

Impoverished Mali Can Become A Breadbasket for the Sahel

by Lawrence K. Freeman

July 12—There is a genuine desire by the Malian people to have their Presidential election on July 28, their first since the March 2012 coup d'état destabilized their country, and since the war against the jihadist invasion in the north. If this month's vote is successfully completed, the underlying issues that led to the crisis in Mali will still have to be addressed. A long-term strategic vision for the country, and for the entire Sahel, is desperately needed, to lift up this impoverished region, which is suffering from an extreme lack of development in basic infrastructure, especially in the critical areas of energy and transportation.

For Mali to become a stable, unified, and peaceful nation, conditions of existence in the northern region—Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal—which extends into the Sahara Desert, must be radically upgraded. These three provinces encompass 800,000 square kilometers, about two-thirds of Mali's land area of 1,240,000 km². With just over a million people living there, the combined population represents less than 10% of Mali's 16 million people. Kidal, still not fully pacified (the Tuareg ethnic group, organized in the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad/MNLA, has joined the jihadist invaders), has less than 100,000 inhabitants, and may have as little as 35,000 registered voters out of the 6-7 million Malians registered to vote in the upcoming election. Serious thinkers in Mali (and I would hope outside the country as well) realize that grand projects of economic and social development for the north are essential, as an included feature of Mali's plans following the election of a new President.

In a week-long visit to Mali (June 14-20), this author discovered what could be described as the country's "hidden" treasure: the Niger Inland Delta, which stretches 400 kilometers from the city of Djénné, north to the famous city of Timbuktu. West of the Delta one finds the Faguibine Lake system of five lake basins, another immense

untapped resource of water. From satellite photographs, the Delta appears as a gleaming giant emerald lying in the midst of the vast brown deserts of North Africa.

With the increased utilization of the great potential of the Delta and Faguibine, as an integral part of regional development approach, pivoted on massive expansion of infrastructure in water, energy, and transportation, the desert can be transformed into a lush garden, capable of creating the conditions for food self-sufficiency in Mali, as well as producing significant amounts of food to aid in eliminating hunger and the loss of life for millions of Africans suffering from a lack of nutrition.

FIGURE 1





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During his recent trip to Mali, EIR Africa editor Lawrence Freeman (shown here) discovered the Inland Delta, managed by the Office of Niger. The billboard displays the canals and eight water systems of the Niger Delta. To the right of the map is a summary history of the Office of Niger, created in 1932.

According to recent United Nations reports on the humanitarian crisis in the Sahel region, 11.3 million Sahelians are short of food this year, and 1.5 million children under five years old are acutely malnourished. Thus, Mali, by becoming a major food exporter, can give the nation a meaningful mission beyond its own borders: to become a bread-basket for the Sahel.

Mali Knows How To Produce Food

Mali is one of the 25 poorest countries in the world, on the most underdeveloped continent on the planet, yet its agricultural potential has been recognized since it was a French colony (until 1960). Today, agriculture represents close to 40% of Mali's GDP, and employs 80% of the country's official labor force.

Mali's National Director of Agriculture provided the following overview.

Rainfall differs sharply between the north, which stretches up from the Sahel to the Sahara, and only receives 300-400 millimeters annually, while the south has an average of 1,200mm. In addition to many lakes and smaller rivers, the most important rivers are the Senegal and the Niger. Out of country's total land area

of 124,019,200 hectares (ha), 45 million are used for agriculture and breeding livestock, but only 572,911 ha are irrigated today, of which the 330,000 ha managed by the government grow the bulk of the country's food.

Mali's major crops are rice, maize, millet, sorghum, beans, peanuts, cotton, fruits, and vegetables; however, due to lack of storage, significant amounts of crops are lost to spoilage. In 2012, Mali produced 1,900,000 tons of rice and 6,674,000 tons of cereals, with the goal of 15 million tons of cereals by 2020. Already Mali is growing 2 million tons more than needed for domestic consumption, and almost twice as much rice

as it consumes. Mali is an exporter of rice, along with millet and cotton, to neighboring countries; yet today, many of its citizens are suffering from malnutrition and food insecurity, exacerbated by the country's political crisis.

Agriculture is allocated 13% of the government's budget, which provides seeds and a 55% subsidy for fertilizer. The government has programs to intensify cultivation of rice, maize, and cotton, using improved methods of farming to expand yields per ha, as part of its broader program that encompasses increased food production, improved storage, manufacturing finished food commodities, and marketing.

A New Breadbasket

The Niger River, originating in Guinea, snakes its way, first northeast, then southeast through Mali, Niger, Benin, and Nigeria, finally emptying out into the Bight of Benin in the Atlantic Ocean, after spreading out into Nigeria's vast Niger Delta wetland. Although the Niger River, at 4,150 km long, is the third-longest in Africa, behind the Nile and the Congo rivers, its volume is significantly less, so that it produces fewer than 200 mega-

watts of hydroelectric power for Mali, and only has a potential of 1,500 MW.

The real contribution of the Niger River is the Inland Delta, the oldest irrigated area in West Africa, which bridges northern and southern Mali, and lies in a depression that was once the bed of a large pre-historic lake. The smaller Bani River also feeds into the Delta.

The Office of Niger, a government-managed, irrigated area, created in 1932, located in the city of Ségou, 275 km north of the capital Bamako, manages only one portion of the Delta,¹ but it is the most fruitful section for irrigated food production. The Office manages 2,500 km of primary and secondary canals (not counting tertiary and quaternary canals), and uses 2.7km₃ of water each year, about 10% of the total flow of the Niger River, the largest irrigation scheme in West Africa.

The author toured the Markala Dam, 816 meters long, first put into service in 1947 to provide a steady flow of water into the Delta for irrigation and navigation (no hydroelectric power). The dam has 488 gates that can operate in four different positions, and are used to raise the water level to 5.5 meters, thus diverting water into the Canal Adducteur, the primary 9-km-long diversion canal on the left bank. The Canal then divides into three diversionary canals; the Macina, Sahel, and Costes-Ongoiba.² Utilizing the natural canals and slopes of the Delta, the Markala Dam, with its man-made directed water flows, was conceived to dominate the eight water systems of this portion of the Delta, which the Office of Niger estimates covers 1,907,000 ha of irrigable land, that could be brought under their managed-irrigated scheme.³

Presently, with only about 100,000 ha of irrigated managed land in use, the Delta is reported to account for as much as 40% of the country's total rice production, with yields of 685,000 tons of rice in the last growing season. There are expectations of 737,645 tons in 2013-14. The Delta is also expected to yield 5,453 tons of maize, 337,307 tons of vegetables, and 24,500 tons of potatoes in this year's farming season.

In 1932, the Office of Niger envisioned that in 50 years, there would be 960,000 ha of managed-irrigation land, of which 510,000 would produce cotton; 450,000 would produce rice, with an estimated yield of

2,500,000 tons. That was to be accomplished by 1982. Three decades later, this potential has not yet been brought to fruition. While the motivations of those who developed this idea initially were purely colonial, in the worst sense of that word, the great potential of this area has been proven. If this vision for the future of the Delta is realized, Mali would become, in the words of the Office of Niger, "the granary of West Africa."

To accomplish this demands a reasonably centralized, integrated development of this area. In recent years, land-grabbing by various powers or financial interests, and agro-business ventures, have taken hold of whole parcels in the Office of Niger. Crop choices are not being determined by the needs of the Malian people and those of other Sahel countries, but by big profit considerations.

Among the largest projects is Malibya, a joint venture between Qaddafi's Libya and Mali, which was set up on 100,000 ha for rice production. Rice is highly water-consuming, as is cotton, the second source of revenue for Mali. The South Africans and the Chinese are producing sugarcane for biofuels on 20,000 ha of this very fertile land. A U.S. project to promote small farming extends over 14,000 ha.

For the full utilization of Mali's water systems, the dredging of the Niger River also is required, post haste.

Needed: A Strategic Vision for Africa

The lack of basic infrastructure in Mali is an indictment of the appalling failure of the City of London-dominated Western financial system, which is itself suffering the death agony of its own perverse monetarist ideology. How is it possible that in the second decade of the 21st Century, people in Mali (and elsewhere in Africa) are forced to burn down trees to make charcoal for cooking, because adequate electrical power does not exist? Basic roads to travel between cities have not been built. Transportation to northern Mali is effectively limited to air travel.

The United States abandoned any meaningful ideas for developing Africa following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. After the collapse of the Bretton Wood System in August 1971, Henry Kissinger released his 1974 genocidal report, "National Security Study Memorandum 200 (NSSM 200),"⁴ which stipu-

1. The other two portions of the Delta are managed from Mopti and Timbuktu.

2. The Markala Dam also creates a canal for fish to pass through, and a canal for navigation.

3. From Office of Niger publications and personal briefings.

4. The full name of the Kissinger report, which remained classified until the late 1980s, is: "National Security Study Memorandum 200: Implications of Worldwide Population Growth for U.S. Security and

lated that the strategic interest of the West was to maintain an uninterrupted supply of natural resources from the developing sector. At the same time, the West opposed the industrial development of those same countries, for fear they themselves would use up those resources; since then, there has been no meaningful commitment to build infrastructure in Africa.

Even before President Obama and NATO implemented Tony Blair's "responsibility to protect/R2P"-regime-change policy in Libya, which has resulted in a catastrophe for West Africa, 30 years of structural adjustments

imposed by the IMF on the whole of Africa had already caused the deplorable conditions which are pervasive throughout the continent. What better recruiting ground for insurgents and terrorists than large, desolate, underdeveloped areas, sparsely populated by desperately poor and alienated people, who, seeing no future, easily turn to criminal activity and violence?

President Obama's cynically misnamed "Power Africa" represents nothing more than a private sector commitment for 8,000-10,000 megawatts of electricity, which any honest observer of Africa knows does not even scratch the surface of what is needed. The African continent requires hundreds of billions of dollars of credits for the generation of thousands of gigawatts of electrical power, if we are to raise the level of existence of hundreds of millions of suffering Africans to a modern (human) standard of living.

Beginning today, we must abandon the prevailing narrow-minded, short-term, myopic, quick-buck approach to Africa, which has contaminated our thinking, and eaten away our morality, as we approach the 50th anniversary of the death of President Kennedy, our last elected national leader committed to scientific and



EIRNS/Lawrence Freeman

The 816-meter-long Markala Dam on the Niger River, shown here, was completed in 1947, to create a managed water system for irrigated agriculture, which potentially could service 1,907,000 ha of land. Full utilization of this naturally irrigated land would allow Mali to become a food exporter of rice to other countries of the Sahel region. The individual in the center is the director of the dam

technological progress. Kennedy was also the last U.S. President who acted to create a better future for Africa.

Given the porous borders and similarity of terrain of the countries neighboring northern Mali, it cannot be emphasized strongly enough, that without a strategic economic development policy for the entire region, the underlying conditions that have plagued Mali for decades will not be addressed. Nothing less will do. Without real economic progress, there will be no peace, and no security, but only failed and fragile states, strewn across Africa; the people will be easy prey for insurgency and destabilization.

This makes it all the more urgent that the United States implement Glass-Steagall legislation immediately to prevent further destruction of the global economy, and that we shift to a credit-based economic-financial system.

Pushing Back the Desert

Mali's Inland Delta is an oasis in the desert. But if its fruits are to be fully realized, there needs to be an integrated perspective that includes creating the financial means for the realization of these projects.

On June 30, 1962, the first President of independent Mali, Modibo Keita (1960-68) announced to an aston-

Overseas Interests."

ished international community his intention to create a national currency, stating that, since the beginning of time, sovereignty was synonymous with the capacity of a state to issue its own currency. A monetary reform of that type, including public credit emission for large infrastructure projects, must be envisaged today, in the context of an overall international struggle to change the present monetarist system. This will be the only way to move Mali and the region rapidly into the 21st Century.

The perspective must be that all these nations develop a capital-dense infrastructure platform, including, in the medium term, use of nuclear power, and high-speed modes of rail transportation to span the girth of the continent, connecting to rail networks from the African Mediterranean coast down to Southern Africa. At the same time, education efforts must be significantly increased, with the intention to develop a populace able to master the higher technologies, and the culture of creativity, needed for the task.

Complementing what we might name the new Mali Delta Breadbasket, we should develop the long-known (but never realized) potential breadbasket of East Africa, of which 58 million acres of arable land are now located in South Sudan. This area is fertile enough to feed almost the entire continent. In our assault on the advancing desert, it is crucial that we move forward with the great water project of Central Africa, known as Transaqua, a plan designed 30 years ago to transfer water from the water-rich Congo River basin, to the arid Chad basin, and to refurbish the disappearing Lake Chad.⁵

Although we do not know the precise effects such projects will have, we do know that by significantly expanding the land area used for food production in the Delta, and reversing the contraction of Lake Chad, weather patterns will be changed through increased evaporation and transpiration, resulting in increased rainfall.

We must change the way we think about Africa, not limiting ourselves to the simple here-and-now, but rather, embarking on a bold and visionary journey to


5. In brief, Transaqua involves building a canal from 5% of water—100 billion cubic meters—captured from the Congo River, north to join the Oubangui River, then sending the increased water flow across the Central Africa Republic to the Chari River which supplies Lake Chad. As a result, we will not only save the Lake for 50 million Africans who depend on it for their livelihoods, but reverse the spread of the Sahel desert. See “The Transaqua Project: Making Africa Bloom,” *EIR* May 1, 2009.

discover what Africa could and should become. Let us allow our creative imaginations to soar to new heights, flying above all the practical nay-sayers who tell us “It will never happen,” and unite the African nations and their allies around a common mission to finally develop the African continent.

Let Mali’s Inland Delta become the center, from which expanding concentric waves of economic progress will spread across the region, with an immediate focus on increasing the production of food. Let us finally end the insecurity of millions of Africans, who wake up each morning not knowing if they or their children will have enough food to survive that day. If we adopt this approach, we will not only create the conditions to feed a billion Africans today, but the next billion as well. If we do not, we will be complicit, by our sins of omission, in condemning hundreds of millions of our fellow human beings to dehumanizing conditions of life, and death.

(This article was written in collaboration with my colleagues from Paris—Jacques Cheminade and Christine Bierre.)

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