



**Welcome to our latest MDG Newsletter and with it our very best wishes to all our members and supporters for 2018.**

In this edition you will hear from some of our four travellers who returned in January from a very successful trip to Mali. They have been able to catch up on progress with our Comic Relief-funded project – the health insurance scheme being developed by Jeunesse et Développement in Yanfolila – as well as other projects which we are able to support through the generosity of our supporters. They also visited Pensons à Demain, our second partner group, to see the wonderful and expanding work of Kader Keita and his team. And a bit of down time to sample the delights of Bamako and hear some great Malian music from global celebrity Habib Koite. The visit has confirmed the centrality for MDG of direct face-to-face contact with our partners, an essential element in the way we think and go about our work. I hope you enjoy reading about their experiences.

*Andy Benson*  
Chair

## Going back to Mali



*The women's group at Kolondieba*



*The villagers at Bounouko - Tanty Samake is to the right in pink*

Going back to Mali as a member of the MDG Review Team for the Comic Relief Mutuelle project was my first visit for nearly 6 years. In the years before I had made frequent trips as MDG Secretary, and I wondered as we boarded the Air France flight from Paris, packed with returning Malians as always, how things would be, given the troubles of recent years and the continuing insecurity in the north of the country.

When we got to Bamako I knew immediately that, for all the newly developed airport with its multiple security checks, the old Mali was all around us and we had a warm welcome from Barry, J&D's acting Director, and of course Tanty Samake, our Link Worker almost from the beginning of MDG and J&D working together.

Before we left for the south we had meetings in the new J&D office. This is really impressive. As well as offices and meeting rooms there are the fittings soon to be installed for solar panels and a row of small shops on one side which provide some income from local traders. The building has space for community activities, and J&D also provide a water source for local people.

We were to work very hard as a team of 4 over the 10 days of our visit. We certainly saw the Mutuelle in action. Our many village visits showed clearly that there have been many challenges in getting the Mutuelle to a viable position. We heard directly from villagers and saw the J&D staff working with them. It is clear that that they are highly regarded and trusted.



Tanty Samake



Cows near Solona village



Children working with Bogolan



Dancers at PAD

We met the Mayor of the Commune. Sam and I were lucky enough, while Luke and Michelle were toiling away in a meeting, to attend, as guests of the Mayor, the final for the football cup he had introduced for local teams. We were introduced to the teams, sat next to the local dignitaries, and watched a game fought very hard on a sand pitch with around 1,000 spectators. Sam somehow became official photographer and I had to present the prize for best goal scorer. The Mayor is keen on developing our planned twinning with Sudbury in Suffolk. His support will be vital in helping sustain the Mutuelle once the 3-year funding from Comic Relief is over, so we hope to develop really strong links with him.

Back in Bamako we had several visits to Kader Keita and Pen-sons a Demain, where the work with deprived children is going well, and the programme of activities has developed further - with dance and drama as well as the bogolan making which has always been central to the work. A new French funder has helped PAD build onto the roof, so that they will now be able to take girls as well as boys, and the way in which art and craft are used as the basis for therapy with some of the poorest and most disadvantaged children in Mali is truly impressive. We were treated to a show with dancing, and other people from the community came, including two Griots (Praise Singers) - a famous and respected role in Malian society. Both women sang long and loud about Kader, his work and the people like MDG who supported it. It was very moving - and then we all had to dance! One of the griots enquired whether we had dances like that in England, so there was nothing for it but to try. Luke and I improvised a Morris dance using branches we found in the courtyard for extra effect. This went down very well, though one of the griots was puzzled about what the sticks were for. We just mumbled something about fertility, which seemed to do as an answer.

We spent much time with J&D's management group and committee. We were able to have the frank and open discussions which are only possible between partners who trust and respect each other. It seemed to me that the depth and warmth of MDG's relationships with both its partners is very special, and it is very clear to me that we must do all we can to keep our visiting as regular as we can. I also feel that we must work to find ways of ensuring that our Malian colleagues are able to visit us as well- despite the past problems with visas and the bureaucratic labyrinth which Malians have to go through to get them.

What else did we learn? - that Tanty Samake has developed into an extremely talented community development worker and is held in very high regard among women's groups across the Sikasso region. We learnt that through Tiori Diarra, our main link for the Mutuelle, the Comic Relief funding has helped establish new thinking and techniques for planning and evaluation within J&D - exactly the kind of added value which Comic Relief was keen to see.

It was great to see Sam and Michelle adapt so well to life in Mali and their enthusiasm and warmth made a real difference to the trip. Luke was a terrific team leader, managing to keep us on track with our review and relating very effectively to local people. He also showed an ability to improvise dance moves, which I never knew he had. This was much admired in the villages!

As well as the work, we had time to meet old friends - Mamadou Kone, now a Project Director for Helvetas, the Swiss NGO, works in Sikasso, and came over to spend time with us. He is in great form and sends everyone in MDG his best wishes. As does Soumy Moro, who ran our Reproductive Health programme for many years, and still works in that field in Bamako.

I was so glad that I made the trip. The main message coming back, I think, is that MDG, J&D and PAD must all work as hard as we can on communicating better, and that we should do all we can to keep visiting. We have, perhaps, been too concerned about the Foreign Office advice to travel only on essential business but we were looked after throughout our stay by our partners where we felt safe and cared for the whole time.

### John Hedge



Kader Keita and team members



Michelle with the children at Pensons à Demain

## Michelle's Impressions of Mali

It was my first visit to Mali – and also to the African continent – and I felt a little nervous. Having the required vaccinations and obtaining a Visa had made the prospect of the trip more real; also, Linda had 'prepared' me with practical advice, like a list of essentials to take with me, and descriptions of typical situations, but nothing can prepare you for the wonderful welcome from the people.

I had never been greeted before with singing, music, dancing, even a gun salute! In the first village we visited, a very old-looking woman (I thought afterwards she may have been my age, or younger) took my hands and danced with me – it was a very strong moment for me. In all three villages when we visited their market gardens and grain mills projects the women had prepared delicious food for us which included rice with a sauce and meat. We learned successfully to eat this with our right hands. They also gave us gifts such as an enormous bag of oranges and peanut butter fresh from the mill. These women, who have very little, are so grateful for the help we bring them.

All through the visit, we were told that illiteracy is a major problem, so I was very impressed with the work achieved with children, as such projects are an investment for the future. One day, we visited 'une école passerelle' (literally 'a bridge school') where children who have had their education stopped or interrupted for a long time can re-join mainstream schooling after a school year which is about nine months spent in that class. The children attend school from 8am to 12am and from 3pm to 7pm which seems like a very long day! We had been delayed on our previous visit and had also been troubled by a very bumpy track meaning we arrived late, at 12.40pm. Nonetheless, the children had been asked to stay for us, and sat at their desks, so well-behaved with no-one fidgeting, and they showed us their beautifully kept exercise books. Is that a UK teachers' dream? At the end of the school year, the best-achieving pupil attends a ceremony where s/he is given a school satchel with writing books, pencils, geometry set etc.

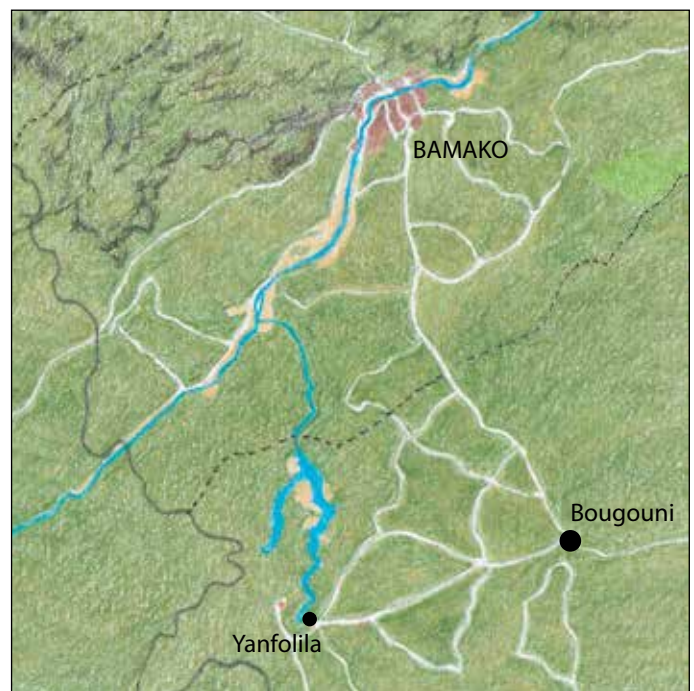
This prize is financed by the teachers themselves who thus hope to encourage more 'recruits', as this reduces the financial burden of buying the equipment on the families. The teachers also aim at giving the award to the first 3 or 5 top-achievers, again to widen the scope.

At the start of our visit, one of our hosts quoted a Malian proverb: "Voir 1 fois vaut mieux qu'entendre 100 fois" which translated means seeing once is better than hearing 100 times. How true it proved on this trip!

*Michelle Chadwick*

## Yanfolila Health Mutuelle

Yanfolila is easy to reach from Bamako. Its on the Route Nationale number 7 until Bougouni, where there is a petrol station and a junction. To the left route number 7 continues on towards Sikasso and to the right route 8 commences, heading west towards Guinea, via Yanfolila. Yanfolila sits within the Wassoulou Balle region, which is the area covered by the Yanfolila Mutuelle Health Insurance Scheme. Wassoulou Balle is perhaps best known in the West for its female singers, including Sali Sidibe, Oumou Sangare and Djeneba Diakite. The area is also an area with gold in the soil and one of the key professions for local people is traditional mining, known as "orpaillage". Using rudimentary tools and travelling from place to place, those involved in gold mining work throughout the weeks hoping for a find, but this doesn't happen often and the majority earn a small amount. International gold mining companies have established themselves in Yanfolila, but there is no evidence that this really benefits local people. The other main activity for local people remains agriculture, which is largely at subsistence level for most people.



The Yanfolila Mutuelle Health Insurance Scheme, to give it its full title, is a subscription based scheme providing subsidised healthcare. Subscribers pay 500 cfa, the equivalent of 70p, for each member on their card each month and are then entitled to a 70 percent reduction in primary healthcare costs. The Health Mutuelle aims to be self-sustaining, with all monies being received being used for healthcare provision and the relatively small administrative cost. Our partners Jeunesse et Développement have been funded through Comic Relief over the last two years and are in place to develop the Mutuelle structures, to support the development of memberships and to train and support local people to take over management of the Health Mutuelle at the end of the funding period.

During a recent visit we spent a great deal of time discussing the Health Mutuelle in the villages around Yanfolila. It was immediately apparent that those who had used the scheme were very positive about it and indeed levels of satisfaction with the Mutuelle have increased over time. Though the last year has seen some membership lapse, Jeunesse et Développement has sought to engage and reengage local communities through regular discussions about the Mutuelle, through a Road show caravan that moves through the 37 villages covered by the Health Mutuelle and through sporting activities, which have particularly appealed to young members of the community. Though subscription levels are lower than anticipated, they are close to the "breakdown even point" required for the Mutuelle to be self sustaining.

A key difficulty has been the collection of subscriptions, particularly for members involved in local mining activities, who move from place to place. Additionally local people involved in agricultural activities tend to receive income at certain points of the year, so the Mutuelle is planning to move to a quarterly collection of subscription charges. Another difficulty is, of course, affordability, particularly for those with lower income capacity. This is where income generation projects come in, such as grain grinding mills and market gardens. Several of which have been funded through MDG and in the coming year MDG will continue to contribute to the development of these projects to support the ongoing functioning of the Mutuelle and to support the inclusion and participation of poorer members of the community.

In Yanfolila itself a plot of land has been provided by the Mayor's Office to the Health Mutuelle for its future office once Jeunesse et Développement withdraws at the end of this year. It is hoped, but not expected, that some funds will be provided by the Mayor's office to support the continuing development of the Health Mutuelle. Over the coming year J&D will continue to support the Health Mutuelle providing technical expertise and guidance as it moves towards autonomy. Beyond the funding period the Health Mutuelle will be supported through a Technical Union, an umbrella organisation based in Sikasso, to which Health Mutuelle schemes are affiliated.

**Luke Hedge**



*Market garden*

## **Fundraising**

### **Sunday 29th July -**

#### **Ride London 100**

Fancy getting on your bike for MDG? We have 2 places in Ride London 100 which takes place this year on Sunday 29th July and we're looking for people to ride and get sponsorship for us. It's a fantastic opportunity to cycle through London, into Surrey and back on roads that are closed to other traffic in a well organised and televised event that is part of a whole weekend of cycling. More about the event itself: [www.prudentialridelondon.co.uk](http://www.prudentialridelondon.co.uk) and if you think you might want to undertake the event or know someone else who might, please contact : [linda.king@malidg.org.uk](mailto:linda.king@malidg.org.uk)

### **Saturday 21st April - A bit of a Do.**

Not strictly fundraising but an opportunity for a social get together in the Village Hall at St John's Stadhampton (S Oxon) to hear from some of the people who have recently returned from a trip to Mali. Everyone is welcome. Please let me know if you intend to come as we'll provide food and drink.

Contact: [linda.king@malidg.org.uk](mailto:linda.king@malidg.org.uk)

### **Saturday June 10th - National Garden Scheme.**

The lovely garden with fantastic views (and also vintage tractors) at Foxington, Britwell Salome in South Oxfordshire will be open to the public from 2 - 6pm. MDG are providing and profiting from the teas. So please come along and support us, or maybe you would like to bake, or help on the day? Please contact [linda.king@malidg.org.uk](mailto:linda.king@malidg.org.uk) if you'd like to help, otherwise, just turn up.

**Linda King**

