

## COUNTRY BACKGROUNDER: MALI

Geographically the largest country in West Africa, Mali is a nation of small farmers; it is estimated that 80% of Malians live in rural areas and over 97% farm small plots of land. This broad agricultural base has enabled Malian farmers to take some important steps in their struggle for food sovereignty. After intense dialogue and organizing, farmers unions and the government agreed to pass a national agricultural law which incorporates the principles of food sovereignty into the Malian constitution. However, foreign investment in African land, and the promotion of chemical inputs, GMOs and hybrid seeds directly undermine Malian farmers' family food production and survival. A Libyan investment fund, for example, has signed a 50-year lease for 250,000 acres of prime rice growing land. Such land grabs threaten Mali's ability to feed itself, and threaten the livelihoods of thousands of smallholders.

Mali is a remarkable place, where numerous ethnic groups coexist more or less peacefully and share resources through customary land use arrangements. Water has particular importance in Mali due to its scarcity throughout much of the country. Every year as the Niger Delta floods with rainwater, this unique ecosystem supports Bozo fisher families, Bambara millet growers who plant in naturally irrigated areas, and nomadic Fulani and Tuareg herders who bring their herds to graze on rich aquatic pastures. Each of these groups relies in some way on the abundance of water. However, through concessions granted by the Malian government, water diversion for large-scale export crop irrigation threatens the livelihoods of not only farmers but also fishermen, herders, and nomads.<sup>1</sup>

In 2007, at the Nyéléni Center in Sélingue, Mali, more than 150 participants from 25 African countries came together for a conference on African Food Sovereignty. The meeting sought to foster an informed and inclusive discussion of the latest mega-development plan being imposed on the continent: the Alliance for a New Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). The Sélingue conference laid the groundwork for a pan-African campaign for traditional, sustainable and democratic solutions to the food crisis. In February 2011, our Food Sovereignty Tours delegation had the privilege of attending the formal launch of the "We are the Solution!" (Nous Sommes la Solution!) campaign for African food sovereignty.<sup>2</sup>

As Ibrahima Coulibaly, a Malian farmer and activist with Malian peasant organization CNOP states, "No family that can grow their own food in rural areas feels themselves to be poor, because food is the basis of life and the beginning of all human and family dignity."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Africa's Flourishing Niger Delta Is Threatened by a Libyan Water Grab" by Fred Pearce, Alternet.  
<http://www.alternet.org/water/149798/africa?page=entire>

<sup>2</sup> "We are the Solution! African rural women say NO to the Green Revolution" Food First.  
<http://www.foodfirst.org/en/node/3322>

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Ibrahima Coulibaly of Mali's CNOP, In Motion Magazine, Aug. 17, 2009.  
[http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/global/i\\_coulibaly\\_int.html](http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/global/i_coulibaly_int.html)