



### Welcome to the Mali Development Group Spring Newsletter – John Hedge

One of MDG's objectives has always been to provide members with up-to-date information not only about the projects they help to fund but also the wider issues about Malian life and culture. In this issue Wilfred Willey, a long serving member of our committee, and a highly respected member of the Malian community in Britain shares his thoughts on the troubled history of Mali over recent years, and makes it clear that future peace will need political as well as military will if it is to be achieved.

Mary Allen, who has extensive development experience, first came into contact with us when she was working with Sahel Eco, and we supported her work with local farmers for a number of years. Mary gives a fascinating account of all those little things which make the pandemic a challenge in Mali. As she says they are the signs of bigger challenges. Many members have asked us how Mali is coping with Covid and here are some real first-hand insights.

We decided a while ago to encourage more members to share their experiences with MDG, and this is what Nick and Eleanor Hards have done. Their year-on-year commitment to us from the beginning and their valuing of our approach to development are very well described in their article, and in these difficult times that is very encouraging for all of us on the committee. If you would like to share your experiences and involvement with us, we would love to hear from you.

The main emphasis on our partnership work in this newsletter is about Pensons à Demain, and Kader Keita's recent report provides a good deal of practical information about the activities undertaken and the needs which this vital agency is trying to meet for some of Mali's most deprived children. The royalties we are receiving this year from Disclosure, the electronic music duo, via Universal Music, will help a great deal with the funding of PAD, and is the latest example of the musical interest which brings Mali and Britain together and inspires many MDG members. There will be more news about J&D in the next newsletter, and we are currently exploring new projects with them. One key development is the recent appointment of a new Director Siriba Togola. Judith Hartley our Secretary is in touch with him, and we wish him a very warm welcome. In earlier issues we have described the development of the Mutuelle health scheme in Yanfolila. When the Mutuelle building opened their committee decided to call the meeting room the Andy Benson Hall, and you can see the picture of him, Judith and Michelle which are displayed there.

Many of you will remember Heather Bolitho, perhaps the oldest of our members to make the trip to Mali- she was 76 and travelled with great determination and grace. We have in the last day or so also heard the sad news that Martin Freeth, the film maker who supported MDG with his fantastic documentary 'The Road to Mafele' has died. We offer our sincere condolences to his daughters and there will be an obituary in our next newsletter. 2020 has been a tough year for small charities like ours but we have been enormously helped by the generosity of members who have rallied round and responded to our financial appeal. Special thanks are due to those who have enabled us to access trust funds, notably Sarah Buxton and also Just Trust. All this help in troubled times is inspirational and we look forward to a resumption of our activities as soon as we can. In the meantime, our very best wishes to everyone.



### Politics, Peace and the People of Mali

The security situation in Mali has been worrying over the last few years. When the French troops intervened in Mali in January 2013 in operation Serval, they did not defeat completely the jihadists. Although they were kicked out of their strongholds and the local populations were freed from strict Islamic (sharia) laws imposed on them, some surviving insurgents fled into the Sahara desert, the mountains and further south and south-west to the Mopti region in Central Mali. Others blended into the local populations as dormant cells waiting for the next call up. This opportunity arose when Amadou Koufa started the Macina Liberation Front, a radical Islamist group claiming to fight for the rights of the Peulh community, while preaching for the establishment of an Islamic state. Added to that a sporadic - but increasingly violent - conflict between the cattle herding Peulhs and farming Bambaras and Dogons in the region, you get an explosive cocktail. The jihadi leaders preyed on victims of this conflict and on the incapacity of the state to secure the area.

So, what started off as a rebellion of some Tuareg groups in the North, slowly turned into a full scale war against heavily armed terrorists. The year 2020 was particularly violent with several attacks on Malian military barracks, MINUSMA convoys and patrols by French troops. Of them all, the then ill equipped Malian army was recording heavy casualties almost on a weekly basis. Then the regime of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK) was deposed in a bloodless coup on the 18th of August 2020, after weeks of mass protests on the streets of Bamako to denounce his mismanagement and incompetence.

Since the transitional government was put in place headed by the military with the primary mission to fight and defeat the jihadists, I must admit that more news is coming in showing a decline in the number of attacks against the Malian military outposts. There are still attacks, but when they happen the FA-MAs (Malian Armed Forces) retaliate, often kill jihadists, capture prisoners, destroy vehicles and recover weapons from them. It was usually the other way around, with the government forces sometimes fleeing and leaving behind weapons and vehicles.

I'm told that this is mainly down to the transition President Bah N'Daw a retired Colonel of the Malian Army and his Vice-President Col. Assimi Goita. They made it a mission to equip the Army with adequate and modern weapons. I also understand that the recent protests against the presence of the French troops in Mali, has increased the confidence in the Malian army who now cover more areas than before.

This is an ongoing war against terrorism and, just like everywhere else, it will not end tomorrow, as the solution is not only military but political as well.

**Wilfred Willey**

the pandemic, observing the rules prescribed by our highest authorities.

After observing these measures, we carried out our activities:

#### **Bogolan training:**

The training in bogolan and painting concerns all the children and also the young mothers. The training is presented by animators: Yacouba Keita et Mariam Camara.

#### **Discussions and conversations:**

This year's debates focused on COVID-19, Reproductive Health and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs). They are led by Mrs. Diary of Samu Social Mali.

#### **Sewing and pattern making**

The pattern making, cutting and sewing training is for young mothers. This training is in its third year. We currently have 15

young mothers doing the training. In parallel to this training, they take courses in bogolan and literacy in Bambara and French. They are taught by Mme Coulibaly. Literacy is a course taught in Bambara and in French by a teacher.



#### **Games and Animations**

The games and animations are about drawings and colouring by the little ones. They are hosted by Mariam Traoré Mami Camara.

#### **Accommodation**

Accommodation is available for a limited number of children who are considered to be most in need. The choice is made after investigations and analysis.

For the year 2020, we had 15 young mothers to train in pattern cutting and sewing. Of these, 5 have completed their training and the other 10 are continuing with us.

In addition, we have trained and housed 20 street children.

We also trained 58 other children from other organisations such as:

- Sindjiyaton: 31 children
- Caritas: 18 children
- Kanuya: 09 children.

This sewing training was initiated through PAD's partnership with ABAMA (based in Angers, France) to help vulnerable young mothers to support themselves and their children. It is important to note that ABAMA plays a leading role through Janick Pietin. ABAMA provides working materials, food and transport.



*Night run in Bamako – Kader visiting young people on the streets*

### **Latest report from Kader (PAD – Pensions à Demain) and the many activities he has run over the last year.**

Despite the COVID-19, 2020 was a busy year. The pandemic has shaken up the whole world and Mali has not escaped. We have adopted strict health measures to protect ourselves from



Also, PAD's partnership with Maliance of Dourdan, France, helps children by sending us working materials, clothes and shoes, blankets, sewing machines, crayons, paints and paint brushes etc. to support vulnerable children and young mothers. We had meetings with Samu Social Mali to strengthen our partnership and collaboration for the training of vulnerable young mothers and children. This partnership allows us to carry out home visits in order to talk with the girls' parents in order to organize their return home to their families. The partnership has also facilitated the medical care of some young mothers and their children, especially in light of COVID 19.



*Children's Drawing workshop led by Kader*



*Using the washing station*

This group frequents populated districts: places of worship, markets and truck stops as part of their survival activities, which include begging, selling small items and providing various services.

In addition, children and young people on the street are particularly vulnerable to COVID contamination due to their lifestyle, proximity to others, mobility and lack of hygiene due to these factors.

In addition to the health risks the COVID 19 pandemic has exposed street children and youth to risks associated with security and food.

Indeed, the measures adopted by the authorities to contain the spread of the virus, such as the introduction of a curfew, the closure of classrooms and bars and the recommendation of social distancing measures have increased the vulnerability of street children and young people to risks of insecurity and hunger.

The increased incidence of children and young people living on the streets in the context of COVID 19 represented a new challenge for PAD and MDG's funding from England to support the protection of children and young people living on the streets and provide for their training and accommodation etc has been more important than ever.

Thanks to MDG, PAD has been able to face up to the coronavirus pandemic through raising awareness among the children and providing the children with masks and installing hand washing stations in the centre as well as offering lodgings to children who would otherwise have had nowhere to go during the curfew and would have had little knowledge of or protection from COVID 19.

A big thank you to our partner MDG for enabling children to understand how to behave in the face of COVID19, which has created an anxious climate and a sense of fear among street children and youth. They needed to be better informed about the pandemic and be supported to protect themselves against the risk of virus contamination.

### **Future Plans**

We have many plans for the future, including:

- The provision of a means of transport to facilitate travel, visits and especially night runs to check on children.
- The various requests made to diplomatic bodies and representations are not yet met – we need to press forward with our requests

In reality, our concern is to extend our actions to as many vulnerable children, teenagers and young mothers as possible, because so many are in precarious situations.

### **The Mutuelle Meeting Room**



*This photo shows the display of photos at the entrance to the meeting room in the building of the Mutuelle offices. The staff decided to call it the Andy Benson Hall, after our visit in 2019. Photos of Andy, Judith and Michelle are proudly displayed under the heading and is a lovely reminder of MDG's work with Comic Relief in developing the Mutuelle.*

## A topical essay from Mary Allen – a long-standing supporter of MDG and a resident of Mali

**It's the small things.** Otherwise, living as I do in one of the quietest and leafiest neighbourhoods of Bamako, you could easily ignore there was anything at all wrong here in Mali-ba.

**The four white cotton masks** that wait in my bathroom to be washed each evening. The two small boys who need to remember to take a clean one each morning and another for the afternoon; 5 days a week since the school year started (at last) on January 25th. Twelve months ago you'd see the occasional mask on a motorcyclist worried about dust and fumes. Now you see them all over the place: on every TV politician and personality; on many taxi drivers and supermarket shoppers; even the occasional few at weddings and in markets. Imperfectly worn, often more chin-bag than "cache-nez", it's the face masks you notice; a small acknowledgement that all is not well.

**The handshakes - not!** No one shakes hands these days; not even at weddings and in markets. Instead there is the slight nod of the head; the fist/elbow/forearm bump or; the smile-behind-the-mask which you hope shows up in your eyes. None of those European mwa-mwa kisses either; the ones that Malian kids find so disconcerting and we Brits get embarrassed about because we are never quite sure: is it 3 or 4? I don't miss those air kisses but I do wonder how, when, if ever, the handshake will come back.

**The bread,** that disappeared from our neighbourhood shop for two days a few weeks ago. When it came back the price had gone up from 250 to 300 CFA francs per miche (20%). This morning, same story again. Another 2-day bread strike because, we are told, what the bakers really want is 350 francs. No, there is no formal price control, but markets are imperfect and this is how it's done here, when a price increase is sensitive. You all agree to take your product off the market for a day or two. Then, if the government doesn't intervene to reduce a tax or raise a subsidy, you all bring it back at a higher price. We saw it earlier this year with the butchers; 200 francs more for a kilo of beef. Ten days ago the transporters union – including Bamako taxis and Sotrama – also went on strike, just for a day. But that was in protest at higher inter-urban tolls with each ticket valid for a single return journey and not for a full 24 hours. Clearly the government is feeling the pinch too, but since neither side can afford to hold out for long, negotiations are underway to find a compromise. Meanwhile, it's the so called "base of pyramid" consumers ("bottom of dung heap" some might say) - the ones who struggle to find an extra 100 francs for bread, the ones who cannot go on strike - who bear the brunt of this economic storm.

**The phone calls,** not to me, but to my husband; telling him about the latest attack or atrocity; voicing their fears. The most recent came late at night from Ke-Macina, a small town on the north bank of the Niger east of Segou, where I happily spent my first years in Mali, safely riding the sandy roads on my trusty mobylette. A terrified grandmother phoned to say she could

hear gunfire. Everyone was safe home except for one young man, who Dieu merci ran in through the gate as they spoke. We later learned that armed men had attacked the gendarmerie post on their way to free a member of their group from prison. He was awaiting trial for fatally shooting a local shop keeper who had stood up to their extortion, refusing to give fuel yet again, à credit. The attackers failed. Four of them died. But were they simple bandits or members of the Katiba Macina (Macina Liberation Group)? No one seems to know and does it matter anyway? Certainly not to the terrified grandmothers of boys caught up in the tragic events of that night.

**So yes, it's the small things:** masks, handshakes, bread and phone calls. Small to us but significant signs of the big issues that challenge us: pandemic, poverty, terror. Is it any surprise that Malians say Covid is the least of their worries? Look at the data. They are right!



### A member's view of MDG from those early days

We have lived in Didcot since 1988 and when we moved here John and Gill Hedge lived a few doors down from us. In those days it was a small group of houses separate from the town, where all the neighbours knew each other so we got to know them socially and also through local politics.

In the summer of 2001 we were invited to a lunch party in John and Gill's garden where MDG was formally launched and we signed up straight away. We have been long-time supporters of international development charities, mainly Christian Aid and Oxfam, but this had a more personal connection. One of the attractions was that Mali is a Francophone country. At about that time John had asked Nick round to meet Kone. Nick still spoke passable French in those days and he, John and Kone had a fascinating chat. We feel a connection with Mali, even though we have never been there and probably never will (we're not great travellers). Over the years we have got to know a little bit about Malian music and always enjoy hearing odd bits on Radio 2.

The way that MDG works and connects with the organisations in Mali delivering the projects means that someone giving even a relatively modest amount of money can see that it can make a difference. For instance, since we became eligible we have both donated our pensioners winter fuel payments since we can manage without them but the sum involved can make a huge difference in Mali.

Two aspects of the work which particularly appealed to Nick were the health initiative in Manakoro, and the funding of a maternity section in a village clinic at Lemeroutomu. Health care improved in leaps and bounds in the UK after the second world war, but no such improvements have reached Mali. Eleanor par-

ticularly likes projects like the market gardens and the mill for making shea butter (maybe the latter is because she's a retired pharmacist). But all the work supported by MDG has been so worthwhile that it's hard to choose.

One thing that makes MDG special is its focus; it works in one specific place and does it well. We appreciate the honesty of the newsletters and annual reports when things haven't been going so well, as with the Health Mutuelle, and the hard work that goes into trying to get them back on track.

**Nick and Eleanor Hards**

## Disclosure



Disclosure is an English electronic music duo consisting of brothers Howard and Guy Lawrence. They grew up in Reigate, Surrey. Their debut studio album, *Settle*, released on 3 June 2013 was nominated for Best Dance/Electronica Album at the 2014 Grammy Awards.

The brothers have dedicated all royalties to MDG every time the track *Douha* (Mali Mali) with Fatoumata Diawara is downloaded from their latest album *Energy*. So far that has raised about £1500. Thank you Disclosure and their distributors, Universal Music for their remarkable generosity. Here is a link to YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qW8270sfsxM>

## Easy Fundraising

**A timely reminder about Easy Fundraising – a quick and rewarding way to shop online. Rewarding to MDG that is! Please register with Easy Fundraising and support MDG at the same time. We have raised about £80 in the last year which may not seem like a large sum, but every little counts at the moment and that was raised with no cooking or washing up involved!**



Heather Bolitho and Tanty Ida Samaké, the MDG J&D link worker

## Obituary

### Heather Bolitho

MDG members will be very sad to hear about the death of Heather Bolitho at the age of 92. She was a member of MDG from 2002 onwards and for many years supported us with generous donations and by running market stalls in her home town of Coggeshall in Essex, where she was well known locally for her beautiful garden and horticultural skills. She was Gill's aunt and came with us to Mali in 2006, when she was 76 years old. She proved to be a remarkable traveller and endured the bumpy roads and heat with great resilience, making friends everywhere she went with her warmth and enthusiasm. When our J&D colleagues Kone and Tanty made visits to England they spent time with her. She never forgot them, and they certainly remembered her fondly.

Kone sent the following message:

*It is with great sadness that I learn of the passing of Heather, such a caring, kind, open and generous person. May her soul find eternal peace. My sincere condolences to Gill, Heather's daughters, and the rest of the family.*

and Tanty wrote:

*Ouffff! It is with a heart full of sadness that I learn of the passing of Heather, a lovely, smiling, generous and very welcoming lady. May the earth rest lightly on her; May her soul rest in peace. My condolences to all her family and to all members of MDG.*

These lovely messages remind us how deep and long lasting the relationship with J&D has been and they are a fitting tribute to Heather's involvement with the charity.

**John Hedge**

## Finance

After a challenging year where we only just managed to fulfil our commitments with projects in Mali, things have started to take on a much healthier position.

MDG now receives increased monthly standing order payments of £470.

Also, MDG received sizeable individual donations amounting in total to £10,400.

These were comprised of a £5,000 sum from Sarah Buxton, £1,800 from a Trustee Company arranged by Sarah, £1,590 in our first quarterly royalties from Universal Music UK and £2,000 from Trust Just.

We very much appreciate all recent donations and contributions made to the charity.

**David Hedge**