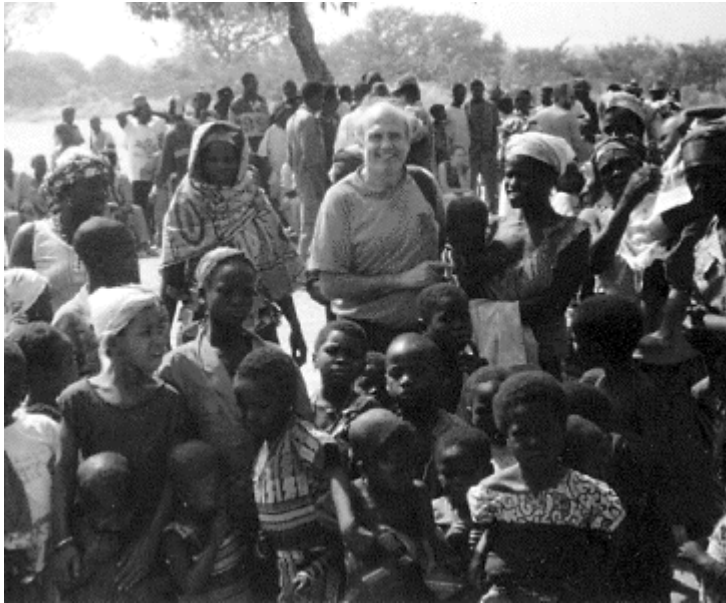


Utahns team up to help villagers

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BYU Professor Warner Woodworth led a group of Utahns to Africa to participate in the work to help these Malians with a charitable project called the Ouelessebouyou-Utah Alliance.

By MARLIESE FILLMORE

In the Muslim republic of Mali, West Africa, live impoverished villagers in need of humanitarian aid, and a BYU professor and fellow Utahns have answered their call for help.

Just over a year ago, BYU Professor Warner Woodworth led a group of Utahns to Africa to participate in the work to help these Malians with a charitable project called the Ouelessebouyou-Utah Alliance.

The group was started more than 10 years ago as a nonprofit foundation to help natives in the Ouelessebouyou region. The effort has raised over one million dollars in private donations, mainly from Salt Lake residents, businesses and some school children.

First the work was focused on improving the physical conditions of the region by installing wells for local water access in the villages void of electricity, running water and other conveniences.

The wells have helped increase the quality of life in the Mali villages. "Every village now has a drinking and or gardening well allowing the people to grow nutritious food and eat a better diet, which has lowered the mortality rate," Woodworth said.

The alliance has also worked to develop an education system in the villages, Woodworth said.

Members have helped build schools, train teachers and provide educational supplies.

The teachers' salaries of \$250 per year have been donated by various Utah volunteers. Woodworth said, "The villagers were going to be dependant on Utah's charity indefinitely if we didn't help them become self-sufficient so they could pay their own teacher salaries."

Woodworth eventually hopes to see each family pay ten dollars per year for their child's schooling.

While this amount seems insignificant to most Americans, it would be a sacrifice for "the average Mali person eking out an existence on less than one dollar a day," Woodworth said.

He hopes this trend can be reversed through microcredit lending, currently the main focus of his work in Mali, and the next step of development.

"Access to water, fresh produce, medical care and literacy, collectively enable the Malian people to now move toward self-reliance through micro-enterprise creation of jobs," Woodworth said in a news release.

The trip Woodworth led to Mali last year was part of a program to continue the microcredit efforts that had begun in December of 1995. Since then, Woodworth and his teams of graduate students have designed and founded the Village Bank.

They have set up training modules to help the potential borrowers "learn how to be entrepreneurs, how to be effective with their loans and how to best multiply their talents," Woodworth said.

Student teams from BYU, the University of Utah and Harvard University have developed training materials and have held seminars in small business, micro finance and basic management skills.

Woodworth recently returned from his yearly trip to Mali during which he checked on the status of the bank and insured procedures are running smoothly.

The microcredit efforts have seen great success, Woodworth said. Already 151 loans starting at \$100 have been given out, and all but three have been paid back.

Loans are used for everything from selling cosmetics or clothing on the street, to butcher, veterinarian and gardener services.

The loans are changing the lives of many Malians, Woodworth said. One single mother, Mantjini, sacrificed to become a microentrepreneur, and is now providing for her children, even creating employment for three of them.

Woodworth helped sponsor the Rocky Mountain Microcredit Conference that was held at BYU on Feb. 5 and 6, which was designed to increase awareness about microcredit.

"I was pleased with the results of the conference, but a little disappointed there wasn't more of a

local interest from BYU students and faculty," Woodworth said.

He said people haven't yet realized what a great tool microcredit can be for poverty alleviation.