

Women break down barriers in Mali

In the village of Zamblara, gender differences as well as caste division have long been clearly defined. Ten years ago, a group of women set up its own organisation of rice producers. Through Participatory Learning and Action Research (PLAR) activities, the group has not only managed to increase rice production, but the regular sessions have broken down traditional barriers between women and men as well as between castes.

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Surrounded by rolling hills, Zamblara looks like many of the villages found in the semi-arid region in the south west of Mali. Most inhabitants rely on agriculture. During the brief rainy season, men grow maize, sorghum, groundnuts and other crops on the higher ground, while women grow rice in low lying, seasonally-flooded areas near the villages. During the long dry season, men and women grow vegetables in the low areas after harvesting the rice.

While all farmers face many difficulties (lack of seeds, water, credit or assistance), women face additional barriers and hardships. In this part of Mali, women are rarely considered equal to men in social and economic status. There is a gender bias at all levels of society, and the agricultural sector is no exception. Women, for example, cannot inherit or own land. Furthermore, Zamblara, like most villages in this region, is also divided according to caste – some families are assigned a higher status (as “nobles”) while others are grouped as descendants of slaves. The direct implication of this division is the social separation of tasks within the village.

More than 10 years ago, a group of women decided to form an organisation of rice producers, and to help themselves increase production and incomes. Known as “*Kotognogontala*” or “mutual respect”, the group was set up as a way to exchange knowledge and good agricultural practices among the community. In 2002 its leaders approached the Africa Rice Center (WARDA), interested in the training activities carried out by the Participatory Adaptation and Diffusion of Technologies for Rice-based Systems (PADS) project. This project began in 2000 with activities in Côte d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana and Guinea, and since 2002 also in Mali. Its



Women in Zamblara sing one of their compositions about new rice technology.

overall objective was to contribute to an increase in rice production, crop diversification and rural revenue generation. It would do this through the development and adaptation of appropriate innovations for improved crop management. In short, it hoped to improve the livelihoods of resource-poor farmers in western Africa. To obtain the greatest benefit from relatively small investments, PADS focused on the inland valley systems because of their great potential to become the food basket of Africa. It was also felt that water, irrigation and drainage activities can unite farmers and bring them together for bottom-up social learning processes.

Firstly on an experimental basis, and later throughout the project, PADS adopted the Participatory Learning and Action Research (or PLAR) approach (see box). PLAR follows some of the Farmer Field School ideas (such as weekly sessions supported by a facilitator, working from land preparation to harvest) while stimulating experiential learning. It combines them with different PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) tools that help make processes and procedures visible, helping farmers and facilitators interact to learn about local agriculture and its constraints.

Local innovations

Even before the project, the women of Zamblara used few chemical inputs, as they are expensive and not always available.

Making use of group experiences

The Participatory Learning and Action Research approach is an adult learning methodology which makes use of the experiences of the members of a group. Working with groups of about 25 people, different sessions cover the whole cropping season. Activities – in this case – follow the development of the rice crop (following a curriculum specially developed for inland valley rice cultivation). Farmers analyse their own practices, discover problems and look for ways to solve them. The curriculum teaches new practices (e.g. transplanting), but instead of transferring technologies, the facilitators encourage farmers to share and reflect on their own experiences. Through this, they can find the solutions themselves, and experiment with new ideas to find techniques which are practical and adapted to specific local solutions.

PLAR places more emphasis on local innovations and farmer experimentations than do either Farmer Field Schools or PRA.

Farmers are not considered to be potential “recipients” or “adopters” of new technologies; the idea is to create a process which stimulates the farmers into discovering and innovating themselves. Unlike the FFS approach, which focuses on a group learning plot, PLAR encourages each farmer to experiment on a small portion of his or her own land. PLAR presents farmers with new ideas every week, which each farmer is free to try (or not) at home. The team of PLAR facilitators often includes one member from extension services, research or an NGO, and one farmer. PLAR’s weekly sessions use many learning tools, such as cropping calendars, maps, diagrams, field observations and monitoring forms. These tools help make things visible so that the group and facilitators interact and learn together. In 28 sessions, the learning tools cover all aspects of integrated crop management, such as land preparation, nursery and transplanting, water management, weeds and pest management, but also harvest, post-harvest and marketing.

Most people rely on traditional practices. As well as encouraging them, the PLAR sessions worked on developing these options further, confronting the major problem related to external inputs: their affordability and availability. During the PLAR training, the women organised their own trial to compare compost vs. chemical fertilizer vs. a blend (compost plus chemical fertilizer). As a result, they now favour compost mixed with small amounts of urea and rock phosphate. They have also developed their own strategies to control pests. These include using neem (*Azadirachta indica*) powder; a mix of laundry detergent and kerosene; or simply by weeding the edges of the rice plot with hoes to eliminate the places where moths lay eggs which hatch into stem borers.

PLAR has helped increase rice production in the village, and many of their neighbours are now interested in the new techniques. The four PLAR groups that were formed in Zamblara each had a farmer-facilitator. Although the PLAR modules were written in French, they have been (verbally) translated into the local language, Bambara. The women have adapted the content, composing songs and poems about the rice-farming modules.

And while the women of Zamblara have their own small plots of rice land, the group also works one collective field of one and a half hectares. They grow rice in the rainy season and vegetables in the dry season. When the women harvest the rice from this plot they sell some of it and keep it as a group fund. They have been dividing some of the rice among themselves, and keeping the rest to use for their meals during group activities.

Breaking barriers

From an original group of 27 people, the association has grown and now is formed by four groups with 115 women and two men. In Mali most women's groups have at least some men in them. In this one, the village chief is the honorary president and another man attends to monitor the women's activities. They all feel that the group has helped improve relations between men and women. The group gives the women a place where they can talk about their problems with men, and give each other advice. Participants recognise how women are less scared to talk in village meetings, participating more actively in them, and contributing every time a decision needs to be taken. Furthermore, the association is now accepted by the men in the village, a fact seen in their willingness to leave land for the women in the association to grow a crop.

PLAR has helped minimise the difference between categories of people. In the training, people experiment together, eat together and sing together, disregarding gender or caste. The weekly PLAR sessions helped increase contact between all villagers, in particular between women of different origins. The gap between the two castes has broken down. The women are so united that they have built a small house where they can meet. It is made of adobe (mud) bricks, but has a corrugated sheet metal roof and wooden windows and a door. They built it themselves and paid for the materials with money they earned on their collective plot. The women feel less lonely and isolated. As one woman said: "Low caste and noble persons are the same since PLAR". With the PADS project and the implementation of the PLAR approach, this stigmatisation has been broken down and the unity of people was strengthened.

Furthermore, this new cohesion is not limited to agricultural practices. The PADS project helped the women conduct a "well-being analysis" (similar to "wealth ranking"). When the women realised that some of their neighbours were too poor to afford to eat three meals a day, they began to help each other with food and labour. The women's groups are strong and the men have accepted them. The women now participate more in

village activities (infrastructural development, milling machine establishment). The solid partnerships that the women have created with NGOs and government agencies, improve their power in village decision-making. Women's improved financial and material standing empowers them and erodes the cultural barriers in this region of Mali, where until recently village decisions were taken largely by men alone.

The group currently contributes to infrastructure development and is becoming a pressure group in the village. The group is viable through their own fund coming from members' contributions, collective land crop selling, or labour services payment (especially when these women work on men fields). Some are also on the waiting list to join the group.



Photo: Jeff Bentley

Social differences became unimportant after the group's successful activities. Here, women chat outside the house they all built together.

Reinforcing social relations

Most women are glad that they are growing more rice and finding low external input pest control measures. But even more important, they say, is that they have now found unity. "The future belongs to the organised people," states one Zamblara woman. The women in Zamblara say that PLAR reinforces the social relations and strengthened the human capital. Although the initiative came from the community itself, it was by adding the well-being analysis that the community was able to visualise their individual and overall well-being and that action for social inclusion received a boost. The PADS project has already ended, but the groups are still working together. ■

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