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TEXTILE TRAINING

Cotton transforms Mali's handicrafts sector

Through local support projects and initiatives in Mali's cotton value chain, craftspeople are acquiring new equipment and skills to increase in-country textile processing.

Soumaila Diarra

In West Africa, the cotton value chain is opening up new market opportunities for small-scale artisans. The Support Project for the Cotton-Textile Subsector (PAFICOT), which ran from 2008 to 2013 and was supported by the African Development Fund (ADF), aimed to diversify cotton distribution networks by providing craftspeople with spinning and weaving equipment (hand carders, spinning wheels, distaffs, large looms of different types), as well as with dyeing tools (bowls, scales, protective equipment). Mali's Ministry of Agriculture estimates that 2,000 craftspeople (including 1,413 women) benefited from the project's capacity-building activities, which included business creation and management training.

Aïssata Camara is one of 2,000 Malian artisans who has received equipment and training for her cotton textile business

One beneficiary of PAFICOT is 57-year-old Aïssata Camara, who runs a dyeing business with six other craftspeople. Under the project, she received entrepreneurship training and equipment including gloves and protective masks. As well as selling dyed fabric at 2,000 CFA francs (approx. €3) per metre, Camara also makes items out of local cotton. Her business brings in an average monthly profit of 400,000 CFA francs (€615). Overall, thanks to the PAFICOT project, the cotton processing industry is on the rise. "I can make a good living now from selling cotton-based fabrics," she explains. "There's been a boom in cotton processing over the past 8 years or so. Professionals working in the sector have joined forces to create the Malian Network for Organic Cotton Processing."

The network has its own store in the capital, Bamako, where it sells organic cotton products to craftspeople throughout the value chain, such as natural dyes, thread and other vital supplies. "We're also working with organic cotton farmers," adds Camara, as "the network gives them an outlet for their produce."

Having also received training and equipment, 30-year-old Assan Gopé seized the opportunity to set up an online store selling textile products,

Machallah Boutique, in 2017. "I can sell 50,000 CFA francs (€90) of clothing each day to customers from as far afield as France, Senegal and, more recently, the United States," he explains.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture's figures, Mali produced 721 t of cotton in 2018, which is more than any other African country. The sector accounts for close to 40% of rural incomes, and 22% of the country's export revenue. Despite this, around 90% of cotton produced in West Africa is still exported raw to Asia. Only 2% of the cotton grown in Mali is processed domestically and local markets are swamped with cheap imports.

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