

*"To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing"*  
*Raymond Williams, Welsh novelist & cultural theorist (1921-1988)*

# Truly Radical

*Notes from the Dakar File -2005*

By Mike Lewis

*In December 2002 Mike Lewis represented the Canadian CED Network at talks in Dakar, Senegal aimed at broadening and deepening the international exchange between people working in community economic and social development. Two previous international gatherings took place in Lima (1997) and Québec City (2001).*

*The Dakar meeting launched an energetic expansion of these efforts, including the forging of practical bonds of solidarity among peoples in the north and the south. Mike will be sharing his reflections in *Making Waves* regularly from now until November 2005 when the next major international gathering will take place in Dakar. He will also be seeking ways to increase the understanding, support, and participation of CCEDNet members and other Canadian networks in the life-affirming struggle to build "another" globalization.*

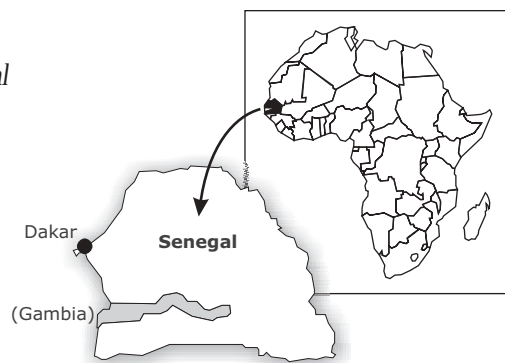
After ten exhausting days, I am sitting at a seaside table viewing a lovely island some ten kilometres off Dakar, the capital of the west African nation of Senegal. For 300 years that island was one of the central holding areas for hundreds of thousands of terrorized Africans awaiting the chains and dank holds of a slaver's ship. It is almost impossible to comprehend, sitting as I am, writing on my laptop computer and soaking up the sun, listening to the lap of the waves 20 meters away.

Almost as incomprehensible is that a 5-minute taxi ride will take me into the midst of a bustling business district, vibrant with the colours of the Senegalese wardrobe – and the daily hub for some of 470,000 children who roam the streets with their cans looking for a coin or two to survive another day.

Yesterday, in a meeting with the strikingly beautiful and dignified Senegalese Minister of Social Development, our international delegation learned that the government had no idea

of how to address this swelling mass of homeless children. There is no strategy and little money to address the challenge, one of many faced by a government with a total budget of about \$1.4 billion in a country of 10 million plus – about \$140 per person.

I have learned so much and met so many incredibly gifted and committed people from various parts of the world. As usual, there is a deluge of ambiguity and complexity. As usual, the context drives me to reflect on how such challenges might be met. As usual, I am brought to think more deeply about how to act, personally and through the organization and networks I am part of, to advance improvements. More than usual, I have met local people with the ideas, skills, and capacity to make deep change



Dr. Ibrahim Cisse (right) and a Mexican delegate (foreground) talk with the members of a *Groupe féminin de production*, the basic unit of the Senegalese rural development system. The man on the left is a staff member of SIPA, the technical assistance and marketing organization.

happen, but who have little access to the financial resources they need to scale up their promising innovations.

One of these people, Dr. Abraham Cisse, volunteered to guide one of the tour groups that were organized to expose delegates to the context of Senegalese development. Young, well-educated, committed to transformative development, he helped me begin to understand something of the challenges, hopes, and resources required for strengthening the social economy in the rural areas.

Here is a glimpse of one rural initiative Abraham and his colleagues exposed us to, a snapshot of what it takes to sustain the “possibility of hope.”

## A Senegalese Model of Integrated Rural Development

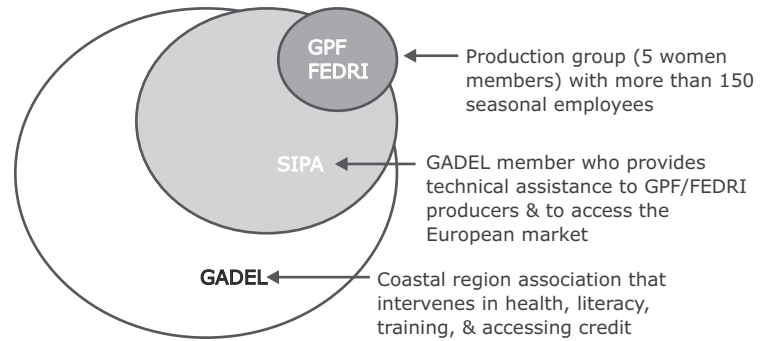
An integrated approach to rural economic and social development is the heart of an innovation that is gaining momentum across the country. It is a brilliant development system with several components. (See diagram, this page.)

Women are at the core of the strategy. The aim is to make them land owners and producers. They own the land collectively in groups of five or six called a *Groupement de production féminin* (Female Production Groups) or GPF.

In the group we visited, five women owned seven hectares on which they raise a variety of vegetables (much of it organically) and beef cattle for local and export markets. Trees planted around their fields conserve water and create micro-climates that improve production. They are also a source of livestock feed and marketable firewood.

A key partner of the GPF is the *Système intégré de production agricole* (SIPA) an organization that provides training and direction on ecological and agricultural practices, and markets the produce destined for Germany, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. These are specialized niche markets built by socially conscious Europeans for sustainably produced agricultural products.

Rural Development in Senegal



Microcredit for GPFs is the responsibility of a local organization called the *Groupe d'action pour le développement local* (GADEL). That's not all it does, however. Through the GPFs and other organizations in coastal villages, GADEL plays a key role organizing stakeholders in the areas of literacy and health and, more generally, in training related to sustainable development practices. (SIPA is also a member of GADEL.)

Over the last 20 years 5000 GPFs have been established in Senegal. They are organized into networks such as the Women's Federation for Integrated Rural Development (FEDRI) that does important work in the ongoing expansion of the model. FEDRI organizes the seasonal workers involved in GPF harvesting, work that includes the promotion of savings plans for workers. This serves as a means of building the equity necessary to increase the number of GPFs – turning workers into owners; in other words.

FEDRI is in turn part of a larger union of agricultural producers and other networks that are trying to extend their influence on the broader policy context affecting rural development. Building a social economy that integrates economic, social, and ecological factors into local and regional action has top priority. It is very real – nothing abstract about it at all.

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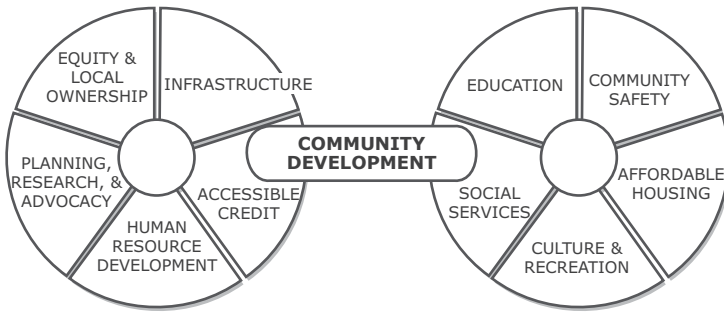


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If you are familiar with publications of the Centre for Community Enterprise, you know that one conceptual framework we use to explain the scope of CED, and particularly the linkage between social and economic goals, concerns the six functions that are critical to the strength of local economies. (See diagram, above.)

In Canada, to weave homegrown solutions to community difficulties, our most durable and effective development organizations take action involving two or more of these functions. Likewise, the Senegal example makes linkages between the same essential functions.

There are specific strategies for building equity through ownership and savings. Credit is being made accessible. Planning, research, and advice are provided to improve commercial production as well as aspects of social development. People development is a multi-level theme throughout.

In addition to the economic and social functions that make up their rural development system, the Senegalese are meeting the ecological challenges head on. Indeed, production is organized so as to benefit from growing markets for organic produce, which

command higher prices while eliminating the cost of pesticides and fertilizers.

Incredibly, the greater part of this rural development infrastructure is sustained without any type of government support. Most transactions between the various partners are paid as a service charge or as a cut of the revenue pie. For example, GPFs pay for technical support from SIPA, and SIPA covers some of its costs by taking a percentage on the export of organic products. The pattern is one of constant re-investment.

No doubt, NGOs are underwriting part of the development infrastructure. But in this model, their support seems destined to be a declining part of the economic equation.

I am impressed. In many respects the Senegalese appear well ahead of Canadians when it comes to designing a more self-reliant development system. My time in Dakar has certainly given me pause to think about how we can organize resources more strategically in support of our evolving CED infrastructure here in Canada.

There is a truly radical element to be pondered, one that is demonstrating that hope is possible, even in circumstances where despair can seem so convincing.

Welcome to "Notes from the Dakar file -2005."



MIKE LEWIS is executive director of the Centre for Community Enterprise and editor of **making waves**, and a member of the Canadian CED Network. Contact him at (tel) 250-723-1139 or (e-mail) ccelewis@island.net.

**1** You know a local problem requires the attention of a specialist. But you've never hired one, & worry about making a bad choice. **What's the right way to hire a consultant?**

**2** Turn to **Tools & Techniques**, the CED encyclopaedia. "Finding and Managing Good Consultants," one of 60 entries, explains the benefits and challenges that consultants can bring to a CED strategy. Seven practical steps help you make the right decision about whom to hire and for what purpose. There's also a list of resource organizations, contacts, and publications. Go to "Tools & Techniques" at ...

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