigated land, one hectare of which is also irrigated during the dry season. I attended agricultural training through the project, and I applied the knowledge and skills I received on my farm. Last year was our first year of production, and we were able to harvest 214 bags of rice.

The project has also helped the women in my village become better organized. I am a member of a women's cooperative that organizes members to work together to purchase seeds and other inputs, provide weeding services and sell our products.

Because of the project, I earned enough money to pay water and land fees. I purchased two oxen to plow alongside the two oxen the project gave me. My cooperative will provide next season's rice seeds and fertilizer.

The opening of the new school is good too. Before the project began, there were no schools in the area. I have a daughter in school and will do everything I can to ensure she is able to continue her studies and become somebody important.

My family was resettled into a new village. The houses the project built are solid. We have enough drinking water in the village thanks to the new water pumps. We also have better sanitation.

I thank those responsible for the Alatona Irrigation Project for this wonderful initiative.



Djoulde Coulibaly and her three children have benefitted from MCC's investments in their region's agricultural sector.