

USAID/Mali Supports Development of Local-Level Food Security Plans



Through PROMISAM, residents of rural areas in the Gao and Sikasso area have developed their own local food security plans. As a result, the children of these regions now face a brighter future.

The commune (township) of Talataye in Mali's Gao region is typical of many locales in the arid north of the country. The population, about 18,000, is ethnically mixed, made up mainly of Touaregs and Arabs (traditionally semi-nomadic herders and traders) and Sonrai (traditionally crop farmers). Herding has been backbone of the local economy, with goats and sheep outnumbering people nearly 5 to 1. Recurrent droughts, however, have led many to lose their animals. Poverty is widespread, and those who have lost their livestock are shifting to small-scale agriculture and petty trade. Social infrastructure is feeble (only 3 primary schools and two poorly equipped health centers serve the commune), veterinary services are weak, and child malnutrition is widespread.

In the past, when crops failed or pastures dried up, the people of Talataye had to rely on emergency food aid. Yet in 2005, thanks to the USAID/Mali-supported PROMISAM project (*Projet de Mobilisation des Initiatives en Matière de Sécurité Alimentaire*, or Project to Mobilize Food Security Initiatives in Mali), the people of Talataye and of all the other communes of the Gao region, are designing their own plans to avoid these crises before they happen. In the process, they are also laying the groundwork for long-term, sustainable growth in the commune. Rather than focus just on emergency relief, Mali is implementing a new National Food Security Strategy that helps local communities develop strategies for long-term, *structural*, food security. PROMISAM is working closely with Mali's Food Security Commission (CSA), housed in the

Office of the President, to help local communities develop the skills they need to build these sustainable food security plans. PROMISAM is also involved in similar efforts in the much more heavily populated Sikasso region of southeastern Mali.

Working with local officials and civil-society leaders, PROMISAM and the CSA have organized a series of 3-day workshops in local areas, which brings together mayors of all the communes, members of the Communal Councils, and representatives of women's groups and farmer associations. The participants learn how to use concepts of food security to develop local food security plans that strengthen local communities' food availability, access, and utilization. The workshop participants then return to their home communes to set up local-level food security committees that develop the commune-level plans. The participants at the commune level identify their communities' most important food security priorities, inventory locally available resources and projects that can help them meet these priorities, and identify resource and knowledge gaps that need to be filled to meet those priorities.

Once all the commune-level plans within a "*cercle*" (county) are developed, they are discussed at the *cercle* level, and common elements in the commune plans become key elements of the *cercle* plan. A similar procedure of synthesizing and reconciling the *cercle* plans will take place at the regional (state) level. At the regional meetings, representatives of national programs, national NGOs, and the technical ministries attend, and the ensuing exchange of information helps link the locally identified needs with resources available through national programs. The local plans also serve as a general framework for all actors who want to help in a given commune. The plans thus put local people in the driver's seat in terms of identifying priorities and help avoid situations where NGOs and other partners at the local level implement projects that are not coordinated with each other or that do not address the top priorities of the local residents.

In 2005, 843 participants (188 women and 655 men), including all mayors in the Gao and Sikasso regions, took part the 3-day training programs. These individuals are serving as catalysts in their local communities to build a new, highly participatory approach to designing and implementing food security programs in Mali. All 24 communes and 4 *cercles* in the Gao region completed draft 5-year local food security action plans by September, 2005; and 152 communes and 24 *cercles* in the Sikasso region are currently completing their local plans.

Local participants in both the Gao and Sikasso regions have enthusiastically embraced this approach. One participant in the Gao meetings remarked that "This is the first group to come here to talk about food security that didn't come with a solution, but rather asked our opinions. We really appreciate that." This participatory approach, which is being extended to other regions of the country in 2005/06, is empowering Malians across the country to build their own, more food-secure future.