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Introduction

The Republic of Mali is an under-developed country with endemic poverty. Its rate of poverty is 63.8 per cent, or two-thirds of the population. This is why, since the arrival of democratic government in 1991, Mali is resolutely engaged in the struggle against poverty. To attain the objective of poverty eradication, Mali first developed the National Strategy Against Poverty (SNLP), followed by the Strategic Framework Against Poverty (CSLP). Both of these were developed in a participatory manner with the support of all development partners.

The poverty in Mali is essentially rural, and it strongly affects vulnerable groups, such as women, children, the disabled, older persons, etc.

With the devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994, the condition of the poor worsened. In order to mitigate the negative effects of this devaluation, Mali, in agreement with its development partners, created a national budget line called the “social net”. As a result, the Agency for Social Development (ADS) was created to manage this line of credit.

This structure has just evolved into the National Solidarity Fund with a view to tap all areas of public, as well as private, resources to combat poverty.

Outside of this structure, the other social investment funds created in Mali with the assistance of Mali’s development partners are: The Association of Basic Initiatives (AIB) and the Social Development Fund (FDS).

The Association of Basic Initiatives (AIB)

The Association of Basic Initiatives manages the Project of Support to Basic Initiatives (PAIB). The Association is composed uniquely of civil society actors (such as architects and engineer-advisers), NGOs, and Associations of Ridge-tilers in the areas of school and health). The Association has put in place an Administration Council which has recruited the management team of the project.

Jointly co-financed by the World Bank and the Government of Mali, the Project of Support to Basic Initiatives has as its objective the improvement of living conditions of the poorest rural communities, targeting the realization of socio-economic infrastructure (schools, health centers, water sources, small building infrastructure, etc.) and the strengthening of capacity of the intermediaries and the beneficiaries.

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In addition to these direct effects, the project also has a perceptible impact on the change of behaviour of the general populations in the beneficiary zones, which are currently located in the regions of Mopti and Timbuktu.

The choice of these action zones was made on the basis of a target study which enabled the choice of the poorest villages in the poorest zones of these two regions. This selection was made in collaboration with representatives of the Government, decentralized collectives/communities and local technical service providers.

The strategy of implementation of the project is based on a partner approach, which has permitted the attainment of results better than expected. The actions carried out within the project framework correspond extremely well to the priority needs of the beneficiary populations. By means of a participatory diagnosis, the targeted communities identify and prioritize their foremost needs. All the participants in the project – beneficiaries, civil society, decentralized structures and services of the Government – are unanimous in their recognition of the project's success.

The Social Development Fund

The Association which manages the Poverty Reduction Project is called “The Social Development Fund” and brings together civil society actors, such as NGOs and women's associations, and the Government. It has elected an Administrative Council, which has put in place the Management Bureau of the project.

The Poverty Reduction Project, co-financed jointly by the African Development Bank and the Government of Mali, at a total cost of approximately 11 billion CFA francs, has as its general objective to contribute to poverty reduction in Mali and as its specific objective to strengthen institutional and revenue-generating capacity of the target populations and to improve access to basic socio-economic services.

The implementation strategy of the Poverty Reduction Project, based on the participatory approach, permits a response based on the expressed needs of the target populations, all in creating synergies between the various project participants: the community residents, the districts, NGOs, the Decentralized Service Financiers (SFD), technical service providers, and businesses.

Planned for five years, this project is made up of the following components: sensitization, strengthening of capacity and follow-up evaluation, development of micro-finance and basic socio-economic infrastructure, and project management.

Informational note on the African Social Investment Fund Network (ASIFNET)

Using the experience of other continents, the Social Investment Funds of the Sub-Saharan African region held their first conference in Harare from 20-24 April 1999 and put in place an ad hoc committee to establish the statutes of their network.

The outcome of this, which was adopted on 8 June 2000 in Washington immediately after the Second International Conference of the Social Investment Funds, was named the African Social Investment Fund Network, ASIFNET, and specifically aims to:

- (a) Stimulate consciousness, at the local and international levels, of the role and successes of Social Investment Funds in reducing poverty;
- (b) Promote understanding of the approach of the African Social Investment Funds which are centred on community demands;
- (c) Create and maintain channels of communication between the African Social Investment Funds and other organizations involved in the reduction of poverty;
- (d) Facilitate the exchange of information and experience between the African Social Investment Funds and support their members by furnishing them pertinent information;
- (e) Develop and share appropriate follow-up indicators, as well as evaluation methodologies, in order to better the follow-up impact processes and other approaches of strengthening capacity with a view to compare between the funds.

To attain the above objectives, ASIFNET plans to synergize the best practices of Social Investment Funds and anti-poverty programmes, and lead with the following activities:

- (a) Establish an Internet site to furnish basic informational data, knowledge, best practices and experiences of Social Investment Funds and promote the sharing of technologies, knowledge and experience between members;
- (b) Create a data bank on human resources which will centralize the recommendations of regional experts, technicians and professionals who have proven experience and specialization in anti-poverty programmes and strategies and which can be used to exchange technical information;
- (c) Familiarize and train the technicians and professionals of ASIFNET in appropriate information technology;
- (d) Organize workshops, seminars, conferences and personnel exchanges to facilitate the exchange of information and practices;
- (e) Publish publications, bulletins and other informational support;
- (f) Mobilize material, human and financial resources, in order to implement the programmes of action.

After the adoption of its statutes, the constitutive assembly of ASIFNET established, for a period of two years, an executive committee composed as follows:

<u>President:</u>	Director General of the Association of Basic Initiatives (AIB), Mali
<u>Secretary General:</u>	Executive Director of the Ghana Poverty Reduction Programme
<u>Members:</u>	Directors or Coordinators of the Social Investment Funds of Benin, Burundi, Gambia, Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Conclusion

Mali's Social Investment Funds participate effectively in the struggle against poverty by the realization of social and economic infrastructure and the strengthening of the capacities of the beneficiaries and the intermediaries. But they are confronted with a problem of financial resources for continuing their activities, particularly the Project of Support to Basic Initiatives (PAIB), for which World Bank financing will end in January 2004. The international community needs to create perennial financial mechanisms for Social Investment Funds. In addition, financing such as that of the PPTE Initiative could be envisaged for a large-scale operationalization of the participatory and engagement principles of Social Investment Funds.