

Making Connections: USAID Brings Wireless Internet Connectivity to Katibougou

“Investing in IPR/IFRA is investing not only in education, but above all in agriculture”

Photo: Dennis



CONNECTED — Mali's Education Minister (center), USAID Director (to his left), and Prof. J. Staatz (right) from MSU watching a connection demonstration with students from IPR as witnesses.

KATIBOUGOU, Mali — The information superhighway is the direct path to Mali's economic development, and a partnership between USAID and Michigan State University (MSU) has just mowed over a major speed bump.

USAID/Mali has helped bring high-speed Internet access to Mali's only university-level school of agriculture and natural resources, located in Katibougou, a small village 40 miles from Mali's capital city of Bamako. There, stakes in agricultural science and research are high in a low-income, developing country in which more than 70 percent of the people live in rural areas.

Mali's leaders have identified modernizing agriculture and strengthening food security as crucial to the country's future — but faculty and students at the school, IPR/IFRA — *Institut Polytechnique Rural et de Recherche Appliquée* in Katibougou — had to drive an hour to get access to e-mail. Scientific data access was relegated to a few shaky dial-up modems. In effect, Mali's most crucial cutting-edge research needs were locked in a time warp.

Over the past 4 years, MSU faculty, with support from the USAID-funded Higher Education for Development office (former Association Liaison Office for University Cooperation), the USAID/MSU Food Security Cooperative Agreement, and USDA, have been working to strengthen teaching and research programs at the Malian school. In 2005, Professor John Staatz of MSU met with USAID/Mali's Accelerated Economic Growth team to discuss how the lack of reliable Internet connectivity was stifling both research and teaching at IPR/IFRA. Because the agriculture school was located so far outside of Bamako, it was impossible to connect it with the wireless Internet system that USAID/Mali had financed for the rest of the University of Bamako. The mission identified VSAT (satellite) as the appropriate technology, and MSU, through its various USAID-supported projects, promised to provide important Internet-based content on food and agriculture to IPR/IFRA once the Internet connection was complete.

“Agricultural science is the number one priority for Mali, yet their agriculture school was cut off from scientific communication,” Staatz said. “It made no sense. The idea of the VSAT connection was an easy sell to USAID,” Staatz continued. “We could all see the potential for a lot of collaboration, and USAID/Mali was quick to respond.” USAID/Mali Director Alex Newton noted, “For USAID, the American government and American people, investing in IPR/IFRA is not only investing in education. Above all, it is investing in agriculture, which is not only the top priority of Mali, but also a pillar of the strategic objectives of USAID.”

On December 15, some 700 people packed an amphitheatre in Katibougou to see high-speed internet pour onto the campus. Nearly all faculty and students of IPR/IFRA were there, many wearing custom T-shirts commemorating the event. Mali's Minister of Education was on the stage, along with the governor, USAID/Mali officials, and local dignitaries. The minister clicked a mouse and was connected, via video conference projected onto the amphitheater's screen, to MSU Agricultural Economics Professor Eric Crawford and Ph.D. student Goita Marthe Diallo, who were in Agriculture Hall in East Lansing, Michigan, 5,000 miles away.

The maiden voyage of the computer hook-up had an especially personal touch. Diallo was the top graduate from IPR/IFRA in 1998. Now she was back on the Mali campus again, bigger than life courtesy of the new video conferencing technology. When she began to speak, the room in Katibougou burst into applause.

USAID and the Malian Government have purchased over 60 new computers to help faculty and students take advantage of the new connectivity. MSU put together training sessions and free access to online resources and arranged Skype software to provide free Internet telephone and video-conferencing.

Already, the collaborations are heating up. Mel Yokoyama, professor of animal science at MSU, is using Skype to communicate with his IPR/IFRA research partner, Boubacar Demele, who just spent three months working in Yokoyama's lab in East Lansing and who has now returned to Mali. Mathieu Ngouajio, an MSU assistant professor of horticulture, already has brought in wireless routers to IPR/IFRA, which will facilitate the school becoming a center for short-courses, including using material online from MSU. Stephen Esquith, professor and chair of philosophy at MSU, is using MSU's web-based ANGEL system to conduct an ethics course and discussion groups at the Mali ag school while working there on a Fulbright scholarship.

“This school was regarded as somewhat backwards because of the lack of Internet access,” Staatz said. “Now it will become a lot more attractive. There's a lot to grow here.” And both the faculty members, students, and local populations have pledged to make the best use of this long-awaited connectivity and the equipment that made it possible — **S. Nichols**.