

Rural Women's Associations and Sustainable Agriculture in Casamance, Senegal



March 2010

LOCATION: Casamance, Senegal

An innovative community grantmaking program for rural women and their organizations in Casamance, Senegal, is creating significant change in women's status and resources that are leading to greater stability and well-being for families and communities.

CHALLENGE

Known for its rich natural resources and the fertility of its land, the Casamance region of southern Senegal has supplied the rest of Senegal with an abundance of food for centuries. However, during colonial rule and into the years following independence in 1960, Casamance resources were used to benefit those in power, while the local population was overlooked and experienced economic disadvantage, relative to the rest of the nation. This sense of marginalization was felt particularly by Casamance's Diola majority, who differ from the rest of the country in their cultural and religious practices, with a highly decentralized and egalitarian social system that gives women a central position and a respected role in rice production.

A growing movement for independence in Casamance, was forcefully subdued by the Senegalese government and in 1982, the emergence of an armed rebel movement resulted in twenty years of bitter conflict and brutal acts of violence on both sides. This led to the destruction of many villages, the displacement of tens of thousands of people, and the stagnation of a once-vibrant local economy. With the arrival of a new president in 2000 and an exhausted civil society, calls for peace grew, with rural women playing an active role. Negotiations with rebel leaders led to the signing of a peace agreement in 2004.

As peace becomes more established, Casamance women and their families are returning to their villages to revive their



communities, recommence agricultural production, heal the wounds of violence, and build links with connecting communities in the Gambia and Guinea Bissau. Rural women in Casamance are developing their own peasant farmer organizations and networks to take advantage of new opportunities, such as the right to own land and a decentralization process that gives more decision-making and resources to rural communities for their own development. Senegal was chosen to sign a Millennium Challenge Account compact with the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), and this is expected to result in improved road infrastructure in Casamance and increased opportunities for farmers to connect with markets.

However, Casamance women farmers are constrained by a variety of factors that include the physical danger of mines that have not yet been cleared from their rice fields; increased salination of soil due to rising levels of sea water; heavy domestic workload and illiteracy due to their status as women; lack of access to capital; lack of inclusion in national negotiations that determine the scope and terms of agricultural policies and priorities; and increasing pressure from government and the private sector to adopt commercial farming methods that create dependence on the purchase of high yield seeds and accompanying inputs.

The current situation of rural women in the Kolda region of Casamance is particularly difficult. Today, 94% of women are excised, 72% are illiterate and only 5.2% have access to family planning. The area has the highest maternal mortality rate in Senegal with 1,200 deaths per 100,000 births, a prevalence of early marriages and pregnancies and the highest HIV rate in the country (2.9% as against 0.7% countrywide).¹

RESPONSE

In the Casamance, as in many parts of West Africa, rural women have a long-established tradition of farming together as women to grow food to feed their families. Along with youth and self-help groups, women's groups contributed to a growing peasant movement in the 1960s after Senegal achieved independence from France. The movement gathered momentum in the 1970s as funding flowed into the country in response to severe drought in the Sahel,² only to be negatively impacted by World Bank and IMF structural adjustment programs in the 1980s.³ In the Casamance, during more than twenty years of conflict,



women farmers continued to work together in groups, often forming unusual alliances of age and ethnicity in urban areas where they were trying to survive, but were severely constrained by lack of resources and access to land. Peace and collaboration are essential pre-requisites for women farmers. In 1999, women's organizations working for peace in conflict-torn Casamance came together in a forum that led to the birth of the Comité Régional de Solidarité des Femmes pour la Paix en Casamance, known as USOFORAL, meaning "Let's join hands" in the Diola language. USOFORAL's mission is to support the leadership of women and women's organizations in the realization of lasting peace in the Casamance region. USOFORAL has a membership base of rural women and actively puts its members in contact with financial and technical partners to bring additional resources to support their objectives. It has supported the emergence of a strong rural women's network, REFECCE, that now has more than 1000 women members in 24 rural groups across 14 villages, its own meeting center, ownership of land, three members elected onto the local district council, an annual action plan, good financial tracking systems, revenues from agricultural activities, a savings and education program, and strong interest from other women's networks that want to learn about its methods of organizing. USOFORAL has also set up a factory producing vinegar made from surplus local mangoes. The factory has the capacity to



produce 30,000 litres a year of 'La Delice', as the product is known, to be marketed in Senegal and neighboring countries. The profits from sales support the operating costs of USOFORAL and its members groups. ⁴

Since the arrival of peace in 2004, rural women have been organizing themselves with renewed energy and effort to increase their food production and income, advocate for rights and resources, exchange knowledge, build their leadership, and ensure representation on decision-making bodies. While they continue to work in groups at village level in order to increase agricultural production, they are also now joining forces at district and national level for networking and advocacy. Today, in 2010, rural women's organizations and networks take a variety of shapes and forms, but all are based on an active and vibrant membership of women farmers who join together in their effort to produce healthy food for their families and communities in ways that are culturally, ecologically and

financially sustainable. They seek to maintain and improve their long-established farming practices that have ensured food security for their families and communities over centuries, through improved ecological practices such as diversification of crops, seed saving and seed exchange, composting, and soil improvement.

Technical Services

For many years, rural women's organizations and networks in Casamance have had limited access to funding, knowledge, communication and technologies, but as peace is established, new opportunities are opening up that offer rural women the possibility of improving their status, resources, and productivity.

A number of women's farming groups in parts of Casamance are receiving training in agro-ecological practices from the Association Sénégalaise de Producteurs de Semences Paysannes (ASPSP) which links 15 regional farmer organizations that in turn have some 63,000 members, the majority of whom are women. ASPSP's main activities are to collect and track local seed varieties, create seed production gardens, train women in the creation of traditional grain banks and most importantly, to hold an annual Senegalese seed fair at which farmers exchange and borrow seeds. It holds a regional farm seed fair every two years, which is attended by farmers from Senegal, Mali, Benin, Togo, Niger, the Gambia, Guinea Bissau, and France. The knowledge and connections that ASPSP brings to women's groups in Casamance enables them to enhance their empirical agricultural knowledge, improve their autonomy over food production, and share techniques with other groups that enhance their yields.

Along with an increase in agro-ecological knowledge, rural women are gaining knowledge about their rights, so that they have the means to change their status and circumstances. The Réseau Africain Pour le Développement Intégré (RADI) (<http://www.radi-afrique.net>) was created in Senegal in 1985 to fight poverty, injustice and ignorance. Its approach is participatory: it supports and accompanies communities that face these challenges to develop and manage their own initiatives, and provides technical support and training in ways that build long-term independence. In the last two years, RADI has trained 36 rural women as paralegals in the districts of Oussouye, Enampor, and Niaguis in Casamance, with a focus on their rights and possible actions as citizens, specifically participation in local governance, familiarity with the process of decentralization, access to national land, and conflict management. The paralegals in turn organized 218 gatherings, reaching a total of 5,006 participants in rural communities (of which 4,358 were women and 648 men), to share knowledge and information in the areas of decentralization, local governance, national land management, conflict management, gender and citizenship, human rights, and the rights of women and children. The paralegals also recorded a series of radio broadcasts in local languages on these topics that were broadcast over two days to audiences across the entire western region of Casamance.

Community radio has also become an important medium for rural women's associations in Casamance to share



knowledge and learn from each other on issues affecting them as women, including sustainable agriculture. World Education has established a network of local radios for peace and development that are owned and run by local community organizations. Enshrined in the by-laws and policies of the radio stations are specific requirements in relation to gender, ethnicity, and youth. Consequently, rural women play an active role on the governing bodies, in management, as technicians, program producers and presenters. Many have become local celebrities because of their outspoken commentary on complex issues, power sharing, and access to resources. Community radio in Casamance gives voice to farmers, both female and male, with extensive sharing of local farming practices and debates on new technologies.⁵

Community grantmaking

One of the greatest challenges for women farmers in sub-Saharan Africa is the unwillingness of funding institutions, development agencies and non-governmental organizations to put money directly into the hands of rural women's groups to manage and spend according to their own collective priorities. Since 2005, New Field Foundation (www.newfieldfound.org), in collaboration with local partners, has created and supported an innovative program to award community grants to rural women's groups in the range of \$1,000 to \$5,000 for farming activities, sustainable technologies, and knowledge sharing. The community grantmaking program is being implemented by ten West African organizations (see Collaborating Partners, below) with the commitment and capacity to provide community grants, technical services and ongoing monitoring to support rural women's groups in the successful implementation of their grant activities. Between 2005 and 2009, grants totaling \$1.3 million have been awarded to 118 rural women's groups.

The community grantmaking program has four distinct elements:

- **Community grants** – Grants of \$1,000 - \$5,000 are awarded to rural women's groups, or *community grantees*, depending on the membership and income size of the group and proposed activities. Grant activities are determined by the rural women's groups themselves.
- **Technical services** – Trainings, workshops, and regular visits are provided to community grantees to enhance project management, bookkeeping, agro-ecology methods, resource mobilization, and advocacy, as needed.
- **Program operations** – This typically requires the development of a grants administration system, recruitment of personnel dedicated to the program and the strengthening of existing financial and management systems. It also includes the introduction of ongoing monitoring by the organization and the community grantees to ensure that the community grants and technical services are on course and relevant.
- **Institutional support** – This can contribute to the organization's financial oversight, governance requirements, strategic planning, staff skills development and the enhancement or expansion of communication, financial or office systems.

Typically, 65–70% is allocated to community grants, 20–25% to technical services and program operations, and 5–10% to institutional support. The community grantmaking program also supports exchange visits among rural women and convenings/presentations at national and regional fora.

Profiles of Community Grantmaking Organizations in Casamance⁶

○ *Association des Jeunes Agriculteurs et Eleveurs du Département d'Oussouye (AJAEDO)*

Established in 1983, AJAEDO is an association of young farmers and animal breeders in the Oussouye Division of Casamance, 75% of whose members are women. AJAEDO awards community grants in the range of \$1,000 to \$5,000 to its member groups, based on greatest need, least resources, and ability to realize the proposed plans. Grants are given for agricultural production, market gardening, establishment of community shops, and other activities that will enable rural women to increase their food resources and income. As Casamance returns to peace after long years of conflict, the improvement of village economies is crucial to the maintenance of peace, and to the political and economic stability of Casamance. AJAEDO participates in national and regional networks to promote collaboration between organizations working on similar issues, and brings together rural women from other parts of Casamance to share their experience in peace-building, income-generation, and resource mobilization. In the last two years, during 2008 and 2009, it carried out a pilot project with five women's groups in the use of solar pumps and drip irrigation for the production of organic vegetables.



○ *Association des Jeunesses Agricoles de Casamance (AJAC-Lukaal)*

Founded in 1984, AJAC-Lukaal has been led by and served peasant communities for over twenty years. Its main purpose is to provide agricultural and technical services to rural groups and help channel funding from international donors to rural communities. It has a rapidly growing membership of some 35 village groups, with several thousand peasant farmers, 70% of whom are women. AJAC-Lukaal's community grantmaking program started

in 2006, to enable member groups to participate in local sustainable farming activities, small businesses, and other activities that improve their living conditions and finances. In four years, it has awarded 36 grants of \$5000 to 16 rural women's groups. The groups have used these grants for initiatives that include the installation of solar pumps for drip irrigation; production of organic fertilizer; seed conservation; the construction of new wells; the creation of irrigation systems; and the installation of protective fencing for cultivated areas. The groups are receiving training in organic farming techniques, as well as financial and project management. As a result, more than 1000 rural women have been able to take care of their families, participate in community activities, support local peace processes, and advance women's rights. In particular, by engaging with their local rural council, six women's groups gained title to the land they were farming, which in turn inspired women in neighboring villages to ask

their leaders to grant them ownership of the lands they farmed. Through the meetings and exchanges that are part of the community grantmaking process, rural women from various villages – even ones that were in conflict with each other – have increased their solidarity, their knowledge and their status. This increase in local resources has led to a visible impact on local communities and is encouraging more displaced families to return to their communities.

- *Comité d'Appui et de Soutien au Développement Economique et Social des régions de Ziguinchor et de Kolda (CASADES)*

Casades was founded in 1997 by a group of male and female students who wanted to help find solutions to the conflict in Casamance. Its mission is to contribute to the emergence of sustainable development based on the promotion of peace, the strengthening of citizenship, consideration of the needs of women and children and their involvement in decision making from the local to sub-regional levels. Casades currently works with 62 rural women's groups to support their rice-farming for home consumption and commercial sale. Casades has also supported women's groups to organize themselves into two networks to better represent their interests at community and district level, and to promote peace and women's leadership.

- *DIRFEL-Kolda*

DIRFEL-Kolda is the Casamance branch of the national women's organization, DINFEL, and was created in 1998 to help women who have small livestock-breeding operations to make their voices heard and increase their profitability. Dirfel-Kolda has approximately 1,200 female members, the vast majority of whom are primary breadwinners for their households and who earn most of their income from breeding livestock. Ninety-five percent are village women living in 13 rural districts, and 5% live on the outskirts of Kolda, one of the poorest towns in Senegal. These members are organized into 14 groups, and are collectively responsible for some 7,000 people in their households. DIRFEL-Kolda's activities revolve around training women in traditional livestock breeding, developing their business skills, increasing their civic participation, and supporting family health and food security through the production of organic fruit and vegetables for home consumption and sale in the community.

- *Forum pour un Développement Durable et Endogène (FODDE)*

FODDE was created in 1997 to provide food security for poor households, equal access to basic social services for women and capacity-building for grassroots community organizations in Kolda, Casamance. FODDE prioritizes gender equity and institutional capacity-building in its work with local organizations, and provides technical services for agricultural production, community health programs, and income generation. It is active in 70 villages in the Kolda region and has a direct impact on about 26,000 people. FODDE awards community grants with an average of \$5,000 that enable rural women's groups to grow vegetables, produce rice and palm oil, and engage in other activities that improve their living conditions and finances. Kolda is largely an immigration zone whose food supply is dwindling because of deforestation and poor land use. Providing grants enables FODDE to improve the capacity and efficiency of women's groups, increase families' financial resources, and improve food security. Increased capacity and coordination of local women's groups is increasing local activism, leading to equitable access to social services, local resources (land, water) and local political processes.

This is very relevant because significant disparities exist in land ownership, political processes, and social services in Kolda.

RESULTS

Identifying and monitoring change among rural women's groups in Casamance over a four year period has been both rewarding and difficult. Cumulative change happens slowly in a society where tradition and culture are strong, where literacy among women is extremely low, where local organizations lack capacity and infrastructure due to long years of conflict, and where what seems extraordinary and significant to an outsider is often commonplace and unremarkable to those who live the experience daily. At the same time, significant change can happen suddenly and rapidly, for example when rural women get together, identify problems, come up with solutions, and decide on multiple actions to change their circumstances, such as voting several of their representatives onto the local council to influence the rural district budget, or installing a rice huller that reduces their domestic labor from several hours a day to a few minutes. Additionally, some important changes are difficult to measure, such as the confidence to express an opinion in a meeting, or the recognition and respect that comes from bringing home more food and money.

It is challenging to monitor and learn about change in ways that are simple, low cost and useful to all those who need to know – the rural women themselves, their groups and associations, their communities, as well as the organizations that work with them and provide funding.

In developing the community grantmaking program, New Field Foundation and its partners have to date relied on a variety of methods to understand what changes are taking place, including interviews with individual rural women, group self-evaluation, organizational reporting and documentation, formal monitoring by field officers and specialist consultants, and regular visits. This process of observation, reporting and review produces a cumulative sense of what is happening, what changes are taking place, and where challenges and problems lie. Through discussion and dialogue, critical issues emerge that demand response and action.

Through an organic monitoring process with multiple perspectives, an understanding emerges of what changes are taking place. While this does not have the precision of scientific data and analysis, it does provide useful insight to inform future decisions. Given the circumstances and constraints of rural women living in post-conflict environments, this is an achievement in its own right.

In the four West African countries where the community grantmaking program is being implemented, there is a consistency of results that indicates common factors in the lives of rural women, the constraints they face, and the changes they make when given the opportunity of resources. Growing more food, reducing manual labor, acquiring land, and being given more respect in the community are all critical steps in the process of change and securing greater stability in their families and communities.

Rural women's groups in the community grantmaking program have achieved many positive changes. In Casamance, they have:

- purchased seeds, livestock, and basic farming equipment for their members in post-conflict situations that significantly increase food production, community nutrition and income;
- increased the area of land that is farmed by the group collectively, from a few hectares to several hundred hectares;
- secured official title to land to ensure registered ownership by the group for their collective farming activities;
- purchased, installed and maintained sustainable agricultural technologies so as to increase group income and reduce women's work, including solar pumps, multi-functional platforms, and rice hullers;
- planted and harvested a greater diversity of crops for local consumption, such as cabbage, carrots, okra, sorrel, grapefruit, mangoes and oranges. This greater diversity has been achieved through increased use of traditional Casamance seeds as well as the introduction of improved seed varieties from peasant communities in other parts of Senegal;
- shared knowledge to increase agricultural production in ways that are culturally, ecologically and financially sustainable. Due to the displacement that occurred with the conflict, women farmers from the Casamance have new networks with women farmers in Guinea Bissau and Gambia, with whom to exchange ideas and information. These exchanges are prompting new approaches to problem-solving, along with a willingness to experiment with farming methods that address issues of climate change, soil fertility, seed saving and nutrition on a sustainable basis;
- provided training and support to 500 women to establish a micro-finance savings program combined with health information;
- ensured that three rural women are elected onto district councils and other local institutions, to be part of the decision-making process for the allocation of agricultural resources and formulation of agricultural policies at local level;
- maintained contact with members of the district councils to keep them informed of issues relevant to rural women;
- produced plans, budgets, and accounting systems as well as operating bank accounts with transparency and integrity;
- built rural women's leadership and networks; and
- attracted additional funding for their groups.

COLLABORATING PARTNERS

Action on Disability and Development Francophone West Africa (ADD-FWAP), Burkina Faso

Association Guinéenne pour l'Allègement des Charges Féminines (AGACFEM), Guinea

Association d'Appui à la Promotion du Développement Durable des Communautés (APDC),
Burkina Faso

Association des Jeunes Agriculteurs et Eleveurs du Département d'Oussouye (AJAEDO), Senegal

Association des Jeunesses Agricoles de Casamance (AJAC-Lukaal), Senegal

Comité d'Appui et de Soutien au Développement Economique et Social des régions de Ziguinchor et de Kolda (CASADES), Senegal

Comité Régional de Solidarité des Femmes pour la Paix en Casamance (USOFORAL), Senegal

Directoire Régional des Femmes en Elevage de Kolda (DIRFEL-Kolda), Senegal

Forum Pour un Développement Durable et Endogène (FODDE), Senegal

National Accountability Group, Sierra Leone

REFERENCES

¹ Information provided by the Kolda non-governmental organization Comité d'Appui et de Soutien au Développement Economique et Social des régions de Ziguinchor et de Kolda (CASADES) in its 2010 grant application to New Field Foundation.

² Isa Baud and Ines Smyth (editors), *Searching for Security: Women's Responses to Economic Transformations*, Routledge Studies in Development and Society, Routledge 1997, p.56

³ Emil Maria Claassen, Pascal Salin, *The Impact of stabilization and structural adjustment policies on the rural sector: Case-studies of Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Liberia, Zambia and Morocco*, Report of the Joint ECA/FAO Agriculture Division, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 1991

⁴ The story of USOFORAL's work and development has been shared with New Field Foundations in reports, meetings, conversations and field visits since 2006.

⁵ Abdou Sarr, *Les Radios Communautaires: Outils de promotion pour la paix, la culture, la démocratie et le développement en Afrique*, (draft manuscript), World Education, 2010

⁶ Information about community grantmaking partners is drawn from proposals, reports and monitoring documents presented to New Field Foundation between 2006-2010.
