



## RURAL WOMEN'S ASSOCIATIONS AND SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE IN CASAMANCE



**Location: Casamance, Senegal**

*An innovative community program supporting rural women's associations boosts gender equality and provides resources that facilitate family and community well being.*

### CHALLENGE<sup>1</sup>

Known for its rich natural resources and land fertility, southern Senegal's Casamance region has long supplied the rest of the country with an abundance of food. However, during colonial rule and the post-independence period, Casamance resources were diverted to the powerful elite, leaving the local population with extreme economic hardship. The marginalization was particularly acute for the Diola majority, who differ from the rest of the country in their cultural and religious practices—a decentralized and egalitarian social system that prioritizes women and gives them a prominent role in food production.

In the 1970s, funding flowed into the country in response to severe Sahelian droughts,<sup>2</sup> but in the 1980s, World Bank and IMF structural adjustment programs negatively impacted public funding for agriculture in Senegal.<sup>3</sup> Since 1982, the emergence of an armed rebel movement for Casamance's independence resulted in twenty years of bitter conflict with government forces and violence which led to the destruction of villages, the displacement of tens of thousands and the stagnation of the once vibrant local economy.

Since the 2004 peace agreement, women who returned to villages and went back to farming in Casamance are developing their own peasant farmer organizations and networks to take advantage of new opportunities: the right to own land, a decentralization process that gives more decision-making power and resources to rural communities, and international funding to improve roads and increase farmers' connection to markets.

A variety of constraints nonetheless persist for women farmers, including land mines that haven't been cleared from rice fields, increased soil salinization due to rising sea water levels, heavy domestic workload and illiteracy, lack of access to capital, lack of inclusion in national formulation of agricultural policies and priorities, and increasing pressure from government and the private sector to adopt farming methods that foster dependence on hybrid seeds and accompanying inputs.

### RESPONSE

Donors and development agencies are often unwilling to give direct funding to rural women's groups. Between 2006 and 2012, the US-based New Field Foundation has developed an innovative program in collaboration with local partners, to award community grants to rural women's groups' farming activities, sustainable technologies, knowledge sharing, and monitoring.

## Profile of some select Community Grantmaking Organizations

*Comité Régional de Solidarité des Femmes pour la Paix en Casamance, CRSFPC/USOFORAL*

In 1999, women's organizations came together in a forum that led to the birth of the Comité Régional de Solidarité des Femmes pour la Paix en Casamance /USOFORAL—or “Let's join hands” in the Diola language. USOFORAL links its members to financial and technical partners. It also supports a network of rural women's groups, REFECE, which has more than 1,000 members from 24 rural groups across 14 villages.

*Association Sénégalaise de Producteurs de Semences Paysannes (ASPSP)*

A number of women's farming groups receive training in agro-ecological practices from ASPSP (association of seed producers), which links 15 regional farmer organizations, with a total of 63,000 members, the majority of whom are women. ASPSP promotes seed autonomy by collecting and encouraging the production of local seed varieties. The organization holds an annual Senegalese seed fair and, every two years, organizes a West African seed fair attended by farmers from all over the region. ASPSP helps women's groups build empirical agricultural knowledge, improve their autonomy over food production, and share agro-ecological yield-boosting techniques.

*World Education*

Community radio is an important medium for rural women's associations. In 2007, World Education established a network of local radios promoting peace and development; these are owned and run by local community organizations and many promote sustainable agriculture. Community radio in Casamance gives a voice to farmers, both female and male, with extensive sharing of local farming practices and debates on new technologies.<sup>4</sup>

*Association des Jeunes Agriculteurs et Eleveurs du Département d'Oussouye (AJAEDO)*

AJAEDO is an association of young farmers and animal breeders; 75 percent of its members are women. AJAEDO awards community grants and provides training to its 21 community-based member groups for agricultural production, market gardening, creation of community shops, and other activities that enable rural women to increase their food resources and income. In 2008 and 2009, AJAEDO conducted a successful pilot project with five women's groups using solar pumps and drip irrigation to produce organic vegetables, resulting in significantly reduced work for women and increased yields. As a result, AJAEDO expanded the scheme to an additional ten women's groups in 2011.

By disseminating knowledge and fostering connections, ASPSP helps women's groups build empirical agricultural knowledge, improve their autonomy over food production, and share yield-boosting techniques.



Members of CASADES proudly display their onion harvest. © ACA



Members of ASPSP march at the 2011 World Social Forum in Dakar.  
© Awa Tounkara





Members of DIRFEL-Kolda walking to a newly installed well in their fields. © ACA

#### *Association des Jeunes Agricoles de Casamance (AJAC-Lukaal)*

AJAC-Lukaal provides agricultural and technical services to rural groups and helps channel international donor funding to rural communities. AJAC-Lukaal has some 3,500 farmer-members, of whom 75 percent are women. From 2006 to 2010, the organization awarded thirty-six \$5,000 grants to 16 rural women's groups. Groups have used grants for a variety of purposes: to install solar pumps for drip irrigation; produce organic fertilizer; boost seed conservation; construct wells; create irrigation systems; and install protective fencing for cultivated areas. All grantees receive training in organic farming techniques as well as financial and project management. Among AJAC's grantees, six women's groups engaged with their local rural council to gain title to the land they farmed. This inspired women from neighboring villages to ask their leaders to grant them ownership of the lands they farmed.

#### *Comité d'Appui et de Soutien au Développement Economique et Social des régions de Ziguinchor et de Kolda (CASADES)*

CASADES currently works with 62 rural women's groups to promote agriculture, livestock, and commercial products, and in particular to support their rice-farming for home consumption and commercial sale.

#### *DIRFEL-Kolda*

DIRFEL-Kolda is the Casamance branch of the national women's organization, DINFEL. Its goal is to increase the profitability of women-owned small livestock-breeding operations. Most of its 1,200 female members are primary breadwinners, and collectively responsible for some 7,000 people in their households. Activities include training women in traditional livestock breeding, developing business skills, increasing civic participation, and supporting family health and food security through organic fruit and vegetable production for home consumption and sale.

#### *Forum pour un Développement Durable et Endogène (FODDE)*

FODDE promotes food security for poor households, equal access to basic social services, and capacity-building for grassroots community organizations in Kolda, an immigration zone whose food supply is dwindling because of deforestation and poor land use. Active in 70 villages, FODDE has a direct impact on approximately 26,000 people. Community grants—the average distribution is \$5,000—enable rural women's groups to grow vegetables, produce rice and palm oil, and engage in other activities that improve their quality of life.

## RESULTS

- Between 2006 and 2012, New Field Foundation provided 90 main grants to 20 non-profits serving rural women in Casamance, totaling \$3.5 million. In turn, 6 of the beneficiary groups have awarded 257 community grants totaling over \$1.3 million and benefiting 116 rural women's groups.<sup>5</sup>
- Identifying and monitoring progress among rural women's groups in Casamance can be challenging, as cumulative change happens slowly, especially given the cultural constraints. Nonetheless, some rapid positive shifts occur when rural women convene, identify problems and come up with solutions—for example voting several of their representatives onto the local council to influence the rural district budget, or installing a rice huller that reduces domestic labor from several hours to a few minutes.
- An evaluation published in 2014 by New Field Foundation surveyed 379 female grant beneficiaries, and showed that awarding \$5,000 a year for at least two years to women's community organizations improved participants and their household's wellbeing and economic stability. Among the benefits, education for children, health and food are particularly improved. For instance, 72 percent of the surveyed women reported grant-supported activities helped them to respond better to their family's health needs. As regards to food, 78 percent of women stated that grant-supported activities improved family nutrition, 55 percent reported better food quality and 36 percent increased food quantities. AJAC-Lukaal estimates that members of its networks receiving grants grow 60 percent of their own food. Despite

these improvements, some challenges persist for food provision in rural Casamance, where, especially during the lean season, families struggle to provide three daily meals.

More specifically, rural women's groups in the Casamance community grant-making program have achieved many positive changes. They have:

- Purchased seeds, livestock, and basic farming equipment, which significantly increase food production, community nutrition and income. Increased the area of land collectively farmed by the group, from a few hectares to several hundred hectares.
- Secured official titles to land to ensure registered group ownership for collective farming activities. Purchased, installed and maintained sustainable agricultural technologies to increase group income and reduce women's work. Equipment includes solar pumps, multi-functional platforms, and rice hullers.
- Introduced activities to process and add value to locally cultivated goods, with USOFORAL establishing a factory producing vinegar made from local surplus mangoes. The factory can produce 30,000 liters a year of vinegar "La Delice," which is marketed in Senegal and neighboring countries. Profits support USOFORAL operating costs and its members groups.
- Planted and harvested a greater diversity of crops for local consumption, such as cabbage, carrots, okra, sorrel, grapefruit, mangoes and oranges. Traditional Casamance seeds as well as improved seed varieties from peasant communities in other parts of Senegal have been used to grow these crops.
- Shared knowledge to increase agricultural production in ways that are culturally, ecologically and financially sustainable.
- Provided training and support to 500 women to establish a micro-finance savings program combined with health information.
- Ensured that three rural women are elected onto district councils and other local institutions, which decide how to allocate agricultural resources and formulate local level agricultural policies.
- Maintained contact with district council members to keep them informed of rural women's issues.
- Built rural women's leadership and networks and attracted additional funding for their groups.

**Figure 1: Percentage of people reporting improvement in food consumption**



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

[www.oaklandinstitute.org](http://www.oaklandinstitute.org)

[www.afsafrica.org](http://www.afsafrica.org)

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Unless otherwise indicated, information in this case study comes from New Field Foundation's website. ([www.newfieldfound.org](http://www.newfieldfound.org)) and *Rural Women's Association and Sustainable Agriculture in Rural Casamance, Senegal*. New Field Foundation, 2010. <http://www.newfieldfound.org/pdfs/CaseStudyCasamancePhotos.pdf> (accessed December 15, 2014).
- 2 Lachenmann, Gudrun. "Informal Social Security in Africa From a Gender Perspective." in Baud, Isa and Ines Smyth (eds). *Searching for Security: Women's Responses to Economic Transformations*. London, New-York: Routledge, 1997.
- 3 Claassen, Emil and Pascal Salin. *The Impact of stabilization and structural adjustment policies on the rural sector: Case-studies of Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Liberia, Zambia and Morocco*. Rome: FAO, 1991.
- 4 Sarr, Abdou. *Les Radios Communautaires: Outils de promotion pour la paix, la culture, la démocratie et le développement en Afrique*. World Education, 2010. <http://senegal.worlded.org/Features/Docs/LesRadiosCommunautaires.pdf> (accessed September 28, 2014).
- 5 *Changes in Family Health and Education: The Effects Of Funding Women's Community Organizations In Senegal*. New Field Foundation, 2014. [http://www.newfieldfound.org/pdfs/Education\\_and\\_Family\\_Health\\_902-1.pdf](http://www.newfieldfound.org/pdfs/Education_and_Family_Health_902-1.pdf) (accessed November 20, 2014).

### FRONT PAGE PHOTO:

Women standing behind leader. © New Field Foundation