



Oxfam America in West Africa

Across the vast Sahel and down through the lush rainforests of Ghana, there is a growing sense of possibility. Recent changes have created space for greater civil participation, and the people of West Africa are stepping forward to seize this opportunity and create change.

West Africa has made enormous strides toward democracy in recent years. Amid enduring poverty, vibrant networks of farmers, young people, and human rights activists—men and women alike—have emerged, uniting and mobilizing to confront injustice. With funding, training, and advocacy support from Oxfam, these energetic groups are seeking to improve their lives, to participate in decisions that affect them, to speak out, and to break away from the fate of poverty.

Specifically, Oxfam America is supporting people in Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Ghana, and Gambia to:

- Save money to ensure greater financial security;
- Develop a strong community voice (particularly in areas affected by mining); and
- Reduce vulnerability to disaster.

SAVING FOR A MORE SECURE WAY OF LIFE

For rural people in Mali and Senegal, earning an income is a precarious endeavor. A poor harvest can ruin a year's toil and wipe out the meager and precious yield a family counts on to get by. In thousands of subsistence farming communities, Oxfam is training women to save their money, invest in small enterprises, and develop the skills that will make everyday life more safe and secure.

The challenge: Consider the Malian village of N'Golofala, where fortunes change with the weather. Here, farming families rely primarily on corn for their meals as well as their income. When the harvest is bountiful, life is passable. But between harvests, money is tight. And if the rains come late—or not at all—families struggle to get by.

A solution: In 2005, Oxfam America established Saving for Change, a micro-finance program that helps rural women save for the not-so-rainy days. In this program, each woman deposits just a few cents a week into a community pot, from which they then loan each other the capital to invest in money-making ventures.

“Education is the foundation of real change. Only informed people can take meaningful action.”

Mamadou Bitèye, Oxfam America regional director, West Africa

What is Oxfam?

Oxfam America is an international relief and development organization that creates lasting solutions to poverty, hunger, and injustice. Together with individuals and local groups around the world, Oxfam saves lives, helps people overcome poverty, and fights for social justice. To join our efforts or learn more, go to www.oxfamamerica.org.

We are a member of Oxfam International—a confederation of 13 Oxfam affiliates—working in more than 120 countries with up to as 3,000 local organizations. With many of the causes of poverty global in nature, the members of Oxfam International believe that we can achieve greater impact through our collective efforts.



A victory for peace

In 2006, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) voted to outlaw trade in illegal weapons, a victory for Oxfam International and its partners in the Control Arms campaign. The new law aims to stop illegal trafficking in small arms that have contributed to violence and instability across West Africa, where more than two million people have died in conflicts in the past decade. Now, we turn to law enforcement: Oxfam continues to sponsor the ECOWAS coalition's ongoing efforts to get West African countries to ratify this potentially life-saving bill.

Djouri Konaré, a mother of six, runs one such venture, a small business making flavored rice, which she sells once a week on market day. She used to borrow her ingredients from a food dealer; at his mercy, profits were slim. Now, by participating in a savings group, Konaré has money to buy the ingredients she needs at a competitive price—and business is booming. “Some days, I can make about 10,000 CFA [about \$20],” says Konaré. After paying back her loan and interest, Konaré can clear as much as \$65 a month—nearly the average monthly income for Mali.

Increased financial security is just one of the benefits of Saving for Change. When women like Konaré become breadwinners, they gain a more powerful role in their families and societies. And being in a savings group gives women a chance to talk, learn from each other, develop a collective voice, and seek ways to improve their communities. Finally, savings group participants receive training on practical topics such as malaria prevention—information that can save lives. As of 2007, Saving for Change has nearly 50,000 participants in Mali and Senegal and continues to grow rapidly.

ESTABLISHING A COMMUNITY VOICE IN MINING ACTIVITIES

For centuries, people have descended into the ground to unearth the rich veins of gold that lace West African soil. But in the past two decades, modern technology has brought mining operations to the surface—and taken a drastic toll on farmers and their lands. Today, whole communities are losing their homes, health, and means by which to earn a living. Meanwhile, the region's governments are torn between needing to attract foreign investments and needing to protect their people. Oxfam is collaborating with communities, NGOs, governments, and the media to develop a strong collective voice in mining operations.

The challenge: In Prestea, Ghana, the operations of a foreign mining company have literally shaken people to the core. The process of blasting ore has cracked houses, allowing rain to seep through damaged roofs and walls. And the town's three freshwater springs have been contaminated by cyanide and mining waste. Nevertheless, when the mining company sought to expand its operations into new neighborhoods, the bit of cash it offered the poor people living there in exchange for their cooperation was enticing.

Sources of funding

Oxfam America raises more than 90 percent of program funds from individuals and institutions, such as foundations.

To maintain our independence, Oxfam America does not accept funds from the US government or from corporations working in industries that are the subject of our advocacy and campaign programs.

For more detailed financial information, visit our website:
English: www.oxfamamerica.org
Français: www.oxfamamerica.org/fr



A solution: With such a large, government-sanctioned project, it would be easy for people to think they have no say in the matter. But an Oxfam partner, the Wassa Association of Communities Affected by Mining (WACAM), has helped people understand otherwise. "We went house to house to explain to people about the company's plan to blast just 200 or 300 meters from their houses and schools," said Godfried Ofori, a local WACAM-trained activist. "They no longer take money from the mining company and put their children at risk." As of 2007, WACAM's efforts to inform communities, mobilize concerned citizens, and raise mining issues in the media have halted the company's Prestea operations. WACAM is now helping the people of Prestea restore their lives and livelihoods.

REDUCING VULNERABILITY TO DISASTER

The toll of poverty and erratic weather patterns pose a dual threat to peace and stability in the region. Nowhere is this more true than in Gambia, where conflict across the border in Senegal has generated a flood of refugees—and a strained, hand-to-mouth existence. In addition, changing weather patterns have shortened the rainy season, bringing hunger and uncertainty to many subsistence farmers. Even as Oxfam provides immediate support in the form of food and water, we are helping people plan and prepare in an effort to avoid future crises.

The challenge: In the North Bank Division of Gambia, in the community of Dasilami, villagers wrestle with questions of how to feed their families. Will there be enough rain to allow crops to grow? Will locusts devour whatever villagers manage to coax from their fields? Food shortages are a constant threat. And as pressures mount, community solidarity is challenged by the individual need to survive.

A solution: To help the people of Dasilami and 50 other villages scattered throughout the North Bank prepare for emergencies, Oxfam teamed up with the Agency for the Development of Women and Children (AD-WAC). The idea was simple: to establish a place where villagers can set aside food and seeds to save for those times when they run out. An Oxfam grant funded the cost of construction and stocking of four "banks" that can hold up to 30 metric tons of cereal. Those who borrow from the storehouse during a food shortage are obliged to repay the loan and tack on a little extra so the project can grow.

Nyima Filly Fofana, a mother of nine, claps her hands at the thought of the tall white building stocked with grain. "Our worries will be temporarily solved," she says. "We'll have food. Therefore, the families will not cry. The stomachs will not go hungry."

Fairness for cotton farmers

Since 2004, Oxfam has waged an intense campaign to stop the US subsidies that do little to help rural America and do much to hurt farmers in Africa, especially farmers of cotton. Uniting US farmers with their West African counterparts, and uniting activists around the world, the campaign has elevated the interests of small farmers to the highest levels of government and international trade negotiations.

In the meantime, in Mali, where a 2005 state-authorized mechanism for pricing cotton seed has intensified poverty, Oxfam America and Oxfam Great Britain are teaming up to develop a cotton program that will help farmers defend their rights. To this end, Oxfam America is supporting farmer cooperatives, to organize the efforts and build the skills of nearly 350 local unions and cooperatives. Oxfam supports their efforts to promote the diversification of economic activities.

"You used to get something out of cotton," explains Gnagna Traore, a Malian cotton farmer. "Now there is nothing. You plant, you wait, you harvest, and spend days and days and days harvesting ... and in the end, you still have nothing and you can't feed your children."



Working together to end poverty and injustice

How Oxfam works

Recognizing that the best solutions come from local communities, Oxfam invests in civil society and partners with community-based organizations. We identify the most promising local groups—those best positioned to create lasting local solutions to poverty—and provide them with the support they need to thrive. In addition to funding, Oxfam provides technical advice and networking opportunities with like-minded organizations. And while we are a powerful voice for those we serve, we also empower people to advocate on their own behalf. In the end, our partners are more effective, more confident, and more capable of realizing their visions for a better future.

Cover: Teacher Vieux Malang Diedhiou leads a class about peace at the Faye Coly primary school in Bignona, Senegal. He uses a curriculum developed by the Senegalese organization GRA-REDEP with grants from Oxfam America. The students and teachers at Faye Coly organized a student government and trained student mediators in nonviolent conflict resolution. It is all part of the long-term objective of creating a culture of peace in the Casamance region.

Rebecca Blackwell / Oxfam America

Page 2: Sengalese students write about the importance of peace. For the past three years, primary schools in the Casamance region of southern Senegal—where a long, violent conflict has been going on—have instituted a peace curriculum made possible by grants from Oxfam America. *Rebecca Blackwell / Oxfam America*

Page 3: Djouri Konaré with her 22-year-old son Mamou Traoré, a newly trained police officer who works in Bamako. In the background are her sheep—the first of which she bought with her savings.

Brett Eloff / Oxfam America

Above left: In the Gambian village of Dasilami, sacks of grain and seeds climb almost to the ceiling of a new cereal “bank” built with help from Oxfam America. The sorghum, millet, and corn are available to families in need during the hungry season—the lean time before the harvest when people run out of food. Families who use the grains will repay the bank when their own harvests come in.

Rebecca Blackwell / Oxfam America

Above right: A simple pump that operates with a large bicycle-like wheel and a rope is helping to change the lives of people in the Gambian village of Oupat. An old well had run dry, forcing people to trek to the next village for their water. The pump on this new well is easy to fix, and that’s its big advantage. With a little bit of training, villagers can do the repairs themselves and buy the parts locally.

Rebecca Blackwell / Oxfam America