# Makeshift Cuisinart Makes a Lot Possible In Impoverished Mali

by Roger Thurow
July 26, 2002
It Can Do Work in a Flash, Leaving Time for Literacy And Entrepreneurship

SANANKORONI, Mali -- "Thump-thump-thump" is the trademark sound of the African bush. It is the dreary rhythm of village women pounding grains and nuts into breakfast, lunch and dinner with their heavy wooden pestles.

But in this village of simple mud-brick huts, the melody of daily life goes "chug-chug-chug."

"Isn't it wonderful?" marveled Biutou Doumbia, talking above the din of a diesel engine kicking into high gear. Balancing a baby on her back and cradling a large sack of peanuts in her arms, she approached a contraption that looks to have sprung from a Rube Goldberg blueprint -- a most unlikely weapon in this country's war on poverty.

After paying the equivalent of 25 cents for machine time, she emptied her 15 pounds of peanuts into a funnel leading to a grinder and blender connected to another funnel, and an ooze of thick peanut butter emerged from its spout. The job was finished in 10 minutes. All that was left for Mrs. Doumbia was to scoop the peanut butter into a dozen jars and sell it on the market. Then, she said with a laugh, she might take a nap. "Before, it would take a whole day to pound and grind the peanuts by hand, and the butter still wouldn't be as fine as this."

Not only is the peanut butter better -- and Mrs. Doumbia's selling easier -- so is the quality of life in the 300 Mali villages that have the machine. Girls who were kept home to help with the domestic work from dawn to dusk are now going to school. Mothers and grandmothers who would have spent a lifetime pounding and grinding now have the free time to take literacy courses and start up small businesses, or to expand family farming plots and nurture a cash crop such as rice.

They have dubbed the durable, uncomplaining machine "the daughter-in-law who doesn't speak."

"It's changing our lives," said Mineta Keita, the 46-year-old president of the Sanankoroni women's association, which manages the machine and the flourishing business that has sprouted around it. Before it arrived a year ago, only nine women in this village of 460 people were able to read and write. Since then, she said, more than 40 have attended literacy courses. The training to prepare the women to manage the machine usually takes four to six months, and it gives them the basics in reading, writing and arithmetic. Most then continue with other courses to get better and better.

Known blandly as the "multifunctional platform" in United Nations parlance, the contraption was invented in the mid-1990s by a Swiss development worker in Mali who believed that easing the domestic load of African women would unleash their entrepreneurial zeal. The machine, simple and sturdy, was tailored for rural Africa.

A 10-horsepower motor is the centerpiece, sitting on two metal rails about 9 or 10 feet long, anchored to the floor of a small mud-brick shed. Rubber belts connect the motor to various tools: funnels that channel grain and nuts into grinders, whirring blenders that husk rice, pistons that pump water, saws that cut wood, cables that recharge batteries. It is an industrial-sized Cuisinart.

"It's not just about milling and grinding," says Laurent Coche, a Frenchman who has been deploying the machine in Mali for the U.N. Development Program and is now introducing it to neighboring countries. "The biggest impact has been to empower women."

The UNDP insists that the women who use the machine also manage it. Once the women's association in a village can scrape together about 50% of the machine's $4,000 cost, the U.N. and other donors kick in the rest. The Mali government, one of the poorest in the world, would like to see one machine in every village, and it is funneling some of its savings from international debt relief into the project.

Farma Traore, a real daughter-in-law, remembers that it used to take "three whole days" to manually grind a 100-pound bag of corn. "It's unthinkable that we would even do that anymore," she says. The machine does the job in 15 minutes.

Her brother-in-law, Sekou Traore, leaned back in a chair outside his one-room house and smiled. "Our wives aren't so tired anymore," he said. "And their hands are smoother. We like that."

Mr. Traore and several of his brothers had just returned from the fields where they cultivate their crops by hand. One of their wives served up lunch: a big bowl of rice with spicy peanut sauce. Since the women don't spend all day wielding the pestles anymore, the men say, meals are rarely late and families are spending more time together. "We're eating on time," said Mr. Traore. "There's fewer arguments."

Still, the social changes take some getting used to. "Working for women isn't an easy thing. They talk too much and are bossy," said Lassine Traore, a 19-year-old relative who has been trained to maintain the machine. He warily glanced behind his back and tended to a balky fuel injector. "But I'm happy to have this job. It beats farming."

Inside the shed housing the machine, the women's new literacy skills were on display. Two big blackboards hanging on the walls presented a full accounting of the operation. One board gave a daily reckoning of when the machine was turned on and off, what tasks it performed, how much fuel was consumed and how much money was earned. The second board listed who worked, for how long and how much they were paid for their labors. The workers -- usually several women and the maintenance man -- share 30% of the day's revenues. On a particularly active day, the machine may take in $10 to $15.

In nine months of operation, through March of this year, the Sanankoroni machine took in about $1,600. Of that, the women's committee paid out about $500 in salaries to the workers who rotate on part-time shifts. The committee has also managed to build up bank savings in a city nearby of more than $200 and cash reserves of $180 to cover operating expenses. That is big money in a land where average annual per capita income is less than $300, and it is nurturing even bigger ambitions. "We would like to branch out into other businesses, like dyeing clothes and making soap," said Ms. Keita, the committee president. "And we would like to dig a well to get clean water."

This past spring, in the village of Mountougoula, just outside the capital of Bamako, the women raised additional money to connect a generator to the machine and rigged up a lighting network. For the first time ever, the village of 1,580 had lights, with 280 bulbs burning brightly from dusk to midnight.

"The dark is gone," said a wide-eyed Tieoule Dembele, the village secretary. As the lights came on one recent night, he finished a bottle of Coca-Cola at an outdoor bar and sauntered back to the one-room city hall to continue his paperwork. A bare bulb shone above his desk where once hung a kerosene lamp. "We do work for 16 villages in the area," he said, "and I can't get it all done during the day."

At the maternity clinic, where 200 babies are born each year, the midwife reports healthier births under the lights. Across the dirt road, the proprietor of the general store said nightly sales are up $25 since the bulb above his counter began burning.

The chug-chug-chug of the daughter-in-law who doesn't speak pierced the stillness of the night. Soleba Doumbia, the machine's mechanic in Mountougoula, closed the door of the shed and headed home to his own bulb. "Every night, I'm teaching my two daughters how to read," he said.

One day, he figures, he may be working for them.
This article first appeared in the Wall Street Journal.

Originally published July 2002