

The case of Mopti and its peri-urban settlements, Mali

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Introduction

The town of Mopti has expanded dramatically since the colonial era, when it became a major administrative centre. Its geographical location has fostered the development of trade with the hinterland and neighbouring countries. The region's economy is basically agro-pastoral and centred on rice production in the inner Niger delta. However, the region has practically no industrial fabric, with processing and preserving of produce still done traditionally on a small scale.

It is often in peri-urban areas that interaction between town and countryside is most visible, as the proximity of markets and urban consumers may stimulate agricultural production. At the same time, as the city grows, city-dwellers, often from the middle classes, see opportunities for investment in land and farming in these areas, and this often occurs to the detriment of the inhabitants of villages who are gradually absorbed into the towns and cities. Overlap between customary and statutory law, especially as regards land tenure, may give rise to conflict between different groups and lead to growing marginalization of the least well-off.

This paper summarizes the main features of interaction between the town of Mopti and two peri-urban villages. Barbé, located some 14km from the town with a population of some 1,600, is part of the rural *commune* of Sokoura. Bargondaga is a fishing village of some 510 inhabitants, which comes under the urban *commune* of Mopti.

Agricultural production and marketing systems

Villagers' main economic activities are rice production, fishing and, to a lesser extent, horticulture and animal husbandry. Parastatal agencies, such as the Opération Riz Mopti (rice) and Opération Pêche Mopti (fishing), as well as several national and international NGOs, provide support to producers in the region. The main constraints and opportunities for the villagers are:

- Access to credit and investment flows: failure to reimburse loans granted through parastatal agencies brought these programmes to a halt. NGOs provide limited local support, but *tontines* (schemes whereby members pay

in regularly to a common fund which is paid out to each member in turn) play an important role, providing women especially with seed capital for trading activities. Migration is still the most substantial source of capital, and remittances to families are often invested in farming equipment, consumer goods, means of transport and purchase of livestock;

- Labour availability: the hiring of farm labourers is becoming increasingly common. City-dwellers who have access to land but no family labour resort to waged workers. In so doing, they inflate demand for waged farm labour in relation to supply, which pushes up costs and encourages villagers to leave some of their fields fallow to take jobs as paid labourers, or to get into debt to meet their own labour requirements;
- Modernization of the means of production: more tractors, threshers, groundnut hullers and mills are available, often belonging to city-dwellers. While little modern equipment is owned by villagers who must pay to use it, it nevertheless plays an important part in agricultural production;
- Marketing: trading is an important secondary activity in the villages, even though most enterprises are small. In Bargondaga, young men who can afford to invest in motorcycles collect the fishermen's catch to sell it on to retailers in Mopti, where there is high demand from urban consumers, or to wholesalers from Bamako. However, the limited availability of processing and preserving equipment is a serious constraint on marketing this extremely perishable foodstuff. Better organization of the sector, focusing on improved methods of preservation, processing and transport, can only benefit producers, traders and consumers.

Tenure system and access to land

In Mali, the statutory tenure system governed by legislation is mostly confined to urban areas. In the two villages, it is found mainly in the large-scale irrigation schemes, where plots are allocated by the competent authorities. The traditional system predominates and is based on allocation by indigenous customary owners or the village chief under certain conditions relating to productive use. However, this coexistence is undergoing considerable changes in peri-urban areas:

- The emergent practice of selling land for residential purposes, especially in Bargondaga, where the Mopti municipality has effectively replaced the traditional authorities in land-use management; a growing proportion of horticultural areas is also occupied by city-dwellers;
- Conversely, the traditional authorities in Barbé, which is part of a rural *commune*, have greater control over land. In both villages, the presence of herds belonging to city dwellers is causing over-grazing, while the opening up of quarries and access routes for lorries is encroaching on farmland;
- Increased opportunities to purchase land are opening up access for some groups such as women and young people, who are often marginalized by the traditional system. However, this possibility is restricted to well-off groups and may, over time, have a negative impact on access to land for the poorest.

Income diversification and migration

The main activities of most residents of the two villages may be described as rural: mainly rainfed agriculture in Barbé and rice production and fishing in Bargondaga. However, more than two-thirds of the villagers have one or several secondary activities, varying in accordance with income levels, age and gender. In many cases, this diversification leads to movement: between 70% and 80% of families have at least one person working elsewhere, whether in the neighbouring town, in Bamako or abroad. These trends are reinforced by the influence of the town:

- Trading, as either a primary or a secondary activity, involves women above all. In Bargondaga, trading of fishery products is particularly important and involves both women and young men, taking advantage of the proximity of the market in Mopti town;
- Residents of Barbé travel to town to get jobs as maids (girls) or labourers (young men), or to engage in trade (women especially). Non-farm job opportunities in the village are related to investments made by city-dwellers, such as bars and restaurants, leisure activities and equipment for processing agricultural produce;
- There is considerable out-migration from both villages, particularly of young women from Barbé, leaving to get jobs as maids in Bamako or abroad;
- Many young men travel abroad. Because of distance, the period of migration is extended and migrants do not come back to the village during the peak season for agricultural work. The shortage of family labour affects demand for paid labourers; however, migrants make a very substantial contribution towards household incomes.

Decentralization and administrative and political processes

Until 1996, Mopti region was divided into eight *cercles* and 55 *arrondissements*, plus the *commune* of Mopti/Sévaré. The implementation of decentralization has meant the replacement of these units with 107 rural *communes* and 5 urban *communes*, all run by elected councils. This administrative division has important consequences for the relationship between the town and the villages of Barbé and Bargondaga:

- Barbé is part of the Sokoura rural *commune*; the village chief and village council are in charge of land allocation. Their authority is backed up by the homogeneous ethnic composition of the village's population, more than 90% of whom were born there. Although the village is heavily dependent on the town for services and non-farm employment opportunities, it does retain a degree of independence. The proximity of the town is generally seen in a positive light by residents;
- Bargondaga is a sub-district of Mopti and has a very weak influence on *commune* decision-making. Residents take a negative view of this, especially as regards land-use management. However, perceptions of the town are favourable, above all as regards economic aspects and particularly the outlets provided for the fish produced by the village as its main activity. Demand from urban consumers and the proximity of the town have encouraged marketing initiatives involving women and young people.

Key issues

The demand for farm produce from urban consumers and non-farm job opportunities in town is of benefit to the villages. However, the natural resources needed for agricultural production must be preserved and local people need to be involved in managing them.

The main activities of residents in peri-urban villages are still farming and fishing. Marketing is a weak link, despite individual initiatives by stakeholders and despite demand from the urban market. Better organization of the processing and packing phases, especially for fish, could boost the incomes of producers and traders.

The villages experience substantial out-migration: while this is one of the reasons for labour shortages, it is also the source of significant investment flows. Remittances sent by migrants to their families can be invested in modern equipment and means of production, but this needs to be supported by the competent bodies (parastatal institutions, NGOs, professional associations, etc.).