

Educating the Next Generation of Food Policy Analysts and Agro-Entrepreneurs: The Katibougou Initiative

Agriculture is at the heart of Mali's economic and social development strategy. Nearly 7 in 10 Malians derive their livelihoods from farming, herding, fishing or the selling of agricultural products. For agriculture to flourish, the country needs well-designed agricultural policies, new technologies that are profitable for farmers and agribusinesses, and agro-entrepreneurs who have the business skills to prosper in Mali's dynamic market economy. Yet the number of Malians with university-level training in food policy analysis, agricultural economics, and agribusiness is small, and many of them, trained in the 1970s, are nearing retirement.

USAID/Mali, through its Project to Mobilize Food Security Initiatives in Mali – Phase II (PROMISAM II) with Michigan State University (MSU), is working to create a new generation of agricultural economics professionals to fill this critical gap. PROMISAM II is partnering with Mali's only university-level faculty in the agricultural sciences, the Institut Polytechnique Rural de Formation et de Recherche Appliquée (IPR/IFRA), to create both an undergraduate and a masters degree program in agricultural economics. Located in the small town of Katibougou, 70 km from Bamako, IPR/IFRA is one of the oldest agricultural schools in West Africa. It was originally established by the French in 1902 to train agricultural extension agents and grew to be one of the main centers for training undergraduates in the agricultural sciences from throughout Francophone West Africa. Although strong in the technical sciences like agronomy and animal science, IPR/IFRA has not had the faculty to offer majors in agricultural economics. With Mali's shift to a much more market-driven economy beginning in the 1980s, the need for individuals capable of evaluating the economic profitability of new agricultural technologies, designing market-compatible food policies, and helping emerging agribusiness firms develop their business strategies has soared. IPR/IFRA has faced strong pressure from students and other stakeholders, including government, to open a full-fledged program in agricultural economics, but a previous effort begun in 2005 to design such a program had stalled. The new USAID/Mali-supported IPR/IFRA-MSU is now making this dream possible. The program builds on prior MSU-IPR/IFRA collaboration to strengthen the school's two-year program in agricultural technology and support from USAID/Mali to provide the school with a high-speed Internet connection.

Starting in late 2008, faculty from IPR/IFRA and MSU's Department of Agricultural, Food, and Resource Economics have worked together to assess the supply of and demand for agricultural economists in Mali, identify the skill sets most in demand, and design a curriculum to respond to those needs. The proposed curriculum was presented to a broad array of stakeholders at a workshop in Katibougou in July 2009, where the proposed program was endorsed. Based on the comments received, IPR/IFRA and MSU faculty revised the program so that focuses it more on key skills, orients it more towards the needs of the private sector, and delivers the material at roughly 2/3 the cost of the original design. Katibougou will welcome its first class of undergraduates in the agricultural economics major in October 2009.

The undergraduate program will be offered at Katibougou, but the masters program, to be launched in 2010, will be taught both in Katibougou and in Bamako, so that professionals working in the capital can take courses in the evenings and weekends. The IPR/IFRA partnership will also involve faculty and student exchanges, and two IPR/IFRA faculty members

will undertake further graduate studies at MSU. With this Katibougou initiative, Mali will have a much stronger analytic and business capacity to exploit its enormous potentials for agricultural development.