Mali is at a crossroads in its destiny. The changes that have taken place since the tragic days of March 1991 are as astounding as they are fragile, and few observers would have dared to predict a positive outcome.

In the days after the coup, Colonel Touré, or 'ATT' as he is fondly called, named himself President of a transitional deliberative body that included representatives of each major association that had contributed to the downfall of the previous regime, including Touareg rebel leaders. For the next 14 months, the transitional government organised a national conference to debate a new social contract and draw up a constitution; set up a referendum on the proposed constitution; put in place the rules by which open, free, and multi-party elections were to be held; oversaw municipal, legislative, and presidential elections under the auspices of international observers; and signed a Pacte National which, in principle, ended the Touareg revolt.

The former dictator, his generals, and the principal power-barons of the one-party apparatus were prosecuted in what international observers declared to be a fair and open trial. Moussa Traoré and four of his generals were found guilty of crimes against humanity for their roles in the killing of innocent demonstrators. Sentenced to death, they remain in jail awaiting a presidential reprieve.

In an atmosphere of great expectations and remarkable social order, ATT was able to transfer power in June 1992 to the first democratically elected President of Mali: Alpha Oumar Konaré, a respected intellectual, teacher, and historian.

An experiment in democracy

The new constitution guaranteed freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly. In a few short months more than 20 newspapers were on the streets, a dozen independent radio stations were on the newly liberated airwaves, and thousands of civil associations were organised. From consumer groups to women's associations, all sought new-found freedoms after decades of silence and submission.

But the promises of instant prosperity to be ushered in by democracy soon...
collided with the harsh realities of rebuilding a country which had suffered years of neglect and corruption. President Konaré was perceived as weak and indecisive when he refused any show of force against a rising tide of demonstrations, violence, and political opportunism. Individuals, associations, political parties, and the media were inventing the rules of democracy as they went along, and at times it seemed that the new Malian democracy would be short-lived.

The first major challenge came from the students who had contributed the most to toppling the previous regime. Moussa Traoré, the former dictator, had earned their animosity by deciding, at the World Bank’s insistence, to cut back spending on education. For decades the Malian education system had been in a shambles. Lack of investment, overcrowding, too few teachers, most of them poorly trained and concentrated in the cities: these were the hallmarks of the Traoré regime. Primary education in rural areas was neglected in favour of secondary and higher education in the cities; the result was enormous illiteracy rates and wasted human potential. In a mainly rural and agricultural country, the Malian education system, modelled on the French system, produced sophisticated graduates able to analyse the works of Victor Hugo, but unable to tell the difference between millet and sorghum crops.

Nevertheless, this alien system conferred one advantage on those families whose children did progress beyond primary school: bursaries for all, regardless of attainment, intended to cover the costs of living and studying away from home. In such a poor country with large families and few jobs, the bursary (a legacy of the socialist era) became an important addition to the monthly family revenue.

The new government, under pressure from the World Bank and most of its foreign donors, could no longer pay the bursaries. The student movement, which had given hundreds of lives to the cause of democracy, was now being required by the newly elected democratic government to make more sacrifices. The clash that ensued was to shake loose the very foundations of the young democracy, as radicalised student leaders organised strikes and violent demonstrations which would last for three years and seriously hamper formal education for a whole generation of young Malians.
For three years, three successive
governments and three Prime Ministers
failed to resolve the crisis. President
Konaré, although politically naive and
perceived to be weak, did at least dare to
rely on a democratic and political process,
rather than using the army to defeat the
dissident students. But in the end his
third Prime Minister, Ibrahim Keita,
arrested the student leaders for airing a
call to arms on a local radio programme.

These events were crucial to Mali, for
the simple reason that the experiment in
democracy survived. It became very
evident during those troubled months
that no one in Mali knew exactly how a
democracy should function. While the
constitution is largely based on the French
model, the American, Canadian, Dutch,
and German models are also being
promoted through training and exchange
programmes funded by these nations. If
democracies are forever evolving, and if
democratic values take generations to
become part of any society’s fabric, Mali
is in dire need of creating its own brand of
democracy. To do so, it will need not only
visionary leadership but — more
importantly — the active participation of
each and every Malian citizen. And while
the politicians and student leaders were
battling it out in Bamako, the silent
majority of Malians, and the poorest
among them, were testing these new
freedoms and quite possibly inventing
Malian democracy along the way.

The Sabalibougou test case
Sabalibougou is one of the biggest
quartiers in the ever-spreading suburbs of
Bamako. This poor area was recently the
site of a significant campaign by ordinary
people to claim their rights under the law.
Daba Coulibaly, the leader of a Malian
non-government organisation called
Stop-Sahel, and himself a resident of
Sabalibougou, explains:

‘Not so long ago this area was all fields.
People came and settled here from the
countryside after the droughts of the
1970s and 1980s. Then a new road was
built through our quartier, to link the city
centre with the airport. It was a prestige
development, and the authorities
planned to allocate plots of this now
prime land along the road to speculators,
who would sell it off to rich people. There
was a plan for streets, market areas, and
public spaces, but this meant that many
poor people would have had to move out
of their homes to make way for these new
developments.

‘In September 1993 we were informed
that the bulldozers would be coming to
tear down our houses. We were told that
this was not a place for poor people: as it
was the entrance to the city, new and

above Sabalibougou:
‘Our biggest problem
is water. There is no
mains service, and
the public well is dry.
We have to buy all our
water from street
vendors. It costs 250
CFA for 60 litres —
and twice that on
public holidays.’
beautiful housing was needed; and, as poor people didn’t have beautiful homes to show, they had to leave.

‘Those of us who knew how to read and write, who were considered intellectuals by the other people, started up an association — the Association of Residents of Eastern Sabalibougou — to fight this. The aim was to rehabilitate this sector and to set up economic and social projects for the well-being of the people of the area.

‘We adopted rules and set subscription fees, and from then on every Sunday we had meetings with all the members. We proceeded to hire two law firms, and deposited a complaint at the Supreme Court. In August 1994 the Supreme Court ruled in our favour. The judgement annulled the demolition order; it said that roads and public places were to be provided, but that all development had to be done in consultation with the population and with regard to their collective interest.

‘This was the first case of its kind and established a vital precedent. Many members of the Bamako elite told us: “You can’t fight this. In Mali the Constitution decrees that the government owns all land.” By winning our case, we have proved that ordinary citizens can fight the government and win. Now they know that if ordinary citizens organise, and they have the law on their side, they are a force to be reckoned with.

‘But the people have to be vigilant and wary of the authorities. They must follow the law step by step. The battle goes on!’

That such a case was brought to court by a group of citizens and that they were able to win is testimony to the changes that are taking place within Malian society.

**Giving poor people a voice**

The arrival of democracy has also brought some important changes in the way that local NGOs (non-government organisations) work with poor communities.

While Malian institutions and the constitution have changed, the individuals who exercise power in the towns and countryside have not necessarily changed their ways of working. Moreover, the people whose lives they affect have not been informed about the way that democracy functions, and about the rights and obligations of the citizenry. How can people be trained in such an abstract subject, in a country where communications are difficult at best, where 80 per cent of the population is illiterate, and communities are isolated within a vast territory?

The Near East Foundation (NEF) is a US-funded NGO that has been working in
Mali since 1983. By decentralising decision-making powers and financial resources to its Malian staff, this international NGO has become in fact a Malian NGO, employing over 50 people, all Malians, in the remote Douentza area, in the Mopti region.

The Mopti region is a fascinating area, a microcosm of the nation with all the livelihoods and all the cultural groups present. The Niger and Bani rivers meet in the city of Mopti to form the vast, meandering Niger Delta. The Delta, with its annual floods, was once prosperous and still has enormous potential, with its fishing grounds, rice paddies, and huge herds of cattle and sheep, attracted to the excellent grazing land along the river banks and the lakes that form in the rainy season. But it would not be a microcosm of Mali if it did not also contain the hot and arid Douentza region.

The Douentza Circle (an administrative sub-division of Mopti) covers over 18,000 square kilometres, and has an estimated population of 168,000, consisting of Peulh (Fulani), Songhay, Dogon, Bambara, and Touareg groups, among whom the Peulh are the largest. Many young and able-bodied people migrate to Bamako and elsewhere, because the local economy, based on agriculture, herding, and commerce, is in decline. Poor rainfall leads to poor soil, which increases the competition between farmers and herders for land and water: there are frequent serious conflicts between these two groups. Education and health services are few and far between. The population is poor and illiterate. People have little access to information: there are no telephones or newspapers, and — apart from the lone tarmacked national highway to Gao — the transport system is unreliable, with rough and weather-beaten tracks.

The NEF has worked in this difficult area for many years, developing a large and complex programme which includes credit schemes, water and soil conservation, and more recently support for democracy and the decentralisation of power.
The Voice of Douentza: Bocoum Koumbourou Koita begins her morning broadcast to women in the Mopti region.

Power to the people through a solar-powered radio
In July 1993 NEF opened a locally controlled radio station, broadcasting initially in Peuhl, and later in Dogon and Bozo, to serve isolated and vulnerable populations. It offers traditional music, played by local musicians, and interviews with local people. These are interspersed with short stories and features about local history, and brief information pieces about improved agricultural and pastoral techniques; about health, environmental matters, and market prices. The radio station also broadcasts summaries of regional, national, and international news in local languages; and information on legal rights and changes in Malian law, especially as these relate to women. The programmes promote the decentralisation process, and aim to equip people to participate in local government.

The radio, totally solar-powered, is called Radio Daande Douentza (RDD) — the Voice of Douentza. It is controlled by a local organisation, APROCOR. RDD was an immediate success, partly because it has no competition, but also because for the first time the people of the region have gained a voice. Between July and August 1993 the number of radios in the region increased by 140 per cent. Possession of radios had long been the privilege of menfolk, but now women began the task of fattening goats for the specific purpose of selling them to raise the money to buy a radio in order to follow the programmes.

Bocoum Koumbourou Koita is in charge of programmes for women. She covers issues like health and hygiene. ‘We talk about the importance of clean water to women and children. I also interview women about problems during pregnancy, and other things like nutrition, prices in the market, contraception and family planning. Unfortunately, women are very busy and it’s a problem for them to find the time to listen. Some men think it is a waste of time for women to listen to the radio. We broadcast women’s programmes in the morning, so that they can listen undisturbed while the men are in the fields.’

It is difficult to find hard evidence to evaluate the impact of RDD on the population, but there are signs that it has stimulated attendance at literacy classes and the provision of health services, and eased the task of administration in such a large area. However, the real test of this unique adventure in informing and training poor people will soon come with the advent of decentralisation.
Decentralisation — what does it mean?

Decentralisation is probably the most talked about and least understood reform to be undertaken in democratic Mali.

For decades, the country had been centrally managed from government offices in Bamako; and for years, people paid taxes to civil and military administrators for non-existent services. During the National Conference which followed the coup d’état, delegates from all walks of life demanded that Mali should decentralise its administration by giving important powers to local authorities. This reform was enshrined in the new Constitution and, since taking power, President Konaré has repeatedly made decentralisation the key means by which both democracy and development can be attained. He has appointed a Decentralisation Team, composed of experts in various fields, to draw up the legal framework for this radical reform. The Team developed a national programme of information and training, designed to prepare for local elections in 1996 — the next phase of the massive decentralisation process.

There is widespread enthusiasm for decentralisation, but there are fears, too. There are obvious risks in delegating powers and resources to small local governing bodies in a country with an illiteracy rate of 80 per cent. There is a fear that redefining the boundaries of these local authorities will reopen the cultural and ethnic question and weaken the national Malian identity. In a country with a multitude of ethnic and cultural groups and ancient boundaries, the new local structures could mark a return to government along ethnic lines. These and other fears are real and understandable.

The advocates of decentralisation reply that Mali has not much to lose, and much to gain, by bringing power closer to the people. They argue that the reforms will give wide powers to locally elected representatives, who will rely on professional administrators to help them to implement their policies. They point out that Mali has a long history of solving ethnic tensions without resorting to violence; and that when traditional conciliation methods did break down, the previous centralised forms of government could not prevent groups like the Touaregs from fostering resentment that led to rebellion.

The greatest discontent is expressed, of course, by those who have most to lose by the reforms: the ruling class of administrators who have wielded enormous power in Mali since Independence. They are more feared than respected, and do not look forward to the day when their former subjects will be giving them orders and taking decisions for them to implement.

NGOs and civil society

National non-government organisations (NGOs) are a relatively new phenomenon in Mali. Until the advent of democracy they were barely tolerated by the authorities; but then their number increased from fewer than 100 to more than 600 in just four years. Many of them exist on paper alone: they were established merely to create work for young urban graduates, with no development experience, who before the cutbacks in government spending would have found automatic employment in the civil service. But credible and dedicated Malians are active in a growing number of Malian NGOs which, with support from external funders, are building strong links with their community base, and developing democratic internal procedures.

In recent years, many of these more dynamic NGOs have moved out of the capital city to work in more isolated regions. They specialise in fields such as soil and water conservation, credit and savings, women’s issues, or urban work.
But in such a poor country, with a tiny and impoverished middle-class, Malian NGOs are entirely dependent on external donors for their funds.

With the advent of decentralisation, these versatile and flexible structures may be called to play an important role in developing local expertise and investing in local development projects.

**Walde Kelka: whose wood is it anyway?**

The Kelka zone in the Douentza Circle of the Mopti region of north-central Mali is an arid land, with poor rainfall, poor soils, and widespread poverty. Farming can’t support a family without extra income from other sources. There is a market for fuel-wood in the city of Mopti, so many farmers add to their incomes by gathering wood in the forest.

By Malian law, land and resources belong to the State, and permission to cut wood has to be granted by the local authorities. But this does not mean that forests are managed effectively. In the words of local farmer Nouhoum Coulibaly: ‘Anyone could go to Mopti and get an official paper and come into our area and cut down wood. We watched helplessly as outsiders took our wood, and there was nothing we could do about it.’

In 1992, local villagers, supported by NEF, the Malian NGO whose work has already been noted, held a meeting to discuss ways of managing their own natural resources. Thirteen villages agreed to set up an association called Walde Kelka. Its constitution gives local people the right to regulate the exploitation of their lands. They drew up rules concerning the collection of green and dead woods. They redefined some of the paths used by migrating groups, in order to conserve dry-season pastures. With the agreement of the local Forestry Commissioner, outsiders are no longer
allowed to cut wood in the area. The Association resolves conflicts between the member villages, and between the member villages and others outside the forest area.

Walde Kelka also encourages its members to invest in the development of their area. Maouloua Dicka, Chair of the Association for Amba village, explains: ‘NEF advised us on the marketing of our wood: for example, to fix the price at 55CFA per bundle, rather than 50CFA, so we could put the extra five francs into the common fund. We've really seen the benefits of this. The fund is there if we need a pump in the village, or to welcome guests. If you have to borrow money, you are more at ease when you borrow from an organisation, where the terms are clear, rather than borrowing from an individual.’

Moussa Minta, a councillor in Amba village, says: ‘What I like about the Association is that there is agreement. It’s very good to see 13 villages pulling together in the same direction. This has never happened before. ... All the villagers are members of the Association. If a meeting is convened, everybody comes, even the children.’

This pioneering scheme is a practical example of the sort of local democratic power structure which should emerge all over Mali as the national decentralisation process gathers pace.
Peace and reconciliation

right Touareg nomads tend to be suspicious of outsiders and government authorities

The northern conflict

Since the destruction of the trans-Saharan salt trade by the French colonialists in the early 1900s, the nomadic Touareg people have felt their very existence threatened. They had always had an uneasy relationship with any external and centralising force, and during the first world war they rebelled when the French authorities tried to requisition their camel herds for the war effort. This rebellion was harshly repressed, as was their challenge to the Malian authorities in 1963, when the newly independent government, having failed to consult them when defining the political boundaries of the new nation, restricted their right to cross borders into neighbouring countries.

In June 1990, an armed group attacked government offices in the town of Menaka. This prompted a Sahara-wide uprising of Touaregs living in parts of Mali, Niger, and Mauritania — their traditional nomadic territory of Azaouad, which they aspired to turn into an independent Touareg State.

The rebel forces were highly mobile, well trained, and equipped with sophisticated weaponry by Colonel Khaddafi of Libya. Many were the descendants of the 1963 rebels who had fled from Mali after their defeat; growing up in Libya, they had fought as mercenaries in the Western Sahara conflict against Morocco in the 1980s.

The objectives of the rebels were complex. They were not merely seeking revenge on the Malian authorities: they
also attacked traditional Touareg leaders who had grown rich and powerful during the famine years by controlling most of the food aid that flooded the north. They declared an end to the continued slavery of the black-skinned Bella people, traditionally subservient to the Touareg. They denounced the economic marginalisation of the north, whose needs had been almost totally ignored by central government in Bamako.

The rebellion touched a raw nerve not only throughout the north with the Songhay, Peuhl (Fulani), and Bozo majority, but also across most of rural Mali, which had similarly been neglected by the government. The corrupt Malian army could not match the well-equipped rebels; the government was internally weakened by the nascent democratisation movement; within weeks, Moussa Traoré was negotiating for peace.

**The failure of the first peace talks**
The *Acords de Tamanrasset*, signed in January 1991, brought no reprieve for the Traoré regime. The Songhay and Peuhl populations in the north resented the special status conferred on the Touaregs by the proposal for a quasi-independent Touareg territory with highly decentralised powers. This controversy was overtaken in March 1991 by the civil unrest in Bamako in March 1991, which led to the *coup d'etat* led by Colonel Touré.

Touré’s transitional government signified its intention to respect the peace accords, but the leaders of the Touareg rebels saw an opportunity to maximise their gains, and continued to attack government and military targets — and also civilian sites. The Malian army retaliated harshly with attacks against civilian nomadic sites. The cycle of violence was broken by the arrival of French, Mauritanian, and Algerian negotiators, who brought about an agreement known as the *Pacte National* in April 1992.

... and the failure of the *Pacte National*
The new agreement made significant concessions to the northern rebels, including pledges of investment in the infrastructure and economy of the region, and a commitment to decentralise important government powers to enable local communities to administer their own affairs. Although the official rebel leaders and President Konaré, elected in June 1992, were committed to the peace process, and although key elements of the *Pacte* were soon implemented, the situation gradually got worse, not better, and the country was soon on the brink of a full-scale civil war.

One reason for the impending tragedy was the fact that the Touareg have never been a unified entity, as they are sometimes falsely depicted by the international media. They are a grouping of factions, each with its own territory and internal social structures. The fragile equilibrium of Touareg society, already severely damaged by the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, was shattered by the rebellion of the 1990s. In the resulting power vacuum, the leadership was contested by at least half a dozen armed factions. Together with their allies, the ‘Arab’ population of the north (white-skinned people of Moorish ancestry), many of the warlords were Malian in name only, having been raised outside the country, with no understanding of the social structure of the region.

Armed banditry was a continuing problem. The rebel leaders failed to control their former fighters who had supposedly been demobilised; the Army failed to control the former rebels who had been integrated into its ranks. Men bearing Kalashnikovs strolled openly in Gao and other northern towns, terrorising the local people, and plundering the stores of non-government organisations.

Another reason for the failure of the peace process was the question of refugees: between 100,000 and 250,000 of them, living in camps in Algeria,
Touareg refugees from the conflict in the north Mauritania, and Burkina Faso. In addition, tens of thousands of Touaregs and Malian Moors were displaced internally within Mali, in flight from attacks by their former neighbours, the Songhay and Peulh. Their homes had been pillaged, their belongings lost, their family members killed, and their herds stolen. For any kind of long-term peace to be established, these populations had to return home; but the widespread instability in the north did not encourage them to risk returning.

‘Mobs went on the rampage in Gao, attacking and looting Touareg homes. My own house was attacked several times, and it was only the intervention of my neighbours — both Touareg and Songhay — that stopped the mob taking all my possessions. With all that has happened in the last five years, I really should be dead. Once the Touareg rebels appeared at my family’s compound and claimed that I was part of Ganda Koy, the Songhay militia. At the same time as they were threatening to kill me, I found that my name was on the death list of the Ganda Koy.’

(Abou Ag Assibit)

The third reason for the breakdown of the peace process was the perceived weakness and indecision of President Konaré. He allowed the peace commission, based in Bamako, to become bogged down in bureaucratic considerations. Ordinary people in the north had no access to the talks, which soon became dominated by endless annexes and memoranda attached to the text of the Pacte, as the rebels demanded — and got — significant concessions from the State. Hundreds of jobs in the civil service and the army were being given away to the rebels, while structural adjustment programmes deprived most other Malians of any government employment.

**The conflict spreads**

By 1994, any political or popular support for the peace process had been forfeited. The situation in northern Mali was so tense that the Songhay population
decided it was time to act. The largest cultural group in the north, with many influential members in the army and the government, announced the creation of a militia, called Ganda Koy. Claiming that the government backed this militia, the rebel representative on the peace commission quit and joined a new Touareg rebel force to challenge Ganda Koy. The latter won the first battle; retaliations followed, and many atrocities were inflicted on peaceful Songhay and Touareg communities.

Inevitably the population of the whole country became polarised by the conflict. There were pogroms against ‘white-skinned’ Malians in almost every town and city. European and North American embassies and project staff were targeted as alleged supporters of the Touareg rebel cause; even Malian NGOs were attacked, as recipients of funds from international agencies. The international bodies which could have played a reconciling role were themselves branded as pro-rebel by their own ill-advised and misinformed diagnosis of the situation. The international media, the French in particular, oversimplified the issues, portraying the Touareg rebels as exotic and romantic figures on camels, the innocent victims of the ‘villains’ of the piece: the southern and black Malians.

Cool heads were needed in this crisis, but the voices of moderation were silenced. Moderates were seen as either weak or as traitors to their country. Then the Malian army stepped in.

After the 1991 coup, both Colonel Touré, the transitional Head of State, and Konaré, the new President, had wanted to destabilise the army, in order to discourage any attempt at a military coup d'état. This had further demoralised an already undisciplined army, especially among the badly paid non-commissioned officers (NCOs). Konaré, unable to bring peace between the warring Touareg and Songhay militias, sent in the army. But the NCOs refused to obey orders and set out to impose their own brand of peace, by taking sides in the conflict.

The crisis intensified when the military executed a Swiss diplomat who was touring the Timbuktu region. In late October 1994, when the Touaregs launched their most spectacular offensive by attacking the military stronghold of Gao, the military refused to defend the city or its inhabitants. Instead, when the killings were over, they attacked a peaceful Touareg nomadic community on the outskirts of Gao, brutally killing over 200 civilians.

**Turning the tide of violence**

Mali was on the brink of civil war. Its international reputation was in tatters, as a campaign of disinformation accused the government of genocide. News of the latest military massacre left southern Malians in a state of shock and disbelief. The social fabric woven during centuries of sharing a common land and identity was unravelling. Many people doubted that it could be mended. But they misunderstood the essential spirit of Mali.

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‘We are all victims of this conflict. Everybody has been hurt in some way. Members of my family lost all their possessions. I lost some very good Touareg friends. Worst of all, I lost a sister-in-law. She was pregnant, and travelling to Gao by boat because the road wasn’t safe. There had been a rebel raid somewhere nearby and in retaliation the Songhay militia attacked the boat. Although she was a Songhay, she had very fair skin, and they killed her because they thought she was a Touareg. It just shows the futility of the fighting. It had to stop.’

(Sada Maiga)

‘When farmers and nomads came together to discuss the situation, they realised that they have much more in common than they have dividing them. They need each other; they have lived together in a complementary way for centuries. Ordinary people are tired of violence; they have really suffered, physically and economically, from the havoc.’

(Ibrahim Ag Idbaltanat)
In November and December 1994, several individuals, Touareg and Songhay, all working for international and local NGOs in the north, united in solidarity with the voiceless and impoverished Touareg and Songhay communities in the region. This singular act of courage set in motion a series of meetings between the communities, in an effort to break their isolation and heal the pain and distrust inflicted during five years of conflict.

After months of this process, from December 1994 to July 1995, a fragile peace had come to northern Mali. Communities had asked each other’s forgiveness; armed combatants had given up their weapons; banditry had receded; and plans had been drawn up by funders and the government for an economic development programme for the north. This culminated in a formal meeting of the former warring parties and representatives of all northern communities, who signed a peace pact which this time was focused on local development for the benefit of all groups. The armed Touareg umbrella group, the MFUA (Mouvement des fronts unis de l’Azaouad) announced its own dissolution.

This process culminated in March 1996 with the ceremonial burning of 3,000 weapons, surrendered by demobilised fighters, in Timbuktu, in the presence of President Konaré and representatives of all the warring parties. There was only one element in the process which all other attempts at reconciliation had lacked: control by the communities themselves.

Arbon Kama Maiga, Chair of the Monitoring Committee, observes: ‘What is new is that the social fabric has been torn apart, and the work of the Peace Commission has been to knit society together again. One of the cornerstones of this approach is that the leaders of each community continue to meet. We are recreating our traditional ways, and that inspires us for the future. It’s not new. People are bound to live together side by side. God has given them the same land to live on.’
Sustainable development

The economy

Despite the structural adjustment programmes adopted in the early 1980s and despite the radical political reforms of the 1990s, Mali remains one of the poorest countries in the world. In 1993 its Gross Domestic Product equalled just 0.2 per cent of the GDP of France, the former colonial power. This vast, landlocked area in the middle of the Sahel, with its fragile soils and low rainfall and lack of infrastructure, depends almost totally for its export earnings on agriculture and livestock herding. Against all the odds, in the last ten years Mali has actually become self-sufficient in cereal production and produces very nearly all the rice that it consumes.

The industrial and manufacturing sector is virtually confined to Bamako. Still reeling from the damage done during riots of 1991 and the pillaging of 1994, it produces only a negligible proportion of the country's needs — about 15 per cent of GDP.

Buried treasure

Nobody can put a value on the potential contribution that could be made by minerals and precious metals to the economy of Mali. In theory, it could be very considerable. For hundreds of years, gold and diamonds have been mined on a small scale in the south and west of the country. The French neglected the mining sector, and the post-Independence para-statal

left A truck leaving Tonka market. Poor roads and a lack of public transport services hold back the development of Mali's economy
Below Moro Bore, a farmer in Bougouitie, Douentza Circle, in his cotton field. He also grows rice and sorghum.

James Hawkins/Oxfam

mining company was corrupt and inefficient. Now, however, the government is taking measures to encourage foreign investment, and companies based in the USA, South Africa, and Australia are beginning to exploit the remote area south of Kayes, which is potentially very productive, but completely cut off from the capital city except for the dilapidated rail line from Dakar to Bamako.

Another constraint on the mining industry is the problem of energy supplies. At present, over 90 per cent of national energy needs are met from fuelwood and charcoal (which leads, of course, to severe deforestation). However, the Manantali Dam on the Senegal River is expected to start generating hydro-powered electricity in 1998, and this should give a vital boost to the mining sector.

Beside gold and diamonds, there are deposits of bauxite, manganese, zinc, copper, and lithium waiting to be surveyed and extracted. But this is all in the future. At present, the economy of Mali is dangerously dependent for foreign exchange on the production and export of one main commodity: cotton.

Cotton: the white gold of Mali

Malians refer to cotton as ‘white gold’. The cotton they grow is of high quality, and in the last ten years Mali has become the largest producer in West Africa. The harvest in 1995 was 400,000 tons — compared with 272,000 tons only four years previously. But this success has brought mixed blessings. To start with, its dependence on cotton leaves the national economy vulnerable to fluctuations in world prices: Mali was very hard hit by the fall in world cotton prices in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Nevertheless, Mali has doubled and trebled the land area dedicated to cotton, especially in the south, where rainfall and soils are better. Thus an ever larger number of farmers are at the mercy of international markets.

Mali could earn more from its cotton if it could find ways of adding value to its crops of raw cotton by processing it. At present, 98 per cent of the cotton crop is exported in unprocessed form. But there is a strong demand abroad for the typical bogolan motifs (designed by the late Chris Seydou, based on traditional mud-cloth patterns), and the potential for developing the textiles industry, given
suitable levels of investment, is very considerable.

The Malian para-statal company that manages national cotton production, the Compagnie Malienne d'Industrie du Textile (CMDT), has managed to make substantial reductions in its costs and bureaucracy, and all price controls have been abolished. The CMDT works with the peasant producers, encouraging them to create village associations, and offering training in literacy and financial management. Its advice to smallholders to intercrop cotton with cereals and cash crops such as groundnuts and soya beans has proved very successful.

After the arrival of democracy, Malian cotton farmers created producers’ trade unions, which now negotiate with the CMDT on everything from producer prices to quality control, from fertiliser stocking to prices. These unions should, in the future, be a force to be reckoned with in rural Mali.

**Rice production**

Mali is almost self-sufficient in rice, but has hardly begun to tap the enormous potential of the Niger River Delta. Only 5,000 hectares of land produce rice, while in theory about one million hectares are available for irrigated farming.

Most of the rice is grown in the area of the Office du Niger (ON), north of the city of Ségou in what was once the highly ambitious but ill-fated attempt by colonial France to exploit the river’s flood levels to make this the Nile of West Africa.

The ON has been drastically restructured in recent years, trimming down its bloated bureaucracy to the bare minimum, and empowering the producers who live along the irrigation canals. Previously abandoned land is back in production; the dilapidated irrigation network is being repaired; and yields of rice are improving. Farmers have been encouraged to form and manage marketing units which gradually developed into a sort of producers’ union. Its representatives negotiate with ON officials on everything from controlling water levels in the canals to the choice of rice varieties and target production levels.

**Livestock**

Large proportions of the Malian herds of cows, sheep, and goats died in the drought of 1984. But since then the biggest herds in West Africa have reconstituted themselves and are once again making an important contribution to the country’s export earnings. One problem is that local meat prices and export revenues are vulnerable to the impact of cheap imports from overseas, such as frozen beef from Argentina, and the heavily subsidised, low-quality beef which was dumped in West Africa by European nations in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Another problem is the lack of refrigeration facilities and the poor roads, which make bulk transport of carcasses almost impossible.

The devaluation of the CFA Franc in 1994, the first in a series announced for the future, did produce greater revenues for exported livestock and rice. While everyone is still waiting for the dust to settle on this controversial devaluation, which affected the whole of former French Africa, the demand for cheaper Malian meat did give a bonus to Malian herders.

In the cotton industry, however, the rise in
the cost of imported fertiliser and machinery was transferred to the producers, who will not necessarily benefit from increased world prices.

**Cereals**
The production and marketing of cereals (mainly millet, sorghum, and maize) have benefited from major reforms that started in the mid-1980s, when markets were liberalised and producer and consumer price controls were abolished. Generally, this restructuring can claim to have had a positive effect in the southern rural areas, by favouring cereal production at the expense of the mighty cotton, by providing marketing credit funds to village associations, and by improving cereal distribution to most regions. Unfortunately, the reforms have not reached the poorer and more isolated communities in the Sahelian zones, which still lack proper distribution facilities and village institutions such as cereal banks.

**Farmers organise in Koro**
Agriculteurs Sans Frontières (ASF) is a local association set up in 1992 in the Koro area of Mopti Region, in north-central Mali. Koro is the cereal-producing zone in the otherwise arid and drought-prone region of Mali. Most of the inhabitants are Dogons who came down from the Bandiagara Cliffs and Plateau in search of a better life in the Koro plains.

While the land is relatively rich, the water table is desperately low, and locating and digging wells is a daunting task for local people, who have to dig by hand in hard rock to depths of 80 metres (240 feet) or more. Ever-increasing demand for farming land means that woodland areas are dwindling, and it is common to see village women using millet stalks for fuel, thus depriving the fields and the livestock of rich nutrients from the stalks, which should be left to rot into the soil. Another problem is transport. As in many other regions of this vast country, the roads are poorly maintained and farmers can’t get their produce to market. This leaves them at the
mercy of middlemen, who come into the area and buy up crops at knock-down prices.

The ASF was created by local people who knew they could not count on the government any more, and also realised that they could not wait for the arrival of an NGO to help to solve their problems. More and more of their young men were leaving the area to find work elsewhere, because cereal crops were not profitable. Many of these young men sought jobs in the plantations of Côte d'Ivoire, and many were returning only to die from AIDS, contracted in Abidjan, the capital, where the disease is rife.

The ASF works mainly in a group of six Dogon villages around the city of Koro, but has a loose link with a network of 80 more. It is entirely controlled by peasant members from local communities. Only one member is fully literate, but the creators of ASF are visionaries, who see their small association one day becoming a federation of villages in the Koro area. Their self-help philosophy is summed up by Jean Podiougou, the General Secretary, and Yatouna, a mother from Kiri village.

Jean: ‘One of our many problems is how to get a nurse to come and treat our sick children. The health centre is 40 km away, so we have appointed our own village health workers. We chose volunteers from the villages to go to be trained by government health trainers.’

Yatouna: ‘We women buy sheep; an NGO gave us the money for the first lot. We fatten them with leaves and pounded millet, and then about eight months later we sell them. But we had to pay for a vet to keep the animals healthy. Instead of calling a vet from Koro every time, we sent three people for paravet training, so they could look after the sheep in our village. This is much more economical for us.’

Jean explains how the Association is trying to beat the middlemen who exploit the farmers of this remote area: ‘We have a common field. We work it communally and the produce is held in common. In years when the harvest is bad, we use this produce to put in the cereal bank. We sell it to villagers at a price they can afford, which stops them having to go outside to buy seed from traders who profit from our misfortune.’
Molibemo — 'Let's Stick Together'

The people of the Plateau

In a country which has one of the hottest climates on earth (averaging between 40 and 48 degrees Celsius — 105–120 °F — in the last months of the dry season), the Bandiagara Plateau is reputed to be hotter than anywhere else. This is due to the fact that the whole Plateau is literally a bedrock, with practically no top-soil, few trees, and a few dry river-beds here and there. This inhospitable land has been the home of the Dogon people for several centuries, since the time when they fled from the advance of Islam.
Dogon villages, whether on a cliff, a plateau, or a plain, have a very distinctive appearance. They are crowded with mud-built granaries, with millet-stalk thatched roofs shaped like witches' hats. Most Dogon men are polygamous, and each wife acquires her own granary at the birth of her first child. Most villages have a small mud mosque, an equally small church, and a discreet altar for animistic ceremonies. Each village also has a **togouna**: an open-sided meeting place where the men come to discuss and settle disputes. The ceiling is only high enough to allow people to sit down — the idea being that they cannot get up to fight over their disagreements. The **togouna** is square-shaped, like all Dogon buildings and baskets. In each village there is a house occupied only by menstruating women. Ironically, the taboo which keeps them apart from the rest of the community provides a much-needed respite in the women's arduous lives.

The Plateau was always prone to droughts, but those of the 1970s and 1980s were compounded by population pressures and environmental decline. Ever-dwindling crops forced the Dogon to leave the Plateau in droves, and today Dogon traders can be found in every Malian city and in the more prosperous south, where they have adapted their farming techniques to the more moderate and humid climate.

To do any farming on the Plateau requires not just the skill to survive in this harsh environment, but also the Dogons' stubbornness to succeed where no others could. Known as hard workers, the Dogons grow old quickly on the Plateau. Survival is a family matter, and Dogon men, women, and children labour constantly to assure each other's needs.

**How to grow onions on rocks**

Droughts and diminishing crops have forced the Dogons to adapt their ways. Since the 1930s they have had to develop a cash crop to supplement their meagre harvests of millet and sorghum. Over the years they have specialised in growing onions — which they discovered, by trial and error, need less soil and less water than other crops, and are easier to store. To grow onions, they have built small stone barriers in the now dry river-beds and gullies, to capture the rainwater which erodes what is left of the soil from the plateau. If there is enough water, the farmers then collect soil from where the wind and rains have carried it. It is an

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### Facing page

Ire Ly Village and a **togouna** — a traditional Dogon meeting place

### Below

A stone barrier to catch rainwater, and a row of crops growing on a rock
impressive sight on the Plateau in the middle of the dry season, in December and January: lush green onions growing on tiny family plots, amid the arid brown landscape and reddish rocks. Children and women, and sometimes men, go back and forth from the water source to their plots, carrying on their heads huge jugs of water for the thirsty onion plants.

Once the plants have matured (there can be two onion seasons, Allah and the rainfall willing), the women pound the vegetables. They then make onion balls, which are laid out in the sun to dry. Once dry, they are sold to traders who know that the famous Dogon onions are awaited by city dwellers in Bamako, and even as far away as Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, and Abidjan in Côte d’Ivoire.

Below Samba Coulibaly selling Dogon onion balls in the Hippodrome Market, Bamako

**Beating the middlemen at their own game**

But onion-growing cannot solve all the problems of the Dogon economy. The communities need a long-term solution to the complex environmental and social problems that confront them. In response to these problems, they have created a federation called Molibemo (meaning ‘Let’s Stick Together’). It emerged after the latest droughts, when the Bandiagara Catholic Mission needed a structure through which it could organise cereal distribution.

In 1990 Molibemo became independent of the church and started a series of activities to help the Plateau people to organise themselves. Their projects include training in literacy and financial management; developing improved techniques to conserve soil and water; creating cereal banks and, more recently, onion seed banks.

Molibemo’s greatest feat has been to help farmers to beat the greedy traders who used to cheat and exploit them. For years, merchants came to the Plateau at harvest time to negotiate the purchase of onions with individual producers. As most producers could not read, write, or calculate, and the merchants owned the scales and set the prices, the farmers were at a disadvantage. Molibemo was determined to become the middleman on the Plateau. In 1991 it set the price for the entire crop, and persuaded the farmers to hold out. For the first time, the surprised merchants found themselves having to sit down and do a deal.

The victory, however, was short-lived. The following season, when negotiations failed and Molibemo tried to sell their own produce in the capital city, the merchants prevailed upon the traders to close off the Bamako market to them. The Dogons learned the hard way and lost most of their association’s funds in the attempt, as the onions rotted in rented lorries outside the market.
But quitting is not a Dogon characteristic, so Molibemo decided to start a new scheme, which would at least give more independence to the producers by setting up onion seed banks, on the lines of the cereal banks which already existed.

In the past, when crops had been bad, merchants had offered loans to farmers to buy onion seeds, on the basis that they could pay them back at harvest time. Then, of course, the merchants would set the price for the onion crops, and the producers would find themselves at the mercy of the merchants, who set the prices so low that the producers could not make enough profit to keep a stock of seeds for the next season. Now each village buys seeds at the end of the dry season, and sells them to its members at reasonable rates when the sowing season begins. As well as setting up onion seed banks, the Dogon communities have established their own system of loans on 'fraternal and socially acceptable' conditions.

Another problem was the traditional method of stocking onion seeds in tightly closed granaries; this led to heavy losses when the seeds rotted. Recently, German researchers in Bandiagara have designed an improved version of the traditional granary, which should reduce the losses.

**An unexpected spin-off**

The consequences of community development projects cannot always be predicted. Yaya Tapili, Manager of the Onion Seed Bank in Danibomo, summarises the nutritional benefits of the scheme, but draws attention to an unforeseen social consequence too.

'Families no longer need to send their young men away to earn money to buy seeds. So there are more able-bodied people to work in the fields, and production has gone up. With the increase in production, villagers no longer need to sell off their cereal crops for cash, so we will have a secure food base for the difficult dry months.'

'As the only literate person in this village, my services were much in demand. But Molibemo has done literacy, numeracy, and management training with members of the committee, and now the work is more evenly shared. 'Socially, our village has gained in prestige, as other villages now come to sell their crops to us. Also, women come from other villages to seek marriage with men from our village.'
‘Our hands are like wood’

above The daily task of pounding millet in Douekire, near Timbuktu

‘Our hands have been badly damaged by pounding millet. When you shake hands with a woman, it’s like touching wood.’
(Hawa Dama, a mother from Kiri village)

Women’s lives in Mali today

Women make up more than half of the population of Mali and they are a dynamic force in the nation’s development; but their lives are still restricted in some important respects.

After independence from France, the first Malian government introduced some of the most progressive legislation in Africa concerning women’s rights to inherit property, and their status within the family. Despite these liberal laws, traditional ways of life continue to define women’s place in Malian society.

Since the coup of 1991, a Women’s Commission, led by a government minister, has encouraged the formation of a wide variety of national, local, and urban women’s groups. Unfortunately, the government’s preoccupation with the ‘development’ of women is more cosmetic than real, and the numbers of impoverished women in the towns and countryside of Mali continue to grow.

Women in most instances play a vital role not only in the traditional sphere of the family but as providers of food and income. More and more young men are leaving home to find work and income elsewhere, and their communities are left to fend for themselves, usually under the care of women. But despite their added responsibilities, they can rarely get credit or training in new skills. Their voices are not heard, their views not taken into account, and their needs not given proper priority. They are rarely consulted by village leaders, by the government, by donors, or by NGO agents.
Women’s health is imperilled by childbirth. The median age of marriage is 16, and nearly half of all Malian women are mothers by the age of 18. The maternal mortality rate is by far the highest in the world: 20 per cent of deaths among women of child-bearing age are attributed to pregnancy, which is not surprising, as only 32 per cent of births are attended by any kind of trained medical assistant, and 65 per cent of all pregnant women suffer from anaemia. The stark fact is that a woman in Mali has a one-in-seven chance of dying in childbirth or from unsafe abortion.

The statistics for girls’ and women’s education are equally negative, despite the present government’s commitment to improving provision for them. Only 35 per cent of primary-school pupils are girls, and the proportion diminishes with every year of schooling. Only 22 per cent of girls reach a fifth year of education.

But change is slowly coming. Women are making progress through their new, if unrecognised, powers as bread winners. Unfortunately, this still translates in too many instances into an increase in their workloads and responsibilities.

The Sabalibougou Credit Scheme
Sabalibougou is a sprawling area of poor housing on the edge of Bamako. It began to grow as a squatters’ area in the 1980s, as people came in from the rural areas to escape the worst effects of the drought. There is no electricity in Sabalibougou, no clean water or safe sanitation system. In the rainy season, sudden sandstorms are usually the prelude to equally sudden downpours. Within minutes, the red mud tracks and yards around the tiny houses turn into fast-flowing rivers of filthy, blood-red water. Such rains come four or five times a week, and the wet season lasts for two or three months.

Many women work in the market of Sabalibougou. Their stalls, if they have them, are flimsy creations of sticks and millet-stalk thatch, beaten tin cans, and plastic sheeting. As in most African countries, the market-place is a special focus for working women: many meet there to organise themselves and to look for opportunities for self-development.

OMAFES is a Malian NGO, working mainly in the sprawling slum areas of Bamako. It has been working in Sabalibougou since 1992, and has introduced a dynamic credit scheme, and a training programme in literacy and commercial skills which has stimulated most of the residents. At first the project was intended to benefit women; but its successes have prompted the women to argue for the inclusion of their menfolk in the credit scheme.
A day in the life of Saly Fomba
'I wake up very early, about 5 o'clock in the morning. I wash, I pray, and then I go quite a distance from here to get water for the family; it takes about an hour. Then I prepare breakfast for all the family. After that, I start pounding the millet for the noon meal. After I've done the pounding, but before the meal, I go to the market to sell tomatoes, onions, and other condiments. Then I come home and finish preparing the mid-day meal.
'I was born about 150 km from here, but grew up in Bamako. But since I've been married, I've lived here in Sabalibougou: my husband is from here. I have three children, including the youngest, one-year-old Bourama. There are nine people altogether in the household, counting our relatives.
'After preparing the meal, if there's a literacy class I go to it; and then I go downtown, about 7 or 8 km from here, to buy vegetables for the next day's market. I finish all my work around 10 o'clock at night. The main problem we have is money: how to get enough to feed and clothe our children adequately, and to pay for their health care and education.
'Things have got better in the past two years. Since the project opened here, I have received credit, which has enabled me to earn more money. Before the project, the clothes that I wore and the children wore were very shabby, but now I can buy us better-quality clothes and I can provide soap for my family.
'Before the project, I couldn't read or write; but now I can read, I can write letters, and I even fill out the forms for the reimbursements. I feel much more at ease now. Effectively I have gained in self-confidence. I feel I am much more respected, both in my family and in the community. My new skills will surely improve the lives of my children. For instance, even before they are of school age, I can try and teach them the alphabet.
'I have also gained a better sense of managing larger amounts of money, because what I receive in credit far surpasses any amount I had before. And through training I have learned to play a role in the management committee and to acquire management skills.

'I received 25,000 francs (£31.00) from the project. First of all I bought a large bag of onions: onions don't perish very quickly. With the rest of the money I bought new tomatoes each day. I get by. I've always managed to repay the instalment on my loan on the day it's due.'

A household of 40 people

Assitou Fomba (no relation to Saly) has lived in Sabalibougou for 25 years. She has ten children and supports a regular household of 15-20 people, and sometimes up to 40. She comments:

'Life in Bamako these days is extremely expensive, and I have to meet all the expenses of my family. My husband hasn't got any work. Of all the women involved in the Association, none has a husband with a full-time job or a regular income. Many of our husbands came from the bush to find work, but they had no qualifications. Four of my ten children go to school; the others have nothing to do.

'This project is my only source of credit, so I take some of the money I make each day and use it for millet, with which I bake millet cakes to sell at the market.

'Before the credit scheme, I was having enormous problems in getting by. Now I am able to meet all the basic needs of my family — clothing, education — which otherwise would have been impossible, because my husband has no work. An added bonus is that I am now looked upon with respect, because of the role I play in the project.'

'There are six women in our group. Solange buys clothes and sells them in the market. Ramatou and I buy material in the central market and sell it in the Sabalibougou market. Another woman goes to Banan, which is 80 km away, and comes back the same day. She buys shea nuts, curdled milk, aubergines, and chickens, and then sells them in the local market. Fatima buys a whole truck-load of wood and sells it little by little; it can take up to 15 days. Sassetan buys vegetables from a market garden nearby.'

(Fani, leader of a women's credit group in Bamako)
leaving home early in the morning to conceal their lack of work from their children.

In Sabalibougou, seeing their women benefit from the OMAFES credit scheme prompted the men to ask for membership. The women supported their request. The success of this new venture is perhaps partly due to the fact that most people in this community come from the same rural area of Mali, so a sense of loyalty to friends and neighbours has created the necessary social bonds that ensure regular repayments.

Mamedi Keita, a stallholder in N’Gol Onina Market, talks about the benefits of the OMAFES scheme: ‘I’m the eldest son in my family. My father is sick, so the responsibility for meeting all the needs of my family falls on me. There is my father, who has three wives, my own immediate family, plus brothers and sisters, and altogether it comes to about 18 people.

‘I like my trade very well; I have ambitions for my shop. Its name translates as “Traditions of Africa”, and I would like to be able to sell traditional handcrafts from all over West Africa, not just from Mali. With the loan from OMAFES I have acquired more space to display my merchandise, and met some of my household’s personal needs.

‘My wife sells incense at our house. She doesn’t go out to sell in the market. She wasn’t eligible for the credit scheme, because she is not a member of the association. I gave her some of my credit, so she could start her own business, selling incense.’

**A women’s group that men can join**

Unlike many credit schemes in Mali and elsewhere in Africa, the Sabalibougou project has successfully widened its scope to include men as well as women. In development circles, it is often said that providing credit to men is a sure way of losing the money, and that wives and children will never benefit, because the men prefer to meet some other priority. But generally, Malian men do provide for their families — if they can get work. In Bamako many women tell of fathers