

United Women in Zamblara Mali



a method to create and extend technologies for growing rice with low external-inputs is also helping village women to unite together

Background

In Mali a method to create and extend technologies for growing rice with low external-inputs is also helping village women unite together, whether they are descended from former slaves or from village elites.

Since 2005, the Participatory Adaptation and Diffusion of Technologies for Rice-based Systems (PADS) project in West Africa was implemented through the Africa Rice Center (WARDA). Mali was one of the four target countries. In Mali, PADS was led by Jèkasy, an NGO funded by Inter-Cooperation, with various other institutions. Zamblará was one of eleven project villages in Mali.

Principles of PLAR

Participatory learning and action research (PLAR) is a farmer education approach, inspired by FFS (farmer field school), but with more emphasis on innovation. PLAR is based on adult learning in groups of 20 to 25 people, making use of the experiences of the group members. The PLAR curriculum covers the whole cropping season, and activities follow the development of the rice crop. Farmers analyze their own practices, discover problems and seek the solutions to solve them. Some new practices are suggested (e.g. transplanting), but instead of transferring technologies, the facilitators encourage farmers to find the solutions themselves and to experiment with new ideas to find techniques which are practical, applicable, and adapted to specific local solutions.



Figure 1 Women in Zamblara sing one of their compositions about new rice technology

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 (ICM), such as land preparation, nursery and transplanting, water management, weeds and pest management, but also harvest, post-harvest and marketing (for a complete description of all 28 modules see Defoer and al 2004).

Local innovations to lower chemical inputs

During PLAR training in Zamblara, southwest Mali, insecticides and herbicides were discouraged. Local innovations reduced dependency on external inputs as farmers observed their fields, analyzed, made decisions, and experimented.

Even before the project, the women of Zamblara used few chemical inputs, because they were expensive and not always available. During the PLAR training, the women organized their own trial to compare compost vs. chemical fertilizer vs. a blend (compost plus chemical fertilizer). As a result they now favor compost mixed with small amounts of urea and rock phosphate.

For pest control, women of Zamblara village developed several strategies, including:

- Neem (*Azadirata indica*) powder
- A mix of laundry detergent and kerosene
- Weeding the edges of the rice plot with hoes, so eliminate places where moths lay eggs which hatch into stem borers.

A group for women

Like much villages of Mali, Zamblara is semi-arid, with rolling hills. During the brief rainy season of about five months, men grow maize, sorghum, groundnuts and other crops on the higher ground. 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.

Because rice is grown mainly by women in Zamblara, in 1997 they formed an association of rice producers. The women created the association to help themselves develop agricultural practices and to increase their income. The name of the group is 'Kotognogontala' which means "mutual respect." In 2002 they requested the PLAR training. The group is fundamentally made to exchange knowledge and good agricultural practices among the community.

From an original group of 27 people, the association has grown to 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 chief of village is the honorary president and another man attends to monitor the women's activities. The women say 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.

Although the women of Zamblara each have their own small plots of rice land, the group 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 divide some of the rice among themselves, and keep the rest to use for their meals during group activities.

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

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. The agricultural sector is no exception. In Zamblara, the creation of the groups was spontaneous. PLAR groups were created to be open to all women, regardless of ethnic or social background. Any woman who wants can belong to the group. The women's groups of Zamblara are now attracting other NGOs and government organizations.

Banding together and breaking barriers

Zamblara is a community of people descended from certain high status families ("nobles"), and other groups, including former slaves ("caste"). Until a few years ago, the community considered the nobles and the caste to be of two different origins. PLAR has helped minimize the difference between categories of people. In the training, people descended from slaves or nobles experiment together, eat together and sing together. The weekly PLAR sessions increase the contact between women of different origins. The gap between the two classes of women 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 store-bought materials with money they earned on their collective plot. The women feel less lonely and isolated. As one woman said “Caste and noble persons are the same since PLAR”



Figure 2 Women chat outside the house they built as a group

In the other side, this 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 realized that some of their neighbors were too poor to afford to eat three meals a day they began to help each other with food and labor. The women's groups are now considered as a strong team and the men have accepted them.

The women now participate more in village activities (infrastructural development, milling machine establishment). The solid partnerships created by women 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.

Conclusion

The women in Zamblara say that PLAR reinforces the social relation between women. The 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 now they have found unity. “The future belongs to the organised people, states one Zamblara woman.

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Reference

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Authors

Jonas Wanvoeke

Research Assistant
Africa Rice Center (WARDA)
01 B.P. 2031, Cotonou, Benin
Email: j.wanvoeke@cgiar.org

Paul Van Mele

Program Leader Learning & Innovation Systems
Africa Rice Center (WARDA)
01 BP 2031, Cotonou, Benin
Email: p.vanmele@cgiar.org

Rosaline Maiga Dacko

PADS Coordinator Mali
Intercooperation au Sahel (IC Sahel)
BP 94 A-IC San, Mali
Email: jekasysan@icsahel.org

Kalifa Yattara

Researcher CRRRA Sikasso
BP 16 Mali
Email: k.yattara@yahoo.fr