

City life

A tourist's view of Gao

Gao is the northernmost city in Mali. Bamako, the capital, is 1,200 km away. Gao is a place of wide sandy avenues and open spaces. There is a traditional mud mosque and French colonial buildings of faded pink stucco and shady colonnades. Most people live in square, mud houses with roofs made concave to catch water. On the wide green waters of the River Niger, fishermen glide by in their graceful boats, called *pirogues*. Along the banks, women are washing up, scrubbing cooking pots with sand, doing their laundry, pounding millet. In the distance, the distinctive huts of Fulani herders look like up-turned baskets; close by, black and white smudges mark where their sheep and goats lie ruminating in the sun. A flat-bottomed, blue metal ferry with a noisy Italian engine and a spluttering exhaust chugs across the river, weighed down with trucks and carts, trinket sellers and doughnut vendors, and jostling livestock. Camels, sheep, and goats scavenge in the rubbish at the side of the roads. The whole place has a baked, scorched feeling, and shimmers in the heat. Citizens of Gao, both men and women, wear vibrant, stunning colours: flowing *boubous* of scarlet and cobalt blue, or rich, glazed cloth of dark green or brown. The men wear dazzling white turbans, elaborately wound round their heads for protection against wind and sand; the women's scarves are fashioned into elegant folds and peaks. They stand out like jewels against the red-brown backdrop of Gao.



Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam

above Pots on sale in
Tonka market

What the tourist doesn't see

Gao is the fastest-growing city in Mali. It lacks the most basic services and infrastructure needed by a rapidly expanding population, which will soon reach 70,000. In 1960, only five per cent of Malians lived in cities. By 1990 that figure was up to 23 per cent. It is expected to reach 38 per cent by the year 2000. The population of Bamako has multiplied more than ten-fold in the last thirty years: from 76,000 in 1958 to nearly one million in 1995.

One reason for the alarming rate of urban expansion is the high birth-rate; but another, equally valid, is the constant migration from the countryside. The rural exodus has become the modern form of initiation, bringing young people into contact with other ways of living, and putting their personal strengths to the test. Life in the big cities is precarious. People's needs are more numerous and varied, and the traditional solidarity systems which used to provide for those in difficulty quickly disintegrate in an urban setting. Delinquency is on the rise in all its forms: violence, theft, drug addiction, and prostitution.

The industrial and manufacturing sector of the Malian economy is extremely weak. Without skills relevant to city life, permanent jobs are almost impossible to find. Most people try to earn a livelihood in the precarious 'informal sector' — selling anything they can get their hands on. On every street corner there are young and not so young people, selling pirated music cassettes, cigarettes, tourist trinkets, shoe-shining services, Nigerian or Taiwanese watches, and so on. It pays for the next meal, but not much more.

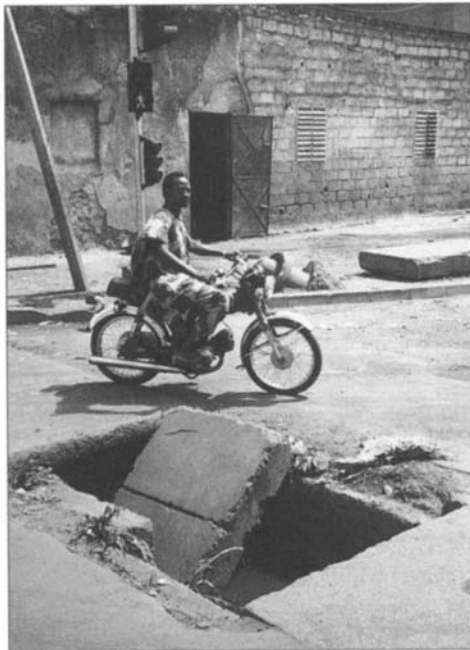
The lack of low-cost housing has forced thousands to the edges of the cities, where their way of life is neither urban nor rural. In Bamako, 30 per cent of the population live in peripheral shanty-towns, in cramped and insanitary housing that,



James Hawkins/Oxfam

above Domestic utensils made from old oil-drums and wrecked cars in a workshop near Bamako's Hippodrome Market

right A pothole in the road in Bamako



James Hawkins/Oxfam

being illegal, is often constructed by night. Throughout the city, only 38 per cent of homes have access to running water; 17 per cent are served by electricity; and garbage-removal services are entirely inadequate.

City life, seasonal migration, and rural exodus make for a highly mobile population of young men and women. Traditional social patterns break down, and the almost inevitable result is the spread of HIV-infection: the present rate for urban populations in Mali is 4 per cent. With an inadequate health-care system, and an almost non-existent communication strategy on AIDS prevention, there is now widespread fear that a full-blown epidemic could be on the way.



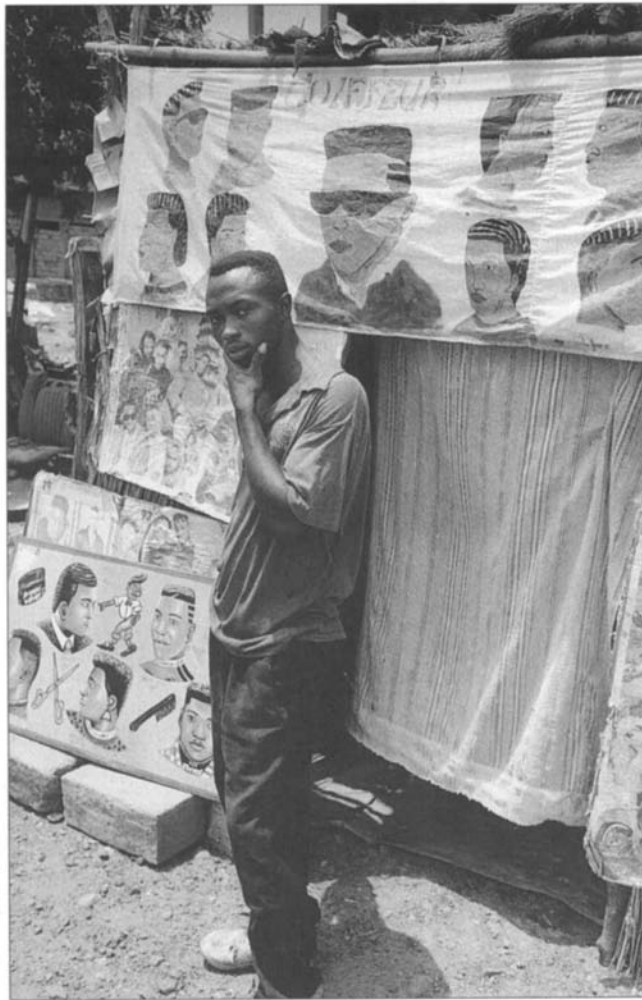
left The informal sector in action: making nails out of old oil drums in Mopti

below Hoes, ploughs, buckets, and cooking utensils made from recycled metal

James Hawkins/Oxfam

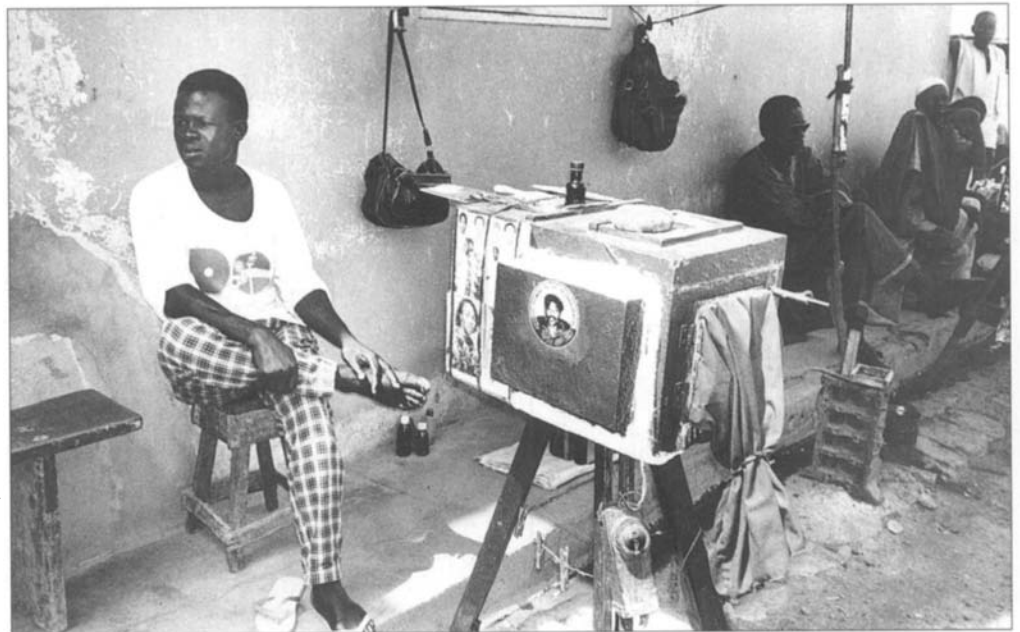


Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam



James Hawkins/Oxfam

Enterprise on the streets: instant passport photos (below), supplied to hopeful migrants like Dominie Josy Mensou (left), a barber from Ghana. Trying to work his way north towards Europe, he was refused entry into Mauritania and forced to turn back. Like hundreds of other Ghanaians, he is now trapped in Mali, lacking the money to return home.



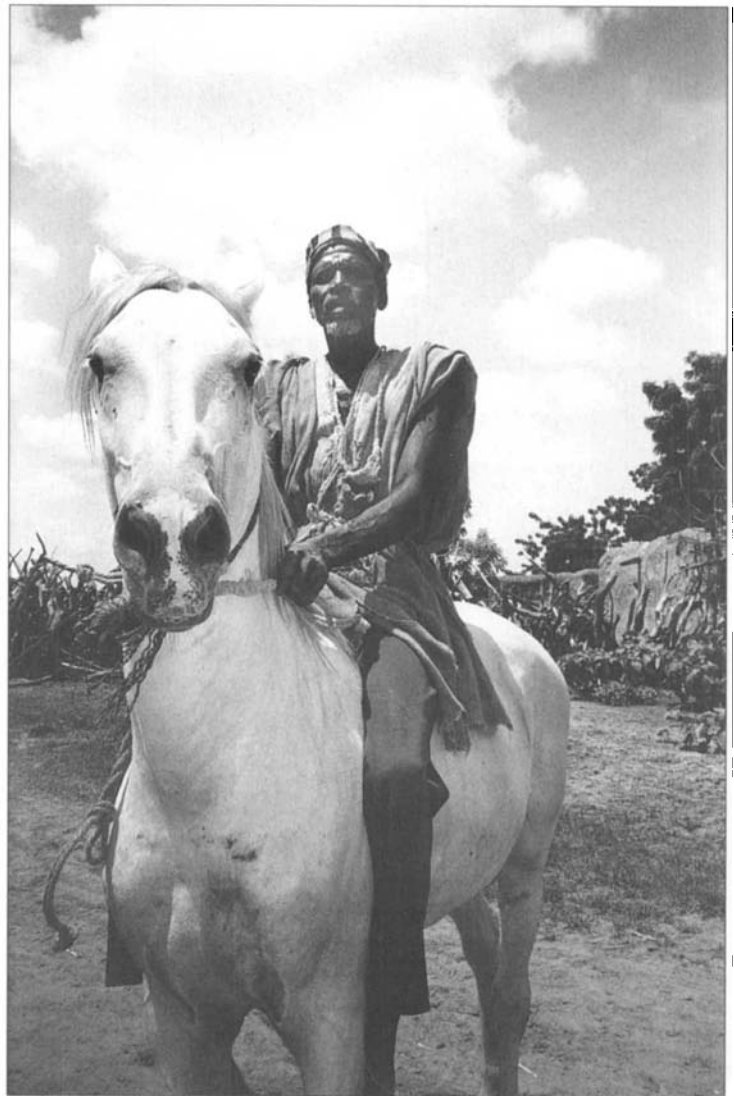
James Hawkins/Oxfam

A nation at the crossroads

During the last ten years, Malians have lived through profound and numerous changes as they tried to erase nearly a century of authoritarian rule which had defiled their very souls and their sense of honour.

Decades of colonial rule, followed by centralised mismanagement and generalised corruption, estranged ordinary Malians from those who 'governed' them. The agricultural potential of this formerly productive country suffered the pernicious consequences of drought, famine, and environmental damage. Worse still, government agents and their policies alienated the peasants and farmers with their contempt and ignorance of those who, for centuries, had accumulated expertise in the science of producing crops from the Sahel. Government administrators and politicians were just local potentates, bent on accumulating power and money at the expense of those they were supposed to serve.

In self-defence, Malians retreated to the only other source of trust and stability they knew: the traditional beliefs of the elders. But the world was changing dramatically, and soon even these old ways were being attacked from within. The oppression of women by men, and of young people by the old, were major obstacles which prevented the most dynamic and resourceful members of Malian society from playing their roles as agents of change and development. Toiling in difficult conditions, Malian women and young people were denied any autonomy, their incomes appropriated by their elders, while their voices and grievances went unheard. Stifled and



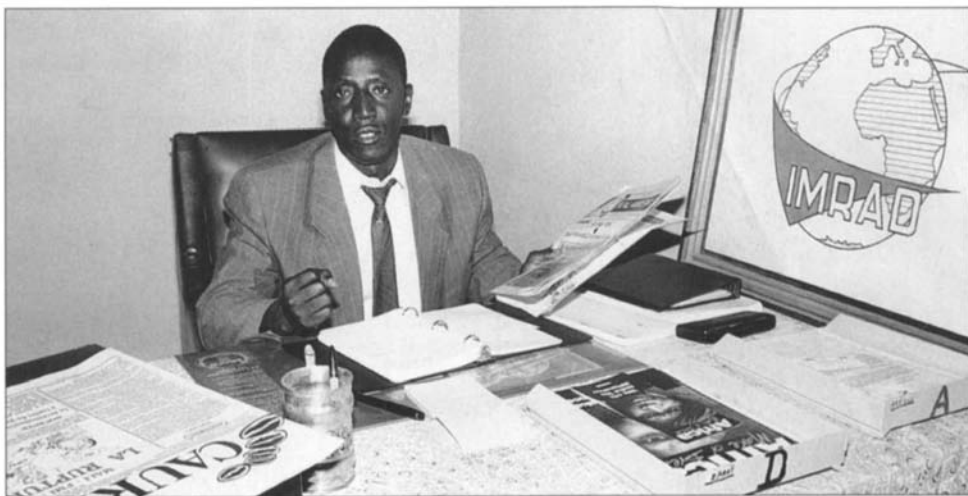
James Hawkins/Oxfam

frustrated, the young escaped to urban centres, where they encountered new freedoms but also misery and hardship.

Throughout the 1980s, many attempts were made to stop the country from surrendering to fatalism and unthinking submission. But they were mostly

above A village elder in Sekolo, near Mourdiah

right Cheibane Coulibaly, newspaper editor in Bamako



James Hawkins/Oxfam

external solutions, proposed by international agencies and their teams of 'experts'. Drastic structural plans were devised by international technocrats; innumerable seminars were held to diagnose symptoms and propose solutions. But one key element remained absent from these exercises: Malians themselves.

The 1990s saw Malians take matters into their own hands. In the words of Moussa Traoré, the former dictator: *'You have to be very wary of Malians, as they are like a spring ... you can push so much, but one day that spring will bounce back and kick you in the face'*. And they did bounce back! The Touareg rebellion, the new student movement, the democratic associations, and the suicidal marches that toppled his regime were part of that 'kick in the face'. However, most of the protestors were not motivated by a thirst for democracy: theirs was a cry of despair.

What followed was no less than revolutionary, as the National Conference debated the vision of a new Mali: proposing a new constitution, establishing decentralisation as the backbone of democracy, legalising multi-party politics, drawing up a new electoral code and process, liberating the media, promoting freedom of speech and association ... This all took place in only three chaotic years, with a modicum of unrest and with respect for democratic principles.

For the huge majority of ordinary Malians — more than 70 per cent of the population — who live below the poverty line, democracy has not yet brought about any tangible and positive changes in their situation. Misery, disease, and ignorance are still the experience of too many. But for anyone who has witnessed the daily struggles of the people, both before and after the recent events, the changes are awesome. Could many countries undergo such upheavals without giving in to disorder and mass violence? Mali did, and it was able to do so because Malians had decided most of the changes, and knew that the very existence of the nation was at stake.

In towns and villages and urban ghettos, men and women, students and youth are organising, creating associations and NGOs, contributing to newspapers, participating in community projects, working on decentralisation committees, and so on. As in Koro and Sabalibougou, they are fighting the system, setting the standards of what democracy *a la Malienne* will become. The stakes are enormous, the challenge inspiring.

Yet people in the rich North rarely, if ever, hear or read about any of this through the media. When one of the poorest and most repressed countries in the world throws away its shackles, sets

up democratic institutions, and tries to resolve civil conflict peacefully, this does not make headlines. When a resource-poor country tries to clean up its financial management, restructures its administration by giving powers to local communities, and encourages constitutional freedoms, the changes go unnoticed. Mali has made the right choices, but in all likelihood will have to make do with less external support from a world that seems bent on cutting aid budgets.

The hardest choices have been made. The effort required is undeniable, as even

the poorer people engage in the emergence of a civil society. The problems of population growth, environmental decline, urban blight, disease, and ignorance will continue to play havoc with the hopes of all Malians. The new Mali does not have many options. The failures of the past and the challenges of the future will not be overcome without the deployment of Mali's greatest natural resource: its men and women, sons and daughters of nomads and farmers, creators of empires and designers of *cousinage*.

left A Touareg man in Gangano Village, near Bourem



Dates and events

1076–1235 Sosso Kingdom under Kanté

1235–1480s First Mali Empire

1493 Askia Mohamed founds Songhay Empire

1591 Moroccan invasion

1594 Destruction of Timbuktu University

1633 Kaarta Kingdom founded by Massassi Coulibaly

1712 Reign of Biton Coulibaly

1862 Holy *jihād* by Oumar Tall; creation of Ségou Kingdom

1880–1899 French invasion challenges Empire of Samory Touré

1900 Touré dies in captivity; Mali becomes a French territory

1960 4 April, creation of Federation of Mali with Senegal; 22 September, Federation broken; Republic of Mali proclaimed under President Modibo Keita

1968 *Coup d'état* led by Moussa Traoré

June 1990 Start of Touareg rebellion

March 1991 Mass discontent leads to military coup led by Colonel Touré and establishment of transitional government

April 1992 *Pacte National* brings temporary peace to the north

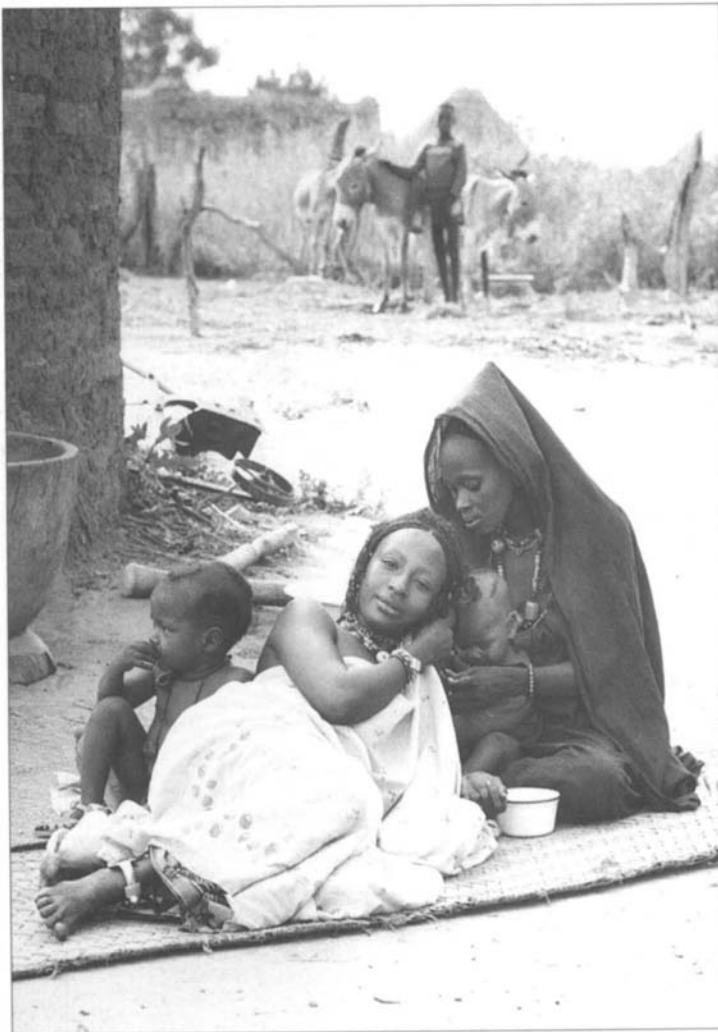
June 1992 Alpha Konaré becomes Mali's first democratically elected President

1994 Collapse of *Pacte National*; armed conflict spreads from the north to most areas of Mali

December 1994 Local NGOs in northern Mali begin the process of reconciliation.

June 1995 Peace restored.

below A young woman has her hair braided in Dili Village, north-west Mali



Mike Goldwater/Oxfam

Mali: facts and figures

Land area: 1,240,000 sq km

Population: 10.76 million (1995 estimate)

Annual population growth: 3.1 per cent

Life expectancy at birth: 46 years

Main urban centres: Bamako (pop. est. 900,000); Ségou (88,000); Sikasso (75,000); Mopti (75,000); Gao (55,000); Kayes (51,000); Koutiala (49,000)

Principal ethnic groups: Bambara, Malinké, Mandingué, Sarakolé, Bozo, Bobo, Senoufou, Peuhl, Dogon, Touareg, Songhay, Moors

Languages: Official language French (used by urban elite only); Bamanakan (dominant language of commerce) and several other national languages are widely spoken

Adult literacy: 11 per cent of women, 23 per cent of men

Primary school enrolment: 30 per cent of boys, 17 per cent of girls

Infant mortality: 161 per 1,000 live births

Maternal mortality: 850 per 100,000

Malnutrition: 31 per cent of under-fives

Vaccinations: 25 per cent of children

Access to clean water: 17 per cent of the population

Exchange rate: £1.00 = 700 CFA francs

Annual GDP per capita: US\$280

GDP growth rate: 5.2 per cent (1995)



Mike Goldwater/Oxfam

Foreign debt: US\$2.8 billion (1995)

Main agricultural products: millet, sorghum, cotton, rice, livestock, peanuts

Principal exports: cotton (\$156m in 1994); livestock and livestock products (\$110m); gold (\$62m)

above Bali Village, north-west Mali, viewed from the air

Sources and further reading

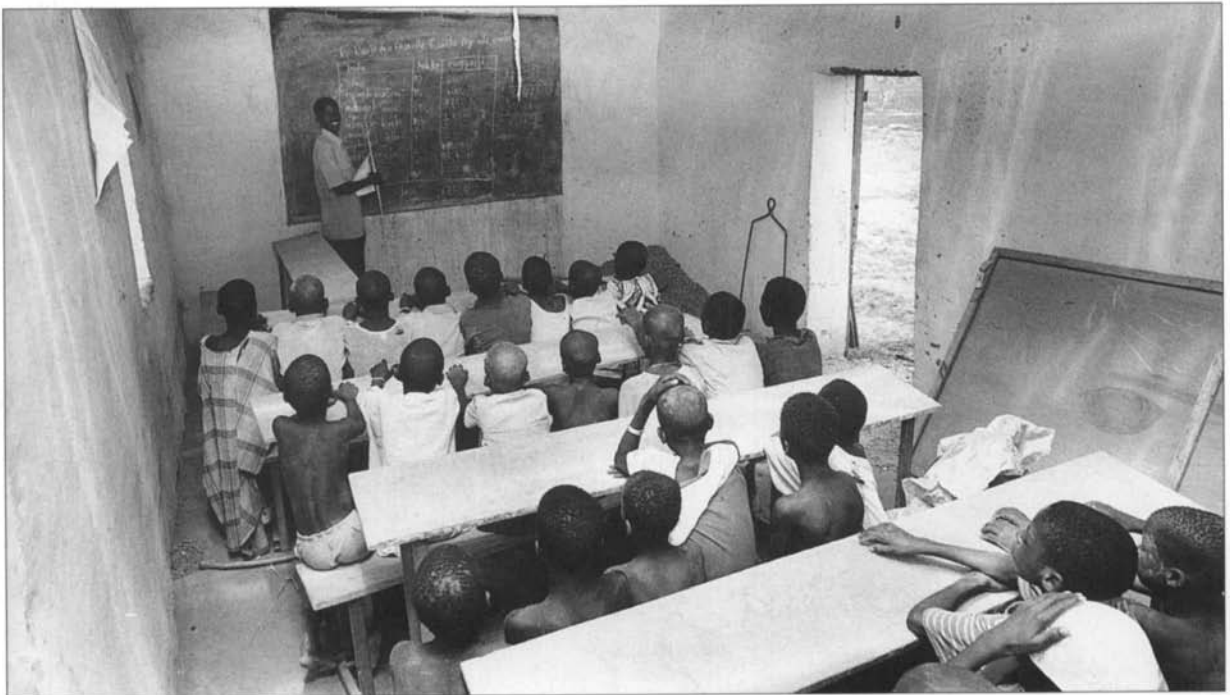
Very little has been written in English about Mali, apart from highly academic studies of social and environmental topics. The present book drew on the following sources:

- Le Mali*, by Joseph Roger de Benoist, published by L'Harmattan, Paris (1989)
A Short History of West Africa, AD 1000 to the Present Day, by T.A. Osae, S.N. Nwabara, and A.T.O. Odunsi, published by Hill and Wang (1973)
UNDP Human Development Report, published annually by Oxford University Press
Mali: Evaluation des conditions de vie, published by the World Bank in 1993
Strategies d'assistance de la Banque Mondiale au Mali, published by the World Bank (1994)

Other relevant resources:

- Adaptable Livelihoods: Coping with Food Insecurity in the Malian Sahel*, by Susanna Davies, published by Macmillan (London), 1996
At the Desert's Edge: Oral Histories from the Sahel, edited by Nigel Cross and Rhiannon Barker, published by Panos/SOS Sahel (London), 1993
Changing Places? Women, Resource Management, and Migration in the Sahel, edited by Rosalind David, published by SOS Sahel (London), 1995
Living in the Sahel, an interactive video-disc about Mali, containing 25,000 photographs, 70 minutes of live sound recordings, and 20 minutes of documentary film; £10.00 from Anglia Multi-Media, Norwich NR1 3JG, UK

below Baba Dicko teaching a literacy class at Poy village



James Hawkins/Oxfam

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Rhéal Drisdelle



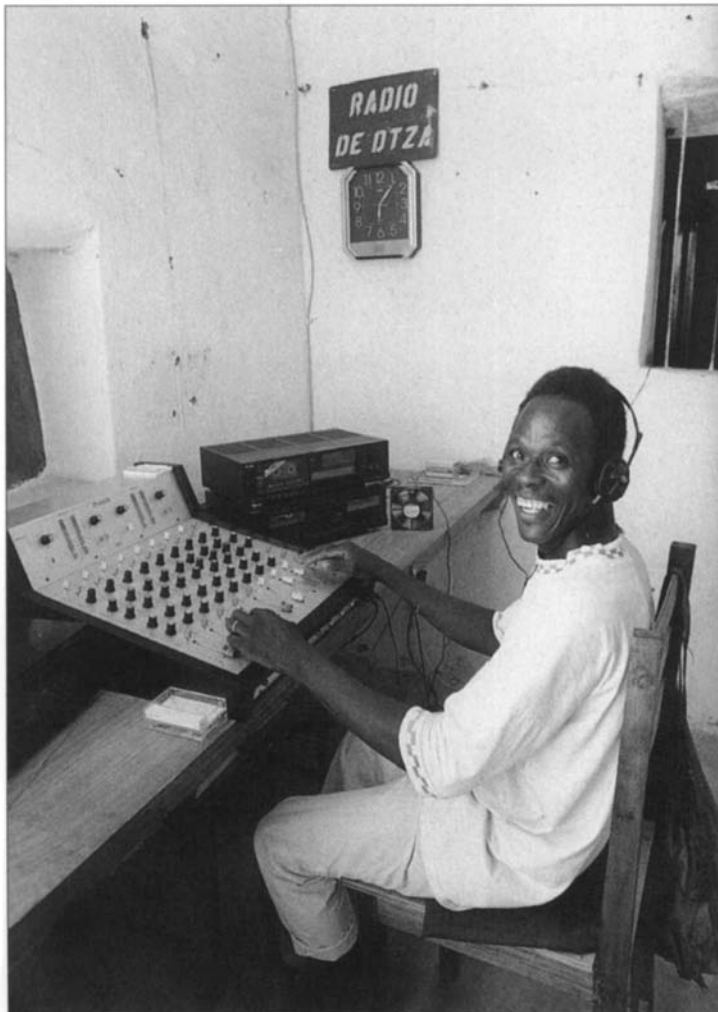
right Friends in a millet field, Sekolo Village, Circle of Nara

James Hawkins/Oxfam

Oxfam in Mali

Most of the projects, people, and communities featured in this book are supported by Oxfam (UK and Ireland), which first became engaged in community development work in Mali in the late 1960s. The Oxfam programme expanded during the trans-Saharan drought of 1983-84, and has concentrated ever since on the more isolated and arid regions of the country. A new initiative

below Boubacar Dicko, technician at the Oxfam-funded Radio Douentza



began in 1991, with the establishment of an urban programme, based mainly in Bamako.

Oxfam's community-based development programme includes support for food-security projects; the conservation of soil and water resources; the installation of water supplies; large and small credit schemes for rural and urban women; and training in literacy and financial management skills.

In addition to these long-term programmes, working in partnership with local non-government organisations, Oxfam has been involved in the democratisation and decentralisation process, and the peace and reconciliation process in northern Mali.

To strengthen local democracy, Oxfam has supported the emergence of an independent rural radio station in the north; instituted training for Malian NGOs on democracy and decentralisation; stimulated debate by organising regional meetings between NGOs, politicians, and government administrators; and has served on a National Training Committee for the Implementation of Decentralisation.

As part of the community-based process of peace and reconciliation, Oxfam has supported the courageous network of NGOs in the north who successfully encouraged communities from both sides of the conflict to sit down together and resolve their differences. Together these communities and NGOs persuaded the combatants to lay down their arms and join them in discussing the prospects for peace and to ask for forgiveness in a joint quest for reconciliation.

left An Oxfam-funded well under construction near Timbuktu



Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam

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