

# US Agriculture and Trade Policy: From Louisville to Mali

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Seydou Coulibaly, a cotton farmer from Mali, was invited to the United States by Oxfam America to engage in educational sessions with communities in Kentucky and Virginia on the impacts that US agricultural subsidies are having on his livelihood. Coulibaly spoke with University of Louisville students about his farm in Mali that supports his 42 family members. He explained that he grows corn, wheat and peanuts for subsistence purposes and cotton for income to pay for clothes for his family, school fees for his children, medical expenses and other basic necessities. But he has been struggling.

“It’s been about six years now that we have struggled against the low price of cotton, caused by the dumping of surplus American cotton on the world market,” said Coulibaly.

“Because of this, the cotton in Mali and in Africa can no longer clothe our kids as they should be clothed, educate them as they should be educated or take care of their health needs.”

Gathered on the University of Louisville campus in the midst of finals, students spent an hour discussing complex issues with this special guest from Mali. Oxfam America, the Community Farm Alliance (CFA) and the Hunger Program of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) teamed up to co-sponsor the event to educate about the impacts of US agricultural policies on family farmers, here and abroad.

“The low cotton prices caused by US cotton subsidies have a ripple effect in cotton growing areas in West Africa,” explained



Left to right: Ivor Chodkoski, Ben Baggett, Rasa Zimliki, Seydou Coulibaly, Jamaica Corker, Andrew Kang Bartlett, Stacy Brooks

Coulibaly. “In my village we have difficulties paying for the costs of basic

education, health care and even drinkable water.”

Ivor Chodkowsky, a Louisville farmer and past president of CFA, explained that many farmers in the US are also hurting. He is a vegetable and fruit farmer and does not receive commodity subsidies.

Chodkowsky explained how buy-outs by agribusiness and consolidation in the food system are disasters for family farmers. Few can maintain their way of life.

“The government finances the large-scale commodity farmers with billions in subsidies, instead of supporting conservation practices and rural development.”

Funding priorities and agricultural policies shaped by electoral politics has made survival as a family farmer in the US almost impossible. Meanwhile, these same policies make physical survival tenuous in poorer

countries that depend on agriculture. US policies and the dumping of agricultural goods result in increased poverty and even starvation in places around the world. The fundamental problem with US agricultural policies is over-production leading to low farm-gate prices. Despite the fact that commodity prices have steadily dropped during the past few decades, the prices consumers pay have stayed the same or, in many countries, increased. The beneficiaries are exporters and agri-food corporations, not people trying to feed their families.

What are the possibilities for change? How will West African and American farmers be able to make a living off their land?

Diversification of crops is sometimes a solution, but this is difficult in Mali because rules in the credit and loan system stymie efforts to access capital. Add to that fickle weather patterns. And finally, even if an alternative crop is developed, price fluctuations and competition from other countries make this risky. Adding value to agricultural products can be a way for farmers to retain more profits.

One cooperative in Nicaragua is working on ways to benefit from value-added production. The cooperative has been successful selling T-shirts and other garments to a growing market for non-sweatshop goods. Nine years ago, the Presbyterian Hunger Program gave an economic development grant to the community. A group of women, dislocated by Hurricane Mitch to Nueva Vida, a muddy piece of land near Managua, built their own assembly plant and became the world's first cooperative free trade zone, a status providing tax and quota advantages.

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The women call their zone *The Fair Trade Zone*. The PC(USA) is now the cooperative's second largest customer and has purchased more than 70,000 T-shirts. The women are now about to start construction of a spinning mill, which would produce new jobs and retain more profits for the cooperative and community. Mr. Coulibaly said, "This is a wonderful initiative, but capital is necessary to start something like that. In my country, this is very difficult."

Better trade rules negotiated through the World Trade Organization (WTO) could improve the prospects for such value-added initiatives, and many continue

to push on that level. At the same time, global trade justice and farmer groups contend that food sovereignty is the goal, and food sovereignty will only be possible if agriculture is removed from the WTO and special protections are established for farmers and domestic production. Equally important are efforts to shape the subsidies system in the 2007 Farm Bill.

"Agricultural subsidies that distort production levels on behalf of industrial agriculture should be phased out so that small and medium-sized farmers have a reasonable chance of survival," Chodkowski said. "These tax dollars should be spent on conservation, rural development and nutrition programs that benefit the common good."

Ivor Chodkowski and Seydou Coulibaly, two farmers from opposite sides of the world, agreed that such changes would dramatically improve the plight of farmers from the heartland of the US to Mali and beyond.