



SUCCESS STORY

Spicing Up Business for Women

USAID's Business Training Helps Mali's Women Entrepreneurs to Compete



Photo by: Vina Verman

Aissata Kabangou (right) is the president of the "Toungagoye" cooperative. She says, "Since the training, I have improved the presentation of my products, I have begun selling products in various quantities, and now practice better customer service. These few changes have enabled me to increase my clientele. In only 2 months, my business has grown and I have hired 2 vendors to help sell my products."

USAID has trained 1473 entrepreneurs in business development services, resulting in growing businesses and increased employment opportunities in Mali.

More than 600 miles (967 km) from Mali's capital, the people in the small village of Ansongho in the northeast part of this country suffer greatly from isolation. The region's extremely arid climate inhibits them from producing many of their own products. As a result, the people depend greatly on traders, such as Aissata Kabangou, for much of their food. Aissata sells spices in Ansongho's local market. Like the majority of traders in Mali's desert regions, she purchases goods from richer cities such as Bamako, the capital, and neighboring countries like Niger to supply the people's needs. Aissata, however, has seen very little profits and often losses because she is illiterate and lacks the business and accounting skills needed to manage her business.

To help small businesses increase incomes and become more competitive, USAID provides technical assistance to traders, growers, processors, packagers and other stakeholders to add the most value to products. After assessing the needs of Ansongho's women's groups, USAID decided that business development training was critical for these small entrepreneurs if they were to succeed. In January 2009, USAID trained 24 leaders from various women's groups in Ansongho in business plan development, product pricing, client negotiations, customer service, marketing strategies and basic accounting. USAID trainers adapted the courses so illiterate entrepreneurs could take part. In all, USAID trained 386 women entrepreneurs.

This training came at the right time as these women were preparing to harvest the potatoes they collectively planted for the first time with USAID's technical assistance. With the knowledge they acquired from the business training, the women were able to conduct market surveys for potato pricing information, research for potential clients, and negotiate sales contracts. The entire 3,685 pounds (1.7 tons) of harvested potatoes were sold the same day of harvest, bringing in more than \$1000 in supplementary income.

The training helped Aissata's clientele to grow, increasing her profits by more than 200 percent. Aissata said that the training allowed her to improve and grow her own business, and "contribute even more this year to "zakat" (charity) – the third pillar of Islam – to help those who have nothing."