



# COFESFA: Malian women manage urban waste

Aster Zaoude

**COFESFA aims to create self-employment for young professional women, and improve the urban environment ... services are developed only after close collaboration with end-users, mostly women**

**It's neither glamorous nor prestigious — so what persuaded a group of young graduates that rubbish collection is a job fit for women?**

**W**hen 14 women graduated from University in Bamako with their diplomas, they expected to have jobs and a comfortable life. But, at the same time that Africa lacks educated and skilled workers, many graduates remain jobless. Being a woman makes job-hunting an even more difficult undertaking. So the 14 graduates decided to take their future into their hands and make a living from waste — garbage collection, the most despicable of jobs, became, for these women, a great source of income. This initiative, and the creation of COFESFA (the Women's Co-operative for Employment and Health), took place in 1987.

The women's mentor and inspiration is Aminata Traoré, a Malian researcher, socio-psychologist and entrepreneur, who was the regional director of UNDP's programme for the promotion of women in water and sanitation, and who is now responsible for Mali's tourism — one of six women ministers. Unifem supported them by funding the urban waste-management co-operative, and UNFPA

helped finance the basic sanitation training that the women would provide in conjunction with their door-to-door garbage-collection efforts.

## Jobs and services

COFESFA aims to create self-employment for young professional women, and improve the urban environment. The waste-collection, supervision and recycling programmes are supplemented by the manufacture and sale of sealed garbage-cans, public-toilet construction, and the improvement of neighbourhood water facilities. All services were developed only after close collaboration with the end-users, mostly women. COFESFA's second objective was to create spaces for dialogue and learning amongst women about hygiene, health, and reproductive health, and to reinforce a process of political empowerment through negotiations with local government.

The dual result of these activities was that the women's co-operative made money — and an interesting empowerment process was initiated. The young women have also improved the urban environment.

COFESFA defied every stereotype regarding intellectuals dirtying their hands, and women driving heavy trucks and doing low-paid, 'men's' work. They created a bond with the women of Medina Coura, a poor district of Bamako; in return, the women of Medina took up their battle with the mayor's office when the contract for garbage collection in Medina Coura was being negotiated.

## First and best

COFESFA moved into other environment-related activities as the members learned on the job, expanding its

**... continued**

'Government and development partners are increasingly concerned about whether urban centres have the capacity to accommodate a healthy environment' — a COFESFA-type initiative is badly needed here.



Marc French/Panos Pictures



A fishing co-operative, Mbao, Senegal. Women can create and manage viable, growing businesses.

areas of intervention and networking around the region. The women went to Burkina Faso to learn how to produce all shapes of garbage bins, adapting them to Malian women's needs. They started building public latrines and waterpoints. They even moved into recycling garbage, the most expensive, but necessary and often-missing element of the waste-management cycle. COFESFA was also seen as a model co-operative, well-managed by its original members. Then along came the wind of change.

A new government came in, and co-operatives gave way to district-based groupings called GIE (Groupement d'Intérêt Economique) with members living in the same district, organized around the same activity. COFESFA had been so successful in Mali that many GIEs decided to get involved in garbage collection — the competition started. COFESFA was the first, and best-organized and, as a result, won the bid for a World Bank labour-intensive infrastructure-building project (AGETIP). COFESFA built more latrines and waterpoints and engaged in a well-paying project but, in the process, they lost their advantage — the bond with the women and their creative response to emerging challenges.

The project received an award for Best Practice at the Agenda 21 NGO Conference held in Miami in preparation for the Rio Summit. COFESFA also became part of ENDA's 'network of partner NGOs'

working in urban environmental development.

### Future plans

COFESFA needed to find ways to generate funds to sustain itself over the long term. Co-operative members considered moving into other revenue-generating initiatives, such as credit and savings schemes, mostly because donors are predisposed to support such projects. Unifem encouraged COFESFA to stick with its area of expertise and to find ways of marketing its services within a business perspective. A marketing brochure was developed with the intention of establishing a service-oriented, private firm, driven by market demands for urban waste management. This approach intends to promote sustainable-development projects, and to ensure the economic empowerment of women by enabling them to create and manage viable, growing business enterprises.

Africa's cities now attract more than 40 per cent of the continent's population, and the exodus from poor rural economies and fragile ecosystems is probably irreversible. Governments and development partners are increasingly concerned about whether urban centres have the capacity to accommodate sound livelihoods and a healthy environment. COFESFA has led the way towards participatory and integrated approaches to the new challenges of urban management, with particular emphasis on water and sanitation as well as waste management. It is a success story worth telling and a model worth following.

#### about the author

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