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Rural development — a partnership of villagers and NGO:

ActionAid's long-term development programme in The Gambia

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A village – NGO partnership

ActionAid The Gambia (AATG) operates an integrated rural development programme in around 130 villages along the Gambia river valley. Rainfall has become thinner and shorter since the 1960s, changing much of the Guinean Savannah into a Sahelian ecology with dustbowls and dying trees. Roads came late, and only in the last 10 years has it been possible to drive the 500 km from Banjul to Basse in 5½ hours, instead of 2½ days. Our NGO work began along the river bank in the small subsistence villages of Kiang district, which live on groundnut cultivation, rice, millet, and fishing.

When we went into the villages of Kiang, we found the villagers there. The villagers had their desires, priorities, needs: and of course the Agency also had its own requirements, constraints, and desires. In fact we now consider (and with the wonderful benefit of looking back six years later!) that ActionAid went into the villages with a hidden agenda. The Agency had experience in schools elsewhere in Africa, and a sponsorship mechanism for fund-raising which was tried and proved successful. The expatriates who arrived in The Gambia in September, 1979 had already designed much of their programme before they left London.

The government of The Gambia designated the isolated and then neglected area of Kiang West to be the target zone, and ActionAid went into the villages to make contact. Discussions were held with the

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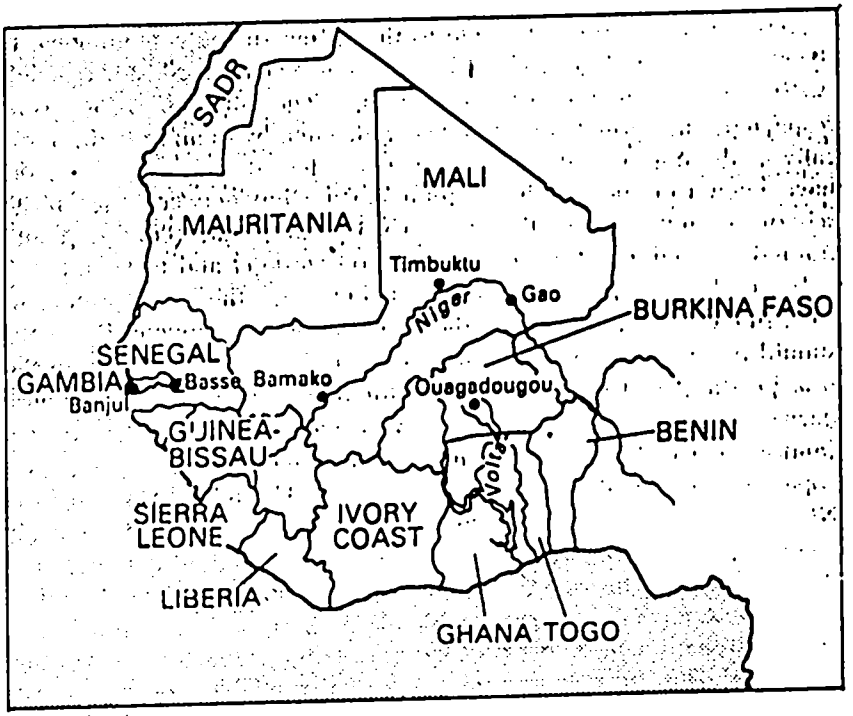


Map 2 Northwestern Africa.

villagers, and these resulted in the drawing up of a 'development demand list'. Education – or at least the provision of schools – featured at the top of the list: a happy coincidence with the Agency's priority on its hidden agenda!

There is no doubt that education was a popular demand in these villages. Fifteen years after independence, Gambian villages in Kiang and elsewhere had less access to education for their children than most regions in Africa in the 1970s. But the villagers knew what schools they wanted; while the Agency had its own ideas of what constituted a suitable village education system. With government support, ActionAid therefore started a four-year non-formal education system, but in school buildings and with school bells and uniforms. Within three years, the villagers had rejected this recipe: they wanted formal primary education for a full six years, which they hoped would lead to their definition of a school within the government system, and allow their children to profit from the rewards which accrued to secondary education graduates during the 1970s.

ActionAid was forced to yield to the wishes of the communities. If the start was 'top-down', the Agency can also claim credit for reacting swiftly to the demands from 'bottom-up'. The villagers' wishes were respected, and formal education was welcomed by them as enthusiastically as the non-formal variety had been rejected. Since then, schools have been run successfully in joint partnership between the village school committees and the Agency's teaching staff (employed and trained by ActionAid as village extension workers and teachers).

In rural development, decision-making plays the most prominent role. In fact decision-making is the sum total of development. Decisions should be taken by the communities themselves, since they are in the best position to decide what is best for them. Sometimes community decisions and desires are so numerous and varied that the Agency cannot cope with all of them, and often the community itself cannot cope with so much activity in a short time. The advisory role of the NGO then becomes vital. This is not a passive role: the outside Agency should actively seek to promote discussion and democracy in the community, ensuring that the women, the children and the poorest are all able to make themselves heard.

It is often difficult to identify the poorest. The poorest are not on the front line. The first people you meet are the elite. The poorest families cannot house you or feed you. So partnership and long familiarity with the village are the only ways to find the very poor.

> The poorest are a residual, the last in the line, the most difficult to find, and the hardest to learn from. Unless paupers and poverty are deliberately and persistently sought, they tend to remain effectively screened from outside enquirers (Chambers, 1983, p. 19).

You cannot cut straight lines in a community. Defining an 'elite' in a poor rural village may be quite difficult to do. Anyway, they are key members of the community with which we work and they are often the opinion leaders. So there is a danger for all outsiders that they may be 'captured' and maintained by the elite. Robert Chambers speaks of 'the elite bias...a bias against the poorest people'. We cannot and should not work without the elites, but we can ensure that the elites are working with the rest of the community and not taking all the benefits. The role of ActionAid is therefore not to be quiet, nor to distract the villagers from their expressed needs....but to help the community as a whole to select priorities.

We can state, as a matter of principle, that the partnership should be dynamic on both sides: the villagers should be taking the initiative in their own development. The Agency should be an active participant in the debate and decision-making. The community takes decisions, the

Agency ensures that all parts of the community can participate in the decision-making and in the implementation of the project.

ActionAid entered the communities through education. This is not a model which can be followed by every agency. Nor do we even recommend it particularly. It just happens to be our entry point. All the development activities of ActionAid therefore have to be seen through the window of our work in primary education. The story of ActionAid can be illustrated through a four-part series of pictures, which illustrate the development cycle we are seeking to achieve.

Stage One

At a village development meeting, the community decided to build a school with assistance from AATG. (We put this in the past tense, since no new schools have been created in this way since 1983. However it is still true that the first entry point has been through the school, even for feeder villages which send their children to school in the larger or 'key' village.) A school parent committee organises the building, with labour provided by the community. AATG helps with the effective use of local resources, as far as possible training villagers to use them in a better way (skill training.) With the creation or improvement of a school, the combat against illiteracy is engaged. The child develops literacy and numeracy skills, and also trains for career skills through the school farms, the school garden, beekeeping project, art and craft, etc. ActionAid emphasises that the school has an inside and an outside; that the school is an important part of the community, not a building outside the village, a first step towards urban migration.

Stage Two

The community is consulted about its basic priority needs. These have nearly always included food and water at the top of the list. Food production is a fundamental problem for all West African countries. AATG helps communities to increase food production and incomes. Given the cultural context of The Gambia, we prefer to work with women's groups. An enormous success has been registered in Kiang with dry-season irrigated vegetable gardens which allow food production in the non-agricultural period, and bring direct benefits to women and children. At all times, AATG has insisted on working through village groups, ensuring that communities are taking the initiative in the project preparation, design, and implementation. There has also been a lot of work with women's groups and young farmers' clubs in the areas of animal traction, seed multiplication and selection, improved storage, beekeeping, fishing, credit and savings, and farmer training.

Stage Three

When excess food is produced by the communities, they discover a

need for marketing. Sometimes there is a problem of transporting goods to the market outlet. At other times there is a problem of market information, and difficulties with storage of produce (like onions) until prices rise and the community can gain better profits. AATG has provided assistance with marketing credits, with transport carts, with grain and onion storage, with variety selection to avoid all vegetables coming to maturity at the same time... and after 6 years in Kiang, assistance has been provided to create a new weekly market, or *loomo*.

Stage Four

The whole of our work is directed at building up the village institutions for decision-making. AATG stresses the importance of involving all strata of the community in the process, men and women alike. In this balanced form of representation, one can justifiably claim that decisions belong to the whole community. Stage four is the 'decision-making' phase, which we have defined as our development objective. Decision-making is emphasised from the start. Now in stage four we are looking at a new sort of decision, investing in the future. The education, food production and income-generating programme allow savings to be made, and to be re-invested in the community through the initiative and decision of the community itself. How long does it take to reach stage four? The Kiang bee groups may have reached it already – as we shall show. For others it may take a generation.

Te sito *and dependency*

The official Gambian philosophy for rural development is described in the Mandinka expression *te sito*. Literally this means 'tighten your belt', but its implication is self-help, its objective is self-reliance. We are faced in West Africa with massive development needs. At the same time, we are constrained by limited resources. We are therefore convinced that self-help must be the major component in the drive for improving living standards in the rural areas. The communities with whom we as extension workers are collaborating, have already established their own sociopolitical institutions to propagate the philosophy of self-reliance. *Te sito* is participative development.

The ActionAid programme espouses this village-first grass-roots philosophy. Its aims to be a philosophy of independence. In the beginning, however, the Agency's impact had rather the reverse effect.

The arrival of any NGO in the village is quickly noticed. No matter what the intention of the NGO is, it is viewed with suspicion at first. The task of eradicating any misconception is complex and in most cases cannot be accomplished within a short time. This is what makes

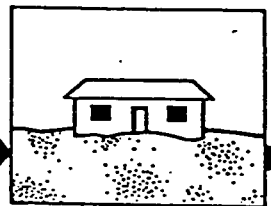
ACTIONAID

receives a request to support community school.

INITIAL MEETINGS

ACTIONAID

assists with the school building and provides school staff and materials.



STAGE ONE PROJECT

The community builds its own school building and elects a committee to manage the school. Discussions are held on what to do next and how to do it. Education support is continued, eventually to be taken on by Government at a later date

ACTIONAID

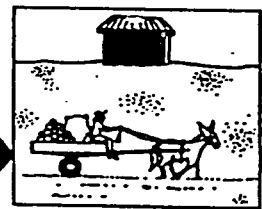
assists with wells and other agricultural inputs and advice, and a credit scheme.

STAGE TWO PROJECT

In response to the needs and ideas of the community. Main aims are to increase food production capacity and incomes from agricultural activities, and to improve group management and organisation skills. Training in production. This takes place with women's groups.

ACTIONAID

assists with inputs and advice to improve group income generation.



STAGE THREE PROJECT

Aimed at strengthening group organisation and marketing skills, increasing profits and money management skills, revolving funds and improving storage methods to avoid glut periods of low prices for produce. Formation of co-operatives, training in group management.

ACTIONAID

continues advice and support to assist the community run existing projects and plan new ones.

STAGE FOUR PROJECT

Community decision-making on what to do with group profits. Discussion, planning and implementation by community. Increasing independence and access to other institutions eg Agricultural Development Bank for savings, loans and support. Group generates its own future projects with its own money to meet its own needs.

PROJECTS

- PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION
- ADULT EDUCATION
- TEACHER TRAINING
- EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

- WELL CONSTRUCTION
- ANIMAL TRACTION
- IRRIGATED GARDENING
- CAUSEWAYS AND BRIDGES
- BEE KEEPING
- FISHING NETS
- CREDIT

- ONION STORAGE
- VEGETABLE MARKETING
- DONKEY CART TRANSPORT
- SEED BANKS
- FOOD PROCESSING
- FISHING BOATS
- CREDIT

- COMMUNITY PROJECTS AS INITIATED BY COMMUNITY ITSELF
- ADULT LITERACY AND NUMERACY
- CREDIT AND ACCOUNTS TRAINING
- INVESTMENT MANAGEMENT

AATG
BANJUL
1984

grass-roots development a long-term process. In partnership both parties must enjoy the confidence of each other for any development to take place.

When the extension worker arrives in a village, full of the lessons he has received from teachers in college he gets a shock! He was told that he would be coming to organise and develop the community, and extend to them the knowledge accumulated in the classroom. To his uttermost surprise, he finds the village very organised! He finds that there is a central authority in the village. He finds that there are various institutions within the village with different socio-political functions, and that there is a sophisticated internal communication system inside the village. Often his cultural background is different from that of the village to which he has been sent. He may speak Wollof, or Mandinka, but the villagers may be Fulani or Sarahulay. He is young; the elders of the community may not take kindly to advice from a mere youth. He arrives on a Honda motorbike, which makes him the envy of all the young men, and gives him an unfair advantage over them with the village girls!

For the old men who are the leaders of the village, he is the representative of modernity both good and bad. Good are the radios and battery torches, the fertilisers and selected seeds from which the old men benefit. Bad are the changing patterns of behaviour, the disrespect of youth with motorbikes, and the *toobab sillo* or 'way of the foreigners' which leads to the looseness of city habits, and takes sons away from the home of their fathers.

This is the difficult combination with which we have to build rural development. Despite the potential frictions, ActionAid and other NGOs are creating the rural partnership which is essential for rural development. It is not only a partnership between an Agency and a village community. It is above all a partnership between Gambians: between villagers out in their remote bush, and extension workers who are committed to the development of their country and their people. This partnership builds self-reliance through time. The long-term nature of rural development should in no way be equated with dependency. On the contrary, it takes time to build up a spirit of self-reliance; and this is why we believe the idea of 'partnership' is important. Rural development means building up community institutions to take decisions for development.

At the beginning, AATG was not very successful at this. We have seen how a 'top-down' model for non-formal education was imposed: and this point of departure was not properly articulated to the villagers, making them look at AATG as provider of everything. The repercussion of this was the inability to make the villagers take up an active role in their own development. Despite the fact that villagers were joining in

the building, the early work and approach of the Agency actually encouraged dependency.

Since the Agency's activities and experience have developed, however, changes in attitude and approach have won the increasing confidence of the villagers. Once AATG had created enough room for the villagers to make decisions at all levels of their interaction, the villagers reacted by showing how much the Agency took for granted in deciding for their village. They taught us what we did not know about their needs. They willingly accepted their role as organisers taking care of logistics and working in partnership with the Agency. This illustrates that the key to self-reliance is the approach. Pour in food-aid and you can create dependency in a week! But if you build up a partnership, then you can build up the skills, the confidence and the institutions for self-reliance, and a sustained economic process in the community.

The relationship was described to us in this way by a villager in Kiang West, where AATG first started work.

> When they (AATG) came, we listened to what they wanted us to hear. They taught us new things and formed their own groups in the village. When they involved us, that is the time they asked us to tell them what we want. We told them what we wanted and we taught them things about our village which they do not understand before. Now we are just like a big family with them in the village. We work and eat together.

The social ties that the Agency enjoys in the village have helped us to 'live in the thinking of the villagers'. Since then, the confidence and cooperation of the villagers has been enhanced, the role of the Agency has been reduced from that of domination to being an active development catalyst.

Building on village institutions

Building institutions is not done in a vacuum. When we found the villagers in their village, we found them with a community organisation both intricate and efficient. Let us therefore examine the existing Gambian village institutions, their origins, their functions and their interrelationships.

1 *The village Council of Elders*
This is the traditional centre of authority. It is headed by the Alkalo, the village headman who is recognised by the villagers, and by central government as the formal authority in the village. The Alkalo almost always is selected from the founding family of the

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village: in many cases the title is inherited by younger brothers or son. The Alkalo is surrounded by Councillors, who are in the decision-making groups by virtue of their age and lineage. They settle disputes in the community, and they decide on the development issues in the village. They are always in the background, and they are always men.

2 *The village peer groups*
The Mandinka word for an age-groups is Kafo. These groups vary a great deal from one area to another, but most of them originate as circumcision groups linking boys or girls inseparably through their shared ritual passage out of childhood. Their fundamental function in the village is an active labour force. This is particularly important for communal tasks (like building a school), and for work of a social or relief nature. If a member of the Kafo is sick, the rest will join forces to carry out labour in his fields. Other community members can likewise benefit from the Kafo, by hiring it as a work unit. In case of need, the Kafo provides a source of support, and this is especially true for women's groups.

3 *New groups*
Modern changes have brought new groups into existence. Religious organisations, political parties, social clubs for football or dancing, young farmers' clubs, primary health care committees, and numerous groups attached to one or other of the aid organisations (notably the NGOs) are found in every village. Although they are not traditional groups, they do play a vital role in the village development process. Their internal cohesiveness varies greatly, and depends to a large extent on their leaders. Their place in the village hierarchy is just as variable, and the internal communication existing between groups differs from community to community. Since 1983, government policy (through the Department of Community Development) has been to encourage the formation of Village Development Committees, which should pull together the various groups, and provide a forum for village development strategy-making.

Meanwhile many traditional groups are becoming weaker. Seasonal migration dilutes the cohesion of the Kafo groups. The cost of circumcision feasts is becoming prohibitive, and poor harvests in time of drought only make it more difficult to maintain traditional ceremonies. More and more parents group their children together for hygienic hospital circumcision: so it becomes a family affair (4-year-olds and 12-year-olds together), and the village peer group begins to disappear.

Many of the new groups we work with did in fact evolve from

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traditional Kafo groups, whose initial roles were limited to animating drumming, dancing, wrestling, and other leisure activities. With the pace of development and change in The Gambia, many of the age-groups have been transformed into young farmers' clubs and village women's farming groups.

While ActionAid has tried to strengthen some groups, others are new creations of the villagers. Thus school committees have been formed where there were previously no schools. Beekeeping Kafo groups (we avoid using the term 'cooperative', which has a different legal sense in The Gambia) have been developed out of the new honey production programme. Fishing groups have been formed to organise communally the use of nets and other improved equipment for better fish-catches. Women' gardening groups and women's ploughing groups have been created, in order to develop a communal increase in food production and women's incomes. Many of these groups exist under the banner of the Young Farmer's Club; others are separate.

ActionAid has sought, by training these groups, to increase their capacity for self-organisation, self-management, and decision-taking. Previously these new groups had no clearly set-out objectives. It appeared that external extension agents were formulating objectives for the groups, to suit the extension agents' own introduced projects. These might very well be different from the preferred goals of the target groups. As a result, many projects failed. Even successful projects could not be sustained by the villagers. The groups were not properly organised, and their structures were not always suitable for development purposes. Furthermore, their capital was usually too small to make an impact on village development.

The programme started work in Kiang district, in 1979 a remote and forgotten corner on the South Bank of the river Gambia. We could have gone for individual model farmers (or opinion leaders), as many large extension projects like to do. But we rejected this concept, which is cost-ineffective and elitist.

From the start AATG adopted a group approach. Women's groups and young farmers' clubs are the main groups through which we reach the rural population. The groups are essential for producing the spirit of mutual aid (traditional in the Kafo), interdependence, self-reliance, and to promote communal participation in development.

All the development projects in the village are introduced through the groups. The projects are supposed to be known from the start as group and community projects (and never as ActionAid projects). Thus the Agency seeks to be a catalyst to development, not to be a development authority. We shall now give illustrations of where we are successful in this creation of community initiative, and where we have gone wrong in some cases.

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It is clear from all that we have written, that the village groups are both economic and social organisations. They are based on self-interest, and depend on the initiative and active participation of their members. If we reach the individual, it is through the work of the group. Thus the individual is mobilised as part of the group, in a communal effort: challenging their problems and finding solutions collectively.

Working with the beekeepers of Kiang

'Kiang people drink porridge' is a traditional joke: for in Kiang you can always find honey to sweeten your millet porridge. Bee hunting has long been a popular sport for the youths: but the methods used were very crude. The bush fires caused trees to die, and many bees were killed in the process. The traditional grass hives, and the herbs used to attract bees and to trap them, testify to the skills of these beehunters. However, ActionAid has sponsored the transition from hunting to farming.

A radical departure was made from the traditional methods and equipment, and modern methods of beekeeping have been introduced to the villagers. The traditional round grass hive, though cleverly woven, pollutes the purity of the honey and also does not allow selective comb harvesting. This results in the destruction of broods. When the Kenya Top Bar hive was introduced as a substitute to the traditional hive, it was readily accepted. This modern hive is not only strong, but easy to harvest and maintain. Unlike the traditional grass hive, it leaves the brood untouched. The Kenya hive has combs formed vertically from the top bars. The brood stays in one or two of the combs, leaving the other combs clean. You simply leave the brood alone, and harvest the rest. No queen-excluder is needed (contrast European hives): so the hives are cheap, and made entirely in The Gambia.

When the honey-production programme was introduced in 1982, 13 groups emerged almost spontaneously, to develop beekeeping. Frontline workers identified by the groups were trained in bee-management. The objective was to encourage peer teaching, the trainers identified by the village group being charged with responsibility for training fellow-villagers in the modern techniques. The result has been that a broad cross-section of village youths have become involved in the bee programme.

The active involvement of villagers in the programme is due in large part to the organisational ability of the trained frontline workers. Beekeeping has also been found to be a less labour-intensive income-generating activity, capable of supplementing rural incomes. Building on (and improving) existing skills has proved a good entry point. These

are all reasons for the apparent success of the AATG beekeeping programme.

The initial one-cooperative structure for all Kiang bee groups has now been changed. The distances were too great for all village groups to feel equally involved in the organisation of their Kafo. So the original structure split into two, each with a self-built round-hut headquarters at Burrong and Jali, respectively. The huts are for storage of the Kafo processing equipment, and for storage of the honey harvest.

The provision of modern equipment has been an important factor too in the groups' success. Processing was traditionally done by heating the honey combs, melting the honey. But usually overheating gave a bitter taste to the honey. The introduction of metal honey extractors and ripeners has made the village honey processing more efficient. The equipment is provided to the Kafo groups, and carried around to each village group for the night-time harvest (three each year; in January, March and July). It must be said, however, that the equipment is important, and provided on credit by the Agency. The transport is also provided by AATG, and bee assistants are usually present. Therefore although the training in technical beekeeping has been successful, we cannot yet claim that the groups are truly independent in their honey production.

The same is true of honey marketing. So far AATG has failed to create a balance between consumption and marketing of honey. We would like to see more honey consumed, both for improved diets, and to replace the cost of imported sugar. However, more than 80 per cent of the honey produced is taken to the market. So far it is taken to the market by Action Aid. Marketing committees were set up, but they are clearly at a disadvantage when it comes to negotiating with buyers like supermarkets. Very good prices have been negotiated for the villagers, but they are false prices in the absence of competition. Imported screw-top honey jars make AATG honey supreme in the market, but their use also emphasises the villagers' dependence on AATG.

Now we have encouraged the producers to lay down new marketing strategies to take care of future production. Local weekly markets will be visited, and honey will be sold in plastic bags as a sugar-substitute.

The two bee Kafos at Jali and Burong have each retained some of their profits for a village communal fund. The active group members do not benefit as individuals, but as group members. The success of the bee-programme in building the groups is illustrated by the spontaneous decision-making which has developed (again, as a stage four process in our pictorial scheme of development).

The Jali group has decided – without any prior discussion with ActionAid officers – to invest their funds in their own bakery project. There is no bread baked in Jali: the production of bread is scheduled.

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to start in 1987, and it will be funded by the bee-profits. This proves that rural people can and will participate in development, if the original idea is identified by them as a real felt need.

In Burrong, during the 'hungry season' of 1985, the villagers in the bee Kafo decided to bring in rice. Again, entirely spontaneously, the group took the initiative and purchased rice in the capital city. When they brought it into the village, they sold it at cost to members of the bee group only. So among the beekeepers we have been successful in creating initiatives even if the villagers are not independent in parts of the honey production process. Some of the village groups have developed their self-confidence and their income-generation capacity to the stage where they have gone one step ahead in the development process. They are now taking investment decisions. This provides the base for sustained economic development in AATG-assisted Kiang communities.

The organisation of women's gardens

Our success with village groups is most visible in the dry-season vegetable gardens. We have assisted groups to set up 95 vegetable gardens for women farmers. Gardening has become their major activity in the dry season, when no other food production is normally possible.

The gardens are owned and organised by the members. Before AATG will agree to assist, the women must organise themselves by creating a committee, arranging membership subscriptions and tasks (President, treasurer, etc.), and negotiating as a group for the community to allocate land for the garden. Then the women must negotiate with the young farmers' club, or with the youth Kafos, for the young men to cut dead trees in the bush with which to make fencing posts.

Only at this stage will ActionAid arrive with assistance to set up the garden: extension advice, measuring tapes to lay out the beds, barbed wire on credit to be repaid over three years, and seeds either on credit, or for cash at cost price. Before AATG agrees to assist the groups, therefore, they must have contributed a large amount themselves in terms of effort.

Each garden contains wells. AATG agrees to dig the well, using skilled and trained contractors' teams, as long as the villagers provide the unskilled labour, gravel, sand, and lodging for the diggers. Again the emphasis is on village participation. The result is a cement-lined irrigation well, 1.9 metres wide to allow ten or more women to draw water at one time during the watering hours of early morning and late afternoon. In addition, the wells provide clean water for domestic use, and a centre for social activity and discussion for the village women. These wells are a vast improvement on the usual narrow unlined wells

3 A skilled well-digging team digs a well to provide water for the expansion of the women's vegetable gardens in The Gambia.

which last only for one or two seasons before they collapse. We do not fix pumps. There is a West African proverb which says: 'If you dig a well, you give water. If you fix a pump, you give a pump.'

The secret of the garden success story is probably our combination of communal organisation and individual benefit. With 226 wells in 95 group gardens, AATG has a lot of expertise after six years. Each garden is organised and run communally: but the garden crops are produced individually. There is a lot of inter-family cooperation: one woman will water all the beds of the family today, and another will do the task tomorrow; but basically the benefit from the crop goes to she who has done the work. Each woman has between 5 and 15 beds, and the number of women in a garden group is between 60 and 80. When setting out the garden, each woman cuts a tiny piece of her dress, and attaches it to a stick. One of the community's leading personalities (usually a man!) then takes all the sticks, and distributes them at random. Impartiality is assured by the fact that a man never recognises the dress of the women, not even that of his wife!

The question of impartiality brings us to ask whether every woman is able to benefit equally from the garden. Is the garden for the village elite, or does the AATG programme help the poorest families as well?

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At the present time we have no sure answer. The method of group creation would lead us to suspect that many of the poorest women might not join the group initially. Many gardens have only had a small number of women at the beginning, and invariably the original group ends up with a second and third allocation of beds when the garden is extended. Is this a way for the elite to obtain double benefit from the garden?

We cannot answer this question yet. A detailed survey was begun in 1987. On a small sample survey in three Kiang villages, an AATG external evaluation mission showed in 1985 that there was no apparent difference in access to the gardens between richer and poorer compounds. First 1987 results seem to confirm this. However, more detailed information is needed to confirm that AATG is in fact reaching the poorest of the poor.

Yields in the gardens contribute significantly to improving living standards in the assisted villages. An evaluation in 1984 found an average in money terms of 850 dalasis per group member in vegetable yields: at 1987 exchange rates that is £85, at 1984 rates it was £170 per woman. Of this total crop, one-third was sold, two-thirds were consumed. Sales at that level represent a significant increase in family cash incomes: but above all they mean an enormous increase in the women's incomes (and therefore economic influence), since cash crops in The Gambia are grown and marketed by men.

Men benefit, of course: 'My wife was able to sell vegetables to buy one bag of rice. This is enough for our food for more than one month,' said a farmer in 1985, following a bad 1984 harvest. Another old greybeard grinned 'We like the ActionAid. Our stew never tasted so good before my two wives began to grow vegetables in their garden'.

AATG agriculturalists estimate the annual yields (in tonnes) as follows:

Year	*1984*	*1985*	*1986*
Average output per garden	10	12.5	13

The 1984 evaluation showed that 8 of the 10 tonnes were onions. Similar onion output was achieved in succeeding years. Onions are favoured mainly as being a good vegetable for sale. Indeed the question of selling surpluses has been high on the agenda in 1985 and 1986: the success of the gardens had created the 'problem' of selling the surplus.

There is no readily available market for the surplus, since the villages we work with are all far from the capital. Some women travel a long way to take vegetables to market, spending money on fares and food in the process. Often no better prices are obtained, and the woman spends as much on the transport as she gains in the profit. In a few

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cases, however, group organisation has again come forward to assist. In 1984 the village of Jiroff requested from AATG a marketing credit of D250 (no more, no less) in order for the group to send two of their members to sell their entire group crop in the eastern market town of Basse, where prices were higher. The credit was repaid in five days. This is a grand example of group organisation: a clear illustration of our stage 4 self-determination.

Faced with the need to sell their women's surplus vegetables, the villages of Kiang west got together in 1986 to construct a weekly market, or *loomo*. Their self-organisation was in fact so successful, that the facilities constructed unfortunately are larger than the likely real commercial activity in the small village of Sankandi where the market takes place. Thirty villages collaborated: those near the Sankandi site helped with sand and gravel and labour for the central cement structure (funded by the British High Commissioner, and erected with AATG assistance and supervision) and those far in the bush collected posts and made mats for the stalls. No evaluation of the *loomo* is yet possible: it was opened officially by the Vice President Honourable Bakary B. Darbo (MP for the district) on April 25 1986, just before planting, and has restarted with the end of the harvest in early January 1987. Time will tell whether the *loomo* can develop as a major vegetable marketing centre.

The Agency has also embarked on a campaign for more efficient production. Prices can be increased for onions by avoiding 'glut' periods in the market. Onion-storage allows women to keep their crops until prices rise: group-organised onion stores have been built in a dozen villages, the women and men doing all except purchase the barbed wire for the sides of the store (which AATG supplies). The village groups run the stores communally, but again each woman has her own crop on her own shelf: and the groups have been guided and assisted to maintain better stores and to reduce storage losses of their onions. These strategies have allowed groups to raise their selling prices from D25 in the urban market (April) to D60 per 25 kg bag in August at the village onion store (where the urban sellers come to buy). Groups have also been assisted to diversify. With onions, there have been short- and long-maturing onion varieties, so that women can choose their period for selling. And other vegetables have been introduced, diversifying vegetable-cropping patterns rather than concentrating only on onion-growing.

Women generally make better development partners than men. They are quicker to seize an opportunity, and easier in organisation and cooperation. Women have fewer hang-ups than men about status and hierarchy. Women are ambitious for their family, while men are ambitious for themselves. Women are also more trustworthy with money.

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As food producers responsible for the nutrition and health of their children, women are the preferred partners for ActionAid. Again, we cannot cut straight lines in a community: women work with men, men have a say in all village affairs, and also they are the fathers of the women's children! So we work with both women and men as partners, yet the spectacular vegetable crops which beautify the Gambian dry season testify every year to the particu'ar dynamism of women.

Overcoming cultural barriers

We have already stated that ActionAid is an active partner in development, acting as a catalyst for change. Our example of vegetable-garden organisation illustrates the capacity of women to organise themselves, and to generate the support of men to carry out those roles which are theirs by tradition. On occasions traditions need to be bent, or changed to remove barriers to development.

As a catalyst, AATG sometimes finds itself backing the women against the traditional elite. An example was the siting of the well at Maka Masireh, a village at the far eastern end of The Gambia, on the northern extremity of the river valley. The Alkalo asked us: 'Where does ActionAid want the well to be sited?' One hundred and fifty people were gathered around the silk cotton tree to discuss this important subject, and they listened with bated breath for our decision. Naturally, they were disappointed, for we were certainly not going to decide for them! 'The well must be sited where the community decides', was our answer; but we added cannily: 'wherever it is of most benefit to the men and women and children of the village, and where it can contribute to greater food production for the villagers'.

The background to the debate was really quite straightforward. The village elite, owners of cattle herds, wanted the well on the north of the village where they could water their livestock. The women wanted the well near the school at the opposite end of the village, where land was available for a vegetable garden.

As the debate progressed, several strong male speakers dominated the village meeting. Reluctantly, the Alkalo was being overwhelmed by the force of the vocal minority. As so often, the poor, the timid, and the women had no voice in the debate. It was at this stage that AATG's representative made a decisive intervention. He gave no opinion, other than to restate in other words that the whole community should benefit, and should decide. But he made one request: that the opinion of the women should be sought. The elite objected, the NGO staff remained politely firm and the Alkalo agreed that the women's

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president should be heard: and in effect the debate was won before the women even began to speak. After two men had said their piece, the chief herd-owner stormed out of the meeting in anger! The NGO staff remained silent: our job was simply to get a hearing for the whole community, and not only the bully-boys of the elite. Our function is to ensure that democracy is respected, instead of accepting that what the elders say is inevitably right. Once the women had their say, the Alkalo found it easy to decide, on behalf of the assembled community, that the well should be used for producing dry-season vegetables, thereby benefiting the women and the school. AATG had helped to achieve a more representative village democracy, had incidentally got the well sited where we felt it would bring maximum benefit, and had established a precedent for a new approach to group discussion across the cultural barriers of this remote and conservative Sarahulay community.

It would be misleading to suggest that the work of AATG is all success. Changing the cultural barriers is a difficult task, and one which will take women many decades to achieve. While the women have obtained men's support and cooperation in every case for setting up vegetable gardens, their success with animal traction has been less easy to achieve. Vegetables are traditionally grown by women; animals are traditionally handled by men.

Surveys by ActionAid and others in Senegal and The Gambia (for instance Haswell, 1985) show clearly that labour is the principal constraint in local traditional food production practices. Sometimes the labour constraint affects sowing and ploughing; often it affects the weeding period more severely. Either way, food crop harvests are reduced. The past twenty years have seen a wide acceptance for ox-drawn equipment in men's farms, although there are universal problems of availability and maintenance. Meanwhile, this technology has passed the women by. ActionAid decided as early as 1981 to bring animal-drawn implements to the women: introducing donkey-drawn sine-hoe ploughs and seeders which women can handle more easily than ox-drawn implements. Training courses were held, which caused great hilarity in the villages. Women's groups were set up, and a set of equipment and donkey were supplied. In early 1985 two evaluators looked at the programme, and came up with different judgements. The first, a Gambian community development expert, wrote that this social and cultural revolution was exciting and underway. The second – a Kenyan agronomist – complained that the stated aim of increasing food production had not been achieved. Both of course are right. The whole effort had been too timid (one donkey-plough for 50 women is unlikely to double cereal output), but the cultural breakthrough is the one which will be critical. Time after time, the village survey showed

that the donkey-ploughs were in fact being used by the men, and not by the women.

In one village, the women had 'decided' to hire it to a man (by coincidence the brother of the Alkalo!) instead of using it themselves. In another, the women's president's husband used it 'as compensation because he had the burden of looking after the group's donkey'. In a third village, the AATG extension agent had delivered the equipment to the Alkalo instead of the women, so he had given it to the Young Farmers' Club. Never mind the reason, the facts showed that most donkeys were not being driven by women, but by their husbands (although often the men tilled the women's communal group farm for them). Finally, we had failed to make the experiment theirs. When a donkey died in the village, it was usually 'The ActionAid donkey'. Our donkey mortality figures were frightening!

In Kassa Kunda village, however, the women's president claims success. 'The first year 30 women used it; the second year only 15 used it; last year only 4 needed it, now the others are all able to use their husbands' equipment. Some women, they showed their men the value of our group donkey, so they convinced their husband to buy a seeder for their compound. This is why only four needed the donkey this year.'

There is some evidence that the Kassa Kunda donkey equipment is of greater benefit to the women's president and her friends, than to some of the poorest families in the community or those of different ethnic origins: so we cannot claim full success for our objectives yet. But the example of Kassa Kunda shows cracks appearing in those social–cultural barriers. An intensive farmer-training campaign in 1986 seemed to bear further fruit: more women were using donkeys than in any previous harvest season.

With more time, and closer follow-up of the women's groups to boost their confidence and their organisation, we shall get more labour-saving tools accepted. Cultivation will change, and production output will rise for a smaller input of energy effort: but it will only happen because the NGO has succeeded as an active catalyst in helping the women to change the cultural barriers.

Towards self-reliance

For us, development is not just output. The important factor is the use of output. Does the increased food production lead to better nutrition for women and children, as well as men? Are rising incomes leading to better nutrition? Does more income mean more savings and investment?

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Does the village work together and organise together to face the threats of ecological change and economic pressure?

Throughout the examples we have cited, the common theme is group organisation. Self-help and self-management create the path towards self-reliance. And it seems to us that the ActionAid development model is new, different from the bankrupt policies of traditional aid: for it is a model of partnership.

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