

From emergency to development

Reducing vulnerability to food insecurity: The experience of the Mali Red Cross

Mali is one of the world's poorest countries. In UNDP's Human Development Index 2006, it was ranked 174th out of 177 countries. Situated between the vast expanses of the Sahara and the Sahelian plains to the south, Mali covers an area of 1,240,000 km² and has common borders with Niger, Mauritania and Burkina Faso. Only half of the population has access to drinking water. Infant and maternal mortality rates are 120 per 1,000 and 580 per 100,000 live births, respectively.

Goundam Circle, which is located in the region of Timbuktu in northern Mali, has a population of some 155,000 inhabitants spread out over 92,000 km², which gives a population density of 1.6 inhabitants per km². It has 16 communes, which are composed of 130 villages and 85 fractions (nomad villages). Situated in the Sahelo-Saharan zone, it features a hot, dry tropical climate. It is one of the poorest regions in Mali, and its main economic activities are farming, animal husbandry,

picking, crafts and trade. This area used to be the granary of Mali owing to the presence of many lakes fed by the floodwaters of the Niger River. Over the past thirty years, however, with the severe droughts in 1973, 1982, 1994 and 2004 and scant rainfall, farming and animal husbandry have been hard hit by water shortages and desertification, not to mention the consequences of the conflict which lasted until 1995 and which destroyed villages and farms. Every year, during the lean period (May-September), cereals stocks dwindle and households must cope with many difficulties that make their lives precarious.

Access to water and health care jeopardized by a lack of watering points, a shortage of health infrastructures (which are limited to the community health centres) and unaffordable health care all add to everyday problems. Without outside help, these households will remain below the poverty threshold.



Market-gardening woman watering her onion patch in Tinassani, M'Bouna commune.

¹ http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/mali_statistics.html

In 2005, a combination of seasonal and structural factors, aggravated by a locust invasion and a pronounced lack of rainfall, triggered an unprecedented crisis throughout the country, further weakening its already sorely tested inhabitants.

Intervention

As part of efforts to combat food insecurity, four communes in Goundam Circle (M'Bouna, Bintagoungou, Tin-Aïcha and Essakane) were assigned to the Mali Red Cross by the Secretariat for Food Security of the Malian Government. These communes are especially vulnerable because they are situated on the shores of Lake Faguibine, which has almost completely dried up.

From September to December 2005, the Mali Red Cross, with technical backing from the Swiss Red Cross, provided nutritional and food assistance to children between the age of 6 months and 5 years and to their parents in the four communes hit by the food crisis. The estimated 43,000 inhabitants of these four communes, of whom over 52 per cent are women, greatly appreciated this support.

With a view to combining emergency and development, as advised by the Algiers Plan of Action, and sustainably reducing the vulnerability of Goundam's inhabitants to food insecurity, a strategic planning workshop was organized together with the representatives of the inhabitants and technical services in Goundam and

Timbuktu (such as health, farming, animal husbandry, hydraulic energy and administration). The aim was to implement a development project that could bring about a lasting improvement in the living conditions of the inhabitants of these four communes.

This participative approach based on a vulnerability and capacity analysis has made it possible to classify inhabitants' needs by descending order of priority:

- Improving community health by running awareness-building sessions on good health and food practices.
- Improving access to water, a crucial problem for desert dwellers (rehabilitation of inoperative watering points and installation of new ones).
- Replenishing food stocks and making them more accessible through market gardening and the establishment of cereal banks (village cooperatives that buy, store and sell basic food grains).

These three priorities have been turned into specific targets, which have taken the form of various project activities. A fourth specific target has been added, which is viewed as grouping together the first three targets and incorporating project management as well as the establishment and strengthening of the volunteer network.

To ensure a substantial impact, the project has targeted the 40 most vulnerable villages. It focuses on the following criteria: pregnant women, children between 6 months and 5 years of age, women heads of households,

Market-gardening well at Alphahou Abarbouch, Bintagoungou commune, rehabilitated by the Mali Red Cross in Goundam 1.





Malaria awareness-building session run by Red Cross volunteers in Essakane.

persons affected by HIV/AIDS and the aged. Village volunteers designated by the communities themselves have been recruited to run awareness-building sessions dealing with health, HIV/AIDS, hygiene and sanitation, with the help of picture boxes and educational textbooks. The efforts of these village volunteers are coordinated by community organizers who have also been designated and recruited by the communes. The village volunteers have followed various training courses, primarily run by the Mali Red Cross and the State's technical services. In particular, they have learned to prevent common illnesses in their environment, in order to boost community awareness of issues concerning health, water and sanitation, and food security.

To replenish food supplies, the Mali Red Cross is focusing on women's market gardening groups. Volunteers, community organizers and technical advisers for health and food security give them advice and training (on composting, protecting crops against ravagers, harvest conservation methods, etc.).

Each women's market gardening group (selected for its vulnerability) has a committee that manages not only market gardens but also existing watering points in the village. The Red Cross supplies the working tools (short-handled hoes, mattocks, watering cans, wheelbarrows, hoes, etc.) and seeds (lettuce, beets, cabbage, carrots,

onions, potatoes, etc.), once each group has fenced in its plot. Periodic exchanges take place with other actors working in this field (such as the NGOs Africare and Veterinarians without Borders) with a view to achieving synergies.

Another means of replenishing food stocks is to set up cereal banks, which the recipients have done in a coordinated, participative fashion. The beneficiary community provides the building to house the cereal bank, following which the project managers make the building secure (by installing metal doors) and provide the initial stocks. The next step is to set up a committee to run the cereal bank. Working together with the project team, this committee decides when to open the stores to sell cereals and what the selling price will be. A woman handles the accounts of each committee. Through regular training courses dispensed by the Mali Red Cross, the project strengthens committee members' capacities, helping them do a better job of running the cereal bank.

As water is one of the key problems in this zone, the project team, together with the communities, has rehabilitated inoperative watering points and installed new ones to meet three types of needs: human consumption, animal consumption and market gardening. The community participate financial or materially in all these efforts.

Four Red Cross communal committees and one local committee have been set up to guide and facilitate project activities. These five committees in Goundam Circle benefit from the support and advice of the regional committee based in Timbuktu. The project has taught the members of these Red Cross committees the rudiments of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, international humanitarian law and governance in order to strengthen their capacities, thereby guaranteeing the sustainability of the action undertaken.

Difficulties

Various problems arose during the implementation stage:

- The community volunteers appointed by their communities are genuinely available and motivated. However, most of the volunteers (over 80 per cent)

are illiterate and have difficulty providing project leaders with feedback on their awareness-building activities. Because they do not know how to write, important information is lost (number of persons advised, topics covered, etc.), along with the data needed to write up a report. Consequently, simple reporting systems (the designation of a coordinator from among the community itself) have been introduced for the benefit of these volunteers, in order to derive maximum benefit from their work.

- Most of the existing watering points that have been rehabilitated as part of the project are big-bore wells. After a few months, these wells no longer produce enough water to meet market gardening and consumption needs. In the project zones, the groundwater table keeps dropping year after year. Wells must constantly be redug, deeper than before,

Drinking-water problem in Alphahou Ababouch, Bintagougou commune.



making it increasingly difficult for women to haul water up. Consequently, when it installed new watering points, the Red Cross opted to sink well holes and equip wells with solar pumps and miniature water tanks, while stressing the need to encourage a feeling of “ownership” in the beneficiary communities.

- Cereal banks have been set up to meet two conditions of food security: availability, and physical and financial accessibility. Notwithstanding, the project teams has noted that certain segments of the target populations could not afford the cereals.

In addition, the project has revealed cases of malnutrition in children, even though their village still has a large stock of cereals in the store. The conclusion was that these problems were related to consumption (care for children) rather than availability and accessibility).

As a result, the project team has put its efforts to set up new cereal banks on hold and is conducting in-depth talks with the community inhabitants to find ways to make cereals more affordable and increase their consumption.

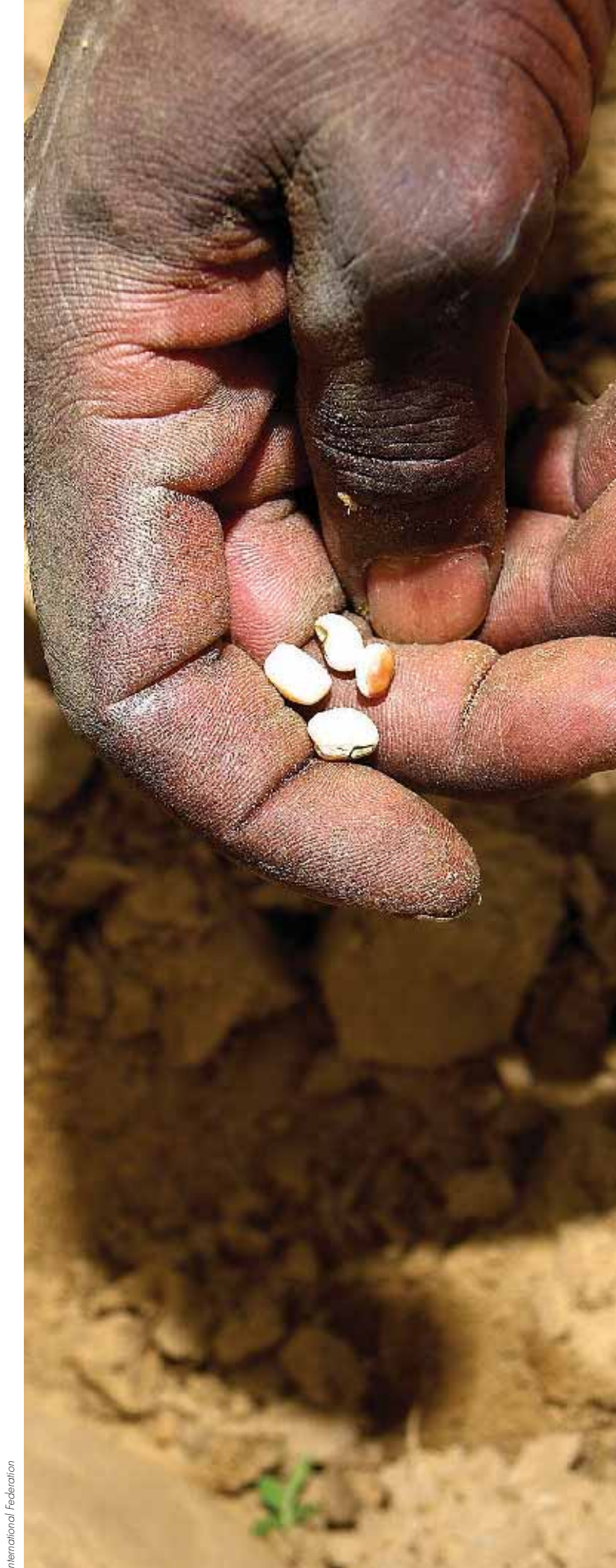
- It has been difficult for the project team to establish a link between emergency and development. The inhabitants fail to understand why the Red Cross is now expecting them to contribute financially, whereas previously (during the emergency phase) everything was free. As a result, the project leaders have stepped up awareness-building activities aimed at inhabitants and have demonstrated the usefulness of preventing rather than curing, with the support of other development partners who already operate in the area.

Impact

Implementing such a project has enabled these communities, which tend to be overlooked during interventions, to improve their health skills thanks to the establishment of a network of 199 volunteers picked by the communities themselves. The mission of the volunteers chosen in the community primarily consists of:

- Informing, educating and communicating in order to bring about changes in behaviour.
- Making people aware of the best practices in use in communities.

The health promotion activities that volunteers carry out in their community have an impact on health insofar as they lead to behaviour change.



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Farmer sowing beans in Tinaffaradji, Essakane commune.

Volunteers are recruited from among the community, which they are expected to know and understand. If they want to induce behaviour change in their community, they must be able to adapt health messages to make them understandable. This is the added value on which the Red Cross can rely, when it gets its network of volunteers involved in this programme.

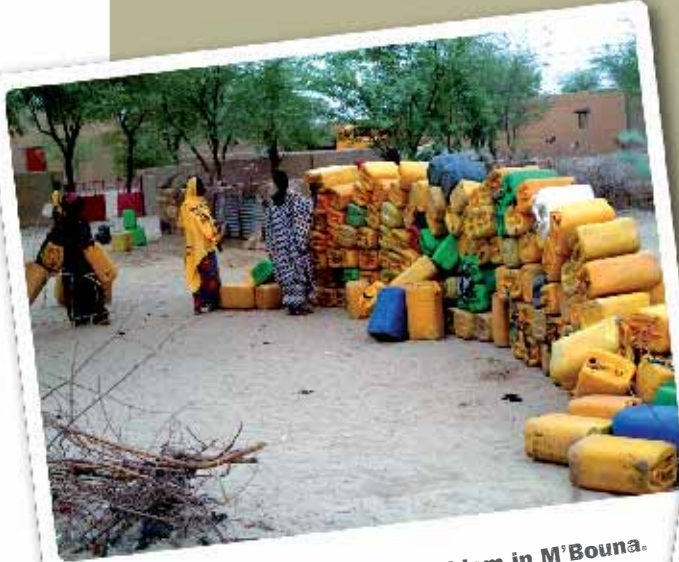
- Awareness-building tools exclusively designed for these communities are available and are used to reach the target population;
- Training in composting techniques and the use of organic means of combating crop ravagers helps strengthen community capacity.
- Market gardening production, the availability of cereals and access to drinking water all reduce the communities' risk of food and nutritional insecurity.
- Income generated by market gardening helps empower women.

Lessons learned

- To ensure that the project is sustainable and that communities feel a sense of “ownership”, they must be involved from the start.
- As wells have dried up, women have been forced to stop market gardening. Accordingly, plans call for developing market gardening around wells.
- Even though volunteers were trained before the project was implemented, there is a need to build their capacities, in particular to help them run the cereal banks.
- There is a need for a much more integrated view of activities in order to maximize project benefits.
- To guarantee sustainability, care should be taken to ensure that the State's technical services are involved in the monitoring and technical supervision of activities.



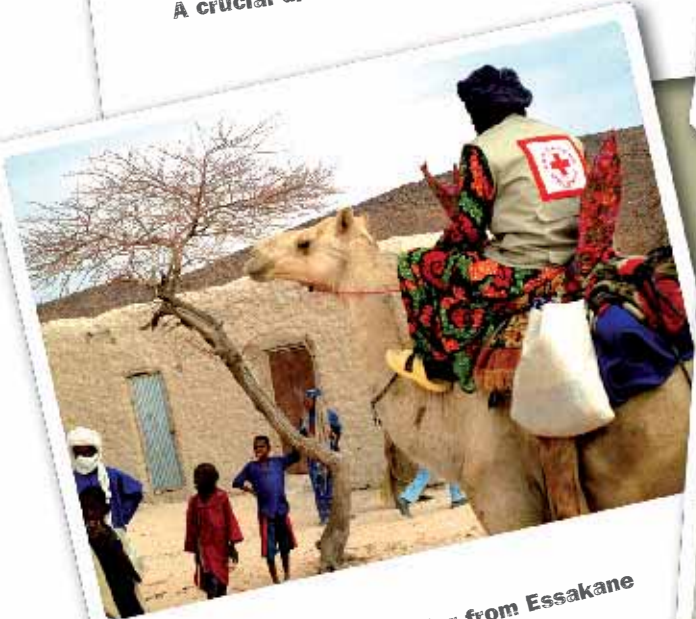
Tinassani market garden, M'Bouna commune, after the harvest.



A crucial drinking-water problem in M'Bouna.



Awareness-building session in Cheriffene, Tin-Aïcha commune.



Community facilitator from Essakane visiting the village of Boucor.



Use of insecticide-treated mosquito nets by the inhabitants of Elekass, Essakane commune.



Mint patch protected from crop ravagers in Tinassani, M'Bouna commune.



Women's daily work in Tin-Aïcha, which has an impact on deforestation.



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Aubergine stems protected from the scorching sun in the garden in Tinassani, M'Bouna commune.

Conclusion

By implementing this project, the Mali Red Cross, together with the Swiss Red Cross, has helped reduce the risk of food insecurity for the inhabitants of Goundam Circle.

Despite the lack of evaluation, it is clear that this project has already had a positive impact on households' food security in Goundam by improving the availability, accessibility and consumption of their own produce.

This type of project, linking the emergency phase to development, can serve as an example both for the Mali Red Cross and for National Societies in other countries which are frequently affected by food insecurity.

For the project to work, various community problems had to be solved using an integrated approach. Combining different activities, such as community

health, food security and water/sanitation, has given these communities a certain degree of socio-economic stability.

With this integrated approach, which combines produce from market gardening, cereal stocks and access to drinking water, communities are less vulnerable to food and nutritional insecurity. In addition, income generated by market gardening has boosted households' means of support.

Replenishing food stocks, providing drinking water and ensuring health care, taken individually, do not necessarily improve the lot of communities. However, a well-coordinated approach designed to find global solutions to problems remains a real plus. Accordingly, efforts should be made to duplicate such projects elsewhere.

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