

Cotton, democracy and development in Mali

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Shortly after the overthrow of the Traoré regime in early 1991, several thousand cotton farmers in the southern part of Mali rose up to demand significant policy changes in cotton production and marketing. This rural revolt symbolised a new era of ‘democracy in the countryside’,¹ and brought forth a vital, new political actor (the National Union of Cotton and Food Crop Producers, *Syndicat des Producteurs de Coton de Vivriers*, SYCOV) in Malian politics. After listening to more than thirty years of governmental populist pronouncements, Mali’s cotton growers finally had a real opportunity to realise a measure of empowerment.

Earlier assessments of agricultural development and technology policy-making in Mali confirmed the need to see SYCOV in the long tradition of discontented farmers’ movements around the world.² This article places SYCOV in a broader political and global setting. It explores how an analysis of the union’s emergence and its political relationships can improve our understanding of the contours and dynamics of democratisation in Mali, and perhaps throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

The concept of ‘developmental democracy’ gives us a useful tool for looking at SYCOV as a case that illustrates the way in which democracy is being forged in Mali.³ Derived from the idea of democracy as a means, rather than an end, the notion of developmental democracy

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¹ Pierre Barrot and Souleymane Ouattara, *Quand la démocratie s’en va en Brousse* (Paris: Periscoop, 1992), videotape.

² R. James Bingen, ‘Agricultural development policy and grassroots democracy in Mali: the emergence of Mali’s farmer movement’, *African Rural and Urban Studies* 1, 1 (1994), 57–72; Henri Josserand and R. James Bingen, ‘Economic management in the Sahel – a study of policy advocacy in Mali’, USAID, Decentralization: Finance and Management Project, Burlington, VT, 1995; and R. James Bingen, D. Carney and E. Dembelé, ‘The Malian Union of Cotton and Food Crop Producers: the current and potential role in technology development and transfer’, ODI Research and Extension Network, London, 1995.

³ See Richard L. Sklar, ‘Towards a theory of developmental democracy’, in Adrian Leftwich (ed.), *Democracy and Development* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 25–44.

encourages us to look at various forms of democratic political behaviour that might be found in economic and social as well as governmental institutions. For example, this case study clearly shows the importance of Malian constitutional conditions for SYCOV's emergence and its continued political activities. At the same time, the political dynamics and dilemmas raised by the Union's 'business partnership' in Malian cotton production and marketing pose equally challenging questions for the future of democratisation and development in Mali.

This case also allows us to illustrate the need for further study into the relationships between two forms of accountability and developmental democracy. Richard L. Skar distinguishes between 'democratic accountability', or the accountability of leaders to followers, and 'constitutional accountability', or the obligation of office-holders to answer for their actions to one another. As the case of SYCOV shows, 'these two types of accountability involve distinct, and very different forms of obligation' that are usually 'mutually reinforcing in their effects'.⁴ But they may also create serious dilemmas and jeopardise the legitimacy of Mali's rural political leadership.

In sum, this article refuses to judge how democratic Mali is. Instead, the study of SYCOV illustrates how democracy is being forged 'in parts' through various political opportunities beyond elections or institutions of government. First, an overview of the emergence of SYCOV provides a basis for interpreting the Union's relationship to the Malian government. This is followed by a discussion that indicates the ways in which an understanding of the international political economy of cotton is important to an assessment of SYCOV and democracy in Mali. Finally, this article offers a preliminary assessment of SYCOV's struggle to be accountable to its members and as a development partner with the government as well as international corporate and public capital institutions. The conclusion offers some initial thoughts on future areas of inquiry into the relationship between democracy and development in sub-Saharan Africa.

THE EMERGENCE OF SYCOV

In 1974, a village extension agent with the newly nationalised Malian Company for Textile Development (Compagnie Malienne pour le Développement des Textiles, CMDT) helped villagers organise

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

a protest against dishonest cotton grading and weighing practices. Responding to the villagers' demands, the CMDT gradually transferred responsibility for cotton grading and weighing, equipment and supply orders and credit management to designated village groups. After several years of fairly informal agreements with these groups, the CMDT formalised the relationship by setting out a series of criteria for establishing Village Associations (Associations Villageoises, AVs). In collaboration with the government, the CMDT also secured World Bank financing to support the development of management skills within the AVs. Special attention was given to a functional literacy programme in the Bambara language: a programme designed to ensure that farmers had the literacy and numeracy skills to fulfill credit and marketing tasks and to prepare account books.

The CMDT selected many of the new AV leaders as 'pilot farmers' to promote the use of new and improved cotton production and marketing technology and practices. As they participated in special training or consultative sessions sponsored by the CMDT and other development agencies over the years, these leaders developed both a sense of partnership with the CMDT and of federation among themselves. Consequently, in 1989, when the CMDT decided to implement a new credit policy that would increase producers' risk and liability, this new 'group' of leaders felt confident in their 'right' to complain and to seek a negotiated settlement with the CMDT.

Their success in reversing the CMDT policy revealed the power of joint, organised action, and a small group decided to hold regular information meetings and to establish an informal coordinating committee (*Comité de Coordination des AV et Tons*). In the course of their coordination meetings, the AV leaders discussed their sense that cotton production was becoming less and less profitable. The meetings also accelerated the circulation of various rumours, two of which were especially bothersome. First, cotton producers knew that for many years the CMDT village extension agents, in response to their own declining purchasing power, had often engaged in a variety of 'moonlighting' activities to supplement their salaries. Thus, when the news circulated about possible pay hikes for these agents, alongside increases in equipment and supply costs for growers, coordinating committee members wanted to know why the purchase price of cotton was not also being raised. Second, cotton producers historically had been able to purchase adequate supplies of animal feed made from cotton seed cake for their work oxen. Starting in 1989–90, however, cotton cake supplies dwindled and the producers could not get clear

answers to their questions about what the CMDT had done with 'their' cotton for their animals.

With the overthrow of the Traoré regime, cotton producers encouraged the coordinating committee to go public with their growing frustrations. Based largely on their success in 1989, the coordinating committee formulated the producers' demands into twelve grievances (*doléances*). These dealt with several long-standing pricing and marketing issues, but focused on two immediate concerns: the shortage of animal feed (cotton cake) on the open market; and, the CMDT decision to grade and price cotton upon delivery at the gin and not with the producers at the village collection sites. While the political conditions during the first months of the transition government allowed producers a measure of previously unavailable political freedom, they were also the source of considerable political apprehension. It was not altogether clear to regional CMDT and government officials that the producers' demands were not a vanguard, grassroots effort by Traoré sympathisers to reinstall the previous regime.⁵ Thus, when the director of the Regional CMDT Office in Koutiala refused on purely legalistic grounds to accept the producers' grievances, the producers felt justified in calling a cotton strike, just as planting was to begin.

After considerable deliberation, the Minister of Rural Development intervened personally in order to reach a negotiated settlement between the producers and the CMDT. Many within the CMDT criticised the minister's personal intervention for unnecessarily politicising the affair and legitimating the (future) SYCOV. Her involvement as an official representative of the transition government, however, helped to defuse the conflict and pave the way for the CMDT to initiate a series of steps designed to restore a spirit of trust with cotton farmers.

There is little doubt that the new government's commitment to democratisation following the March 1991 *coup d'état* afforded cotton producers, ultimately through SYCOV, a previously unheard of measure of constitutional protection and political legitimacy. In early 1991 it was clear that the credibility of the new Malian democracy, especially to a small but briefly attentive world audience, depended upon the ability of the transition government to protect the producers' right to contradict and make demands upon both public policy-makers and private firms, like the CMDT. Consequently, when the producers

⁵ Many of the most active and vocal members of the coordinating committee belonged to a village association and cooperative (*Ton*) that had received a special visit from the former president and that had been widely publicised as a model of village cooperation.

declared their ‘cotton strike’ in May 1991, the government was obliged to seek a compromise between the CMDT and the producers that balanced its commitment to democratic principles with the country’s compelling economic and financial dependence upon cotton production and marketing. This politically astute move was an indispensable step which ‘protected’ the process of democratisation without threatening the economic structure of cotton production. While these events represent an historically significant component in the story of Malian democracy, a dominant theme emerges only when we examine the highly integrated, international production and marketing structure of cotton that defines the stage on which SYCOV plays.

INTERNATIONAL COTTON CAPITAL AND DEVELOPMENT

The setting

Hoping to benefit from a long history of indigenous cotton production throughout West Africa, the French parastatal Compagnie Française pour le Développement des Fibres Textiles (CFDT) extended its improved production, processing and marketing operations from Central Africa into Mali (the Soudan) in the early 1950s.⁶ With Malian political independence in 1960, the Keita regime encouraged a continuation of CFDT investments through an agreement that gave the CFDT monopoly control over cotton production and processing. Fourteen years later, the Malian government and the CFDT agreed to create the CMDT with 60 per cent Malian government and 40 per cent CFDT capital. Rather than an expression of radical nationalism, this joint Malian–CFDT decision represented a mutually beneficial move. It gave the Malian government a means to attract foreign public capital (initially and largely from the World Bank), for important rural development and infrastructure activities (e.g. roads, literacy, etc.) throughout the cotton zone.⁷ With new foreign resources for social and physical infrastructure improvements, the CMDT then had the

⁶ The French government has a 60 per cent interest in the CFDT. For an instructive review of the political and economic history of the CFDT see Henry Bloud, *Le Problème Cotonnier et l’Afrique Occidentale Française: une solution nationale* (Paris, 1925); Jean Suret-Canale, *Afrique Noire Occidentale et Centrale de la Colonisation aux Indépendances (1945–1960)* (Paris, 1977); and Richard L. Roberts, *Two Worlds of Cotton: colonialism and the regional economy in the French Soudan, 1800–1946* (Stanford, 1996).

⁷ The address by World Bank president Robert S. McNamara to the Annual Meeting of the Bank’s Board of Governors in Nairobi on 24 September 1973 marked the beginning of the era of World Bank rural development programmes.

flexibility to invest its capital in more directly profit-related production and marketing activities.⁸

Cotton now accounts for almost one-half of Mali's export earnings and just over 5 per cent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (prior to the 1994 devaluation).⁹ As a local, nationalised subsidiary (affiliate) within CFDT's global, integrated research, production and marketing family, the CMDT gains three specific advantages. First, it captures the benefits from over fifty years of French investment in cotton research throughout West and Central Africa. This French international research network, backed by central laboratories in France, is widely recognised for its contribution to the development of new cotton varieties, cultivation techniques and plant protection practices.¹⁰

Second, as a national 'partner', the CMDT relies heavily on its continuing, close association with various units of the CFDT Cotton and Development Group.¹¹ Notably, this includes an exclusive buying arrangement with, and a 7 per cent interest in, the CFDT marketing unit, COPACO (the *Compagnie Cotonnière*). Malian cotton accounts for only about 3 per cent of the annual global trade, and without a distinct market identity it is vulnerable in the fiercely competitive world cotton market. The link with COPACO, which accounts for a steady 15 per cent of world trade, reduces some of this vulnerability. In addition, since Malian cotton represents 20 per cent of COPACO's trade, the CFDT has a strong interest in assuring a steady and high quality supply from Mali.

Finally, in its capacity as a 'national company', the CMDT enjoys a monopoly on the country's cotton processing and marketing that allows it to serve the government's interest in maintaining and increasing its export earnings.¹² In return, it is in a position to seek

⁸ This illustrates a widely used 'foreign aid formula': the use of public foreign capital to cover the costs of investments in public or collective goods, thereby freeing private capital to focus its investments on private goods. During the mid to late 1970s, several other West African governments, the CFDT and the World Bank worked out similar arrangements.

⁹ The CMDT manages 98 per cent of the country's cotton production and since 1988 holds a monopoly on marketing; another parastatal agency, the *Opération Haute Vallée du Niger*, OHVN, produces the remaining 2 per cent of the country's cotton and sells its production to the CMDT for processing and export.

¹⁰ Hamdy M. Eisa et al., 'Cotton production prospects for the decade to 2005. A global overview', The World Bank, Washington, DC, 1994.

¹¹ In addition to the CFDT, which is largely responsible for technical assistance and support in the areas of production, industrial processing (ginning and oil), and related services, this group consists of: the international marketing arm, COPACO; the equipment purchasing and supply arm, D2E; SOSEA, the unit responsible for fibre quality control plus transit-import/export at Le Havre; and the publication unit, *Coton et Développement*.

¹² With some CFDT technical and management personnel, the CMDT operates seventeen cotton processing facilities.

government support through the Ministry of Agriculture for foreign public grants to purchase agricultural supplies, especially fertiliser, on concessional terms.

This highly integrated production and marketing structure is generally recognised for making cotton the success story of agricultural and rural development in Mali. Since 1960, cotton production has increased by almost 50 per cent, and over 100,000 households, largely in the southern part of the country, cultivate cotton under rainfed conditions. Cotton production technology contributes to increased cereal crop production and the cotton zone has become a Malian breadbasket.¹³ Thousands are involved in various aspects of cotton processing, transport, input supply and the cotton by-product industry (animal feed, soap and oil). Overall, the cotton-producing area is among the richest areas in the country, with an estimated household income approximately five times the national average.

This highly integrated structure is also largely responsible for the parallel accomplishments of the CFDT Cotton and Development Group as a global commodity chain in the international cotton market. World cotton trading is not highly concentrated; the success and growth of a cotton trading enterprise depend heavily on its ability to prove its reliability in the international marketplace through a regular supply and consistency of quality within a specific cotton type.¹⁴ The CFDT with its national affiliates, like the CMDT, has succeeded in meeting this standard. According to the International Cotton Advisory Committee, CFDT (COPACO and its African affiliates) ranks among the world's nine largest international cotton merchants within the world cotton trading industry. Most important, the stability of the price quoted for COPACO's cotton relative to the industry standard (Cotlook A Index) has earned the 'CFDT cotton family' an enviable world cotton market reputation for its 'disciplined export marketing system designed to capture average prices in all years'.¹⁵

Based on this background, it is useful to look more closely at Malian democracy and development by focusing on three areas of concern: the sources of, and dynamics that characterise, the mutual interests of

¹³ François Bérout, 'Intrants coton: quelle politique pour quel développement?', *Coton et Développement*, 1, 1^{er} Trimestre, 1992, pp. 11–15. CMDT studies show that for every new hectare of cotton, just over one hectare of cereals is cultivated as well.

¹⁴ See Fred E. M. Gillham et al., 'Cotton production prospects for the next decade', The World Bank, Washington, DC, 1995; ICAC, 'The structure of world cotton trade', *Cotton: Review of the World Situation*, July–August, 1994, pp. 10–18.

¹⁵ ICAC, 'Marketing cotton in francophone Africa', *Cotton: Review of the World Situation*, March–April, 1996, pp. 9–14.

several national and international, as well as private and public institutions; the conflicts that emerge among these institutions; and, the types of accommodation that various institutions employ to contain the conflict.¹⁶

Mutual interests

The congruence or mutuality of interests between the Malian government, the CMDT, the CFDT Cotton and Development Group, the World Bank/IMF, the French government and its bilateral assistance agencies and SYCOV appears clear. Publicly, each offers its own reasons for working together to continue a viable and relatively long-term stable relationship and to benefit from the production and sale of cotton. As the SYCOV president stated in his conclusion to the Union's Constitutive Congress: 'SYCOV sees itself in a rich and fruitful partnership with the CMDT, a partnership in which, hand in hand, CMDT and SYCOV can confront and overcome the difficulties of the cotton market'.¹⁷

There also appear to be several less obvious, but perhaps more profound, relationships among various actors that deepen their mutual interests. First, the Malian government has an interest in maintaining the CMDT as a national parastatal corporation that is both within and separate from government. Since 1960, when the Keita regime's ideology would have easily rationalised the nationalisation of the CFDT, each Malian government has consistently preferred economic partnership over confrontation as the way to buffer the country's vulnerability to the highly competitive and unpredictable world cotton market.

This is also why, following the turmoil in the world cotton market in the mid-1980s, the Malian government readily accepted the World Bank's (structural adjustment) recommendation to change the legal statute of the CMDT from that of a government agency to a parastatal commercial and industrial enterprise (*société à caractère industriel et commercial*). This statutory change clarifies CMDT's role as a CFDT subsidiary and enables it to operate as a commercial enterprise with specific responsibility for cotton production, collection, processing and

¹⁶ See David G. Becker and Richard L. Sklar, 'Why postimperialism?', in David G. Becker, et al. (eds.), *Postimperialism, International Capitalism and Development in the Late Twentieth Century* (Boulder, 1987), pp. 1–18.

¹⁷ Unpublished speech, Antoine Baba Berthé, SYCOV Constitutive Congress, 27–29 September 1992.

marketing. The new statute also permits the government to use the CMDT as a conduit to attract foreign aid for rural development activities in the cotton production zone. In sum, this arrangement affords a measure of governmental policy or political control over the CMDT that can be used to strengthen the government's popular legitimacy without sacrificing its opportunity for continued capital accumulation. Similarly, CMDT's parastatal status legally manifests its 'domestication' and its (and indirectly the CFDT) 'vow of good corporate citizenship'.¹⁸

Two additional features of the CFDT/CMDT relationship further strengthen the mutual interests among the actors in the Malian cotton subsector. First, smallholder production is fundamental to CFDT's international market position. The CFDT and all of its African affiliates agree that the predominant use of unpaid family labour is the principal source of their comparative advantage on the international cotton market.¹⁹ Second, the need for the CFDT to preserve its image for reliability and stability in the international cotton market and its sunk costs in seventeen ginning facilities suggests that the CFDT family has little interest in shifting its production out of Mali.²⁰ This is why, in part, the CFDT welcomed the internationally sanctioned nationalisation and establishment of the CMDT as a joint Malian–CFDT venture in 1974. This move did not threaten, but instead was essential to holding, if not improving, CFDT's world market position. Consequently, in the absence of profound shifts in the nature of cotton production and processing, in the international textile industry or in the structure and dynamics of the international cotton market, the CFDT/CMDT is in Mali for the long term.

Finally, the French government and its assistance agencies, FAC (Fonds d'Aide et Coopération) and the CFD (Caisse Française de Développement) also help to assure CFDT/CMDT corporate citi-

¹⁸ Seen as an individual subsidiary of the CFDT-led Cotton and Development group, the CMDT adapts to, and operates in accordance with the requirements of its 'host state' while promoting the interests of the enterprise as a whole. Sklar argues that a policy of good corporate citizenship appeals to leaders who want to establish stable relationships. See Richard L. Sklar, 'Postimperialism: a class analysis of multinational corporate expansion', in Becker et al., *Postimperialism*, pp. 19–40.

¹⁹ CFDT, 'Filières Cotonnières d'Afrique Francophone, Réunion d'Abidjan', CFDT, Paris, 1994.

²⁰ As Schatz argues, the CFDT/CMDT–Mali relationship illustrates how multinational enterprises and national governments work out their relationships in a very pragmatic fashion. See Sayre P. Schatz, 'Assertive pragmatism and the multinational enterprise', in Becker et al., *Postimperialism*, pp. 107–30; cf. David C. Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (West Hartford, 1995).

zenship by facilitating continued business and commercial opportunities for the French (and European) industries in textiles, cotton ginning machinery and equipment, agricultural equipment and fertiliser and chemicals. The production and transfer of goods and equipment from these various firms into Mali generates employment both in France and in Mali, thereby further cementing a long-standing bilateral relationship that dates from the colonial era.

Conflict

The potential for conflict in most relationships, and especially those based on vows of corporate citizenship or economic partnership, as described above, never lies far below the surface. In examining the case of SYCOV, it is useful to distinguish between two types of conflict that have different implications for democratisation and development. The first type is not inherent in a relationship, but instead reflects a popularly understood competition based on business or bureaucratic interests. In this case study, this type of conflict is expressed through at least three situations. First, given the relative lack of concentration, but powerful competition, in the international cotton industry, the CFDT group devotes considerable effort to assuring solidarity within its family of affiliates and to promoting its position as each country's premier marketing agent. For example, the CFDT, in order to protect its business position, vehemently opposes a concerted World Bank led effort to 'liberalise' cotton production and marketing that would oblige Mali and other governments to dismantle their exclusive relationship with the CFDT group and follow the examples of Cameroon or Benin.²¹ Second, different points of view, positions and debates commonly rage within and among offices in the same organisation, including the CMDT. As a result, this 'normal' bureaucratic in-fighting offers multiple opportunities for groups like SYCOV to achieve at least minor victories depending upon its capacity to play-off different bureaucratic interests. Third, different institutions bring different agendas to a particular situation. Many French non-governmental groups, even though they may be financed by French foreign aid, disagree strongly with CFDT/CMDT policies and work directly to strengthen the hand of SYCOV vis-à-vis the CMDT. For

²¹ This has been a continuing theme in the CFDT publication, *Coton et Développement*, since 1994.

several years, the Paris-based Réseau GAO – Groupements – Associations Villageoises – Organisations Paysannes has actively encouraged efforts in support of groups like SYCOV.

The second type consists of those conflicts that arise from inherent contradictions in the production and marketing requirements of cotton. Two quite different situations illustrate how these commodity-related contradictions generate new insights into the process of democratisation and development. First, the environmental degradation associated with cotton production is well known. The cultivation techniques ‘mine the soil’²² and the very ‘success’ of the crop puts severe pressure on limited and ecologically marginal land as smallholders save their capital in the form of cattle. Cotton production has started to level off in the Koutiala region, the heart of Mali’s cotton zone. In response, the CMDT is slowly moving its investment capital towards a ‘frontier’ western part of the country around Kita.²³ This process suggests an interesting hypothesis about the political role of SYCOV: the ‘founders’ of SYCOV are from the traditional heartland of the cotton zone and have the most to lose as CMDT turns its attention to newer, more fertile areas. Thus, could the political mobilisation represented by SYCOV reflect as much an attempt to ‘hold on to the past’ as one to empower cotton producers?

A second example illustrates how an understanding of the political economy of cotton offers provocative insights on modernisation and development. The twenty-year emergence of SYCOV is a story tied intimately to a history of village cotton weighing and equipment groups, functional literacy programmes, the formation of more formalised village associations to handle CMDT tasks, and finally the 1991 revolt. Similar political action by other cotton producers, for example in Benin, suggests that the industrial-type discipline imposed on smallholder cotton producers has a catalytic mobilisation effect. ‘Cotton is a crop that has to be really “tamed” from A to Z to achieve its optimum production potential.’²⁴ As such, it fosters the development of a consciousness among peasants roughly comparable to that more commonly found among factory workers. In order to enforce this discipline, the CMDT relies on the strict application of ‘industrial

²² Dean P. Girdis, ‘The role of cotton in agricultural change, land degradation and sustainability in southern Mali’, Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, 1993; Floris van der Pol, ‘Soil mining: an unseen contributor to farm income in Southern Mali’, Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, 1992.

²³ See Kojo Sebastian Amanor, *The New Frontier: farmers’ response to land degradation: a West African study* (Geneva and London, 1994) for a discussion of the ‘universality’ of this ‘frontier’ approach to development.

²⁴ Gillham, ‘Cotton production’.

grading standards' of cotton as its 'taming' mechanism.²⁵ Consequently, just as industrial workers historically have been drawn into the political arena in defence of their recognised economic interests, cotton growers may be emerging as a new political force throughout West Africa.

Accommodation

The recent history of West African cotton farmers' movements, especially in Mali, indicates that powerful forces are at work to encourage cotton farmers to stay 'down on the farm'.²⁶ Corporate power, such as that represented by the CFDT Cotton and Development Group, has a remarkable capability to adapt to, alleviate and diminish the kinds of 'threats' represented by SYCOV and other cotton farmers' unions. Very shortly after the March 1991 revolt, the CMDT moved quickly to 'socialise' or co-opt the discontented cotton farmers. First, the CMDT quickly agreed to the request from the Minister of Rural Development to accept the coordination committee as a legitimate representative body for cotton farmers and to seek a negotiated settlement with this group. This accomplished (largely by getting the farmers to accept a compromise agreement), the CMDT proposed its own two-phase programme to bring the cotton farmers into the larger CMDT/CFDT family.

With support from the World Bank, the CMDT/CFDT organised a training and information programme on the international cotton market for farmers, and conducted a survey of the producers' marketing problems and concerns. The CMDT/CFDT also financed a study trip of the cotton marketing chain from Bamako to Paris and Le Havre as well as information-discussion sessions in the Bambara language to describe CMDT's performance agreement (*contrat-plan*) with the government and its rural development programme. Such a strategy made good business sense. In the short term, these steps were highly visible, while being little more than was necessary to deflect a threat to the viability of the Cotton and Development Group.²⁷ In the long

²⁵ Despite producer demands since 1991 to control cotton grading, the CMDT has consistently carried the day by enforcing its policy of industrial grading, or grading at the ginning mill. See Lawrence Busch, 'The moral economy of grades and standards', Paper presented at the Conference on Agrarian Questions, Wageningen, Netherlands, May 1995.

²⁶ The 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act has also been recognised for its contribution to defusing farmer discontent in the United States.

²⁷ As Schatz suggests, corporations like the CFDT/CMDT have a unique capability to engage in 'socialising adaptation', or a process that alleviates and diminishes any fundamental incongruities between public interests and private capital. See Sayre P. Schatz, 'Socialising adaptation: a perspective on world capitalism', in Becker et al., *Postimperialism*, pp. 161–78.

term, the strategy was designed to enhance CMDT/CFDT's overall operations by creating a cadre of more technically and financially informed, and more 'professionalised' cotton farmers who would appreciate the need to temper and adjust their demands to the 'big picture' of the international cotton market.

With the full backing of an informal consortium of international donors and the government, the CMDT quickly set in motion a process that would formally incorporate SYCOV into public policy-making. In September 1991, the CMDT hosted a public roundtable discussion of cotton issues with the Ministry of Rural Development, donor agencies (including representatives from the French Ministry of Cooperation, the CFDT, the European Development Fund and the World Bank), the producers and the CMDT. The roundtable approved the establishment of a representative cotton producer organisation that would collaborate closely with the CMDT, the Chamber of Agriculture, the government administration and other technical services to guarantee the widest possible diffusion of information to all cotton producers. Specifically, the roundtable recommended the incorporation of this organisation as a signatory to the CMDT performance agreement, its representation on several CMDT-government policy-making units (the CMDT Management Board and the Stabilisation Fund Management Committee), and the option of becoming a shareholder in the CMDT.

The Cotton and Development Group is continuing its effort to incorporate SYCOV and other West African farmer unions in order to regularise and stabilise several specific functions that are critical to the Group's business.²⁸ To achieve this objective, the Group offers specialised training for farmers who wish to interact with the local cotton companies for: the preparation of annual production plans, the distribution of agricultural inputs and the local-level organisation of cotton marketing and payment.²⁹

The Group feels that SYCOV and its West African counterparts should focus on and improve their role as professional associations that represent growers, and not as unions to defend member interests. For the Group, proposals that organisations like SYCOV play a role in setting agricultural or research and extension policy, handling input

²⁸ CFDT, 'Filières Cotonnières d'Afrique Francophone.

²⁹ Such an approach suggests that CMDT policy makers might be unaware of the inherent contradictions that led to the 1991 uprising. Many within the CMDT believe that outside agitators were primarily responsible for turning cotton farmers against them.

supply or as stockholders reflect confused and/or romanticised thinking about producer groups. Such responsibilities and activities are deemed to require 'specialised knowledge' or are 'too complex' for cotton producers to handle. As long as the Cotton and Development Group is able to defend this position, a major structural transformation of African agriculture and a significantly empowered role for West African cotton growers, even remotely comparable to their US counterparts, remains highly unlikely.³⁰

This type of 'corporatisation' of the cotton farmers offers tremendous appeal to the leaders of SYCOV and other farmer unions. It represents a way of assuring access to decision-making that enhances the group's status. In particular, a corporatist relationship characterised by membership on prestigious committees, councils, commissions, etc. lends the union an aura of authority and legitimacy which the leaders can use to build group solidarity and purpose.³¹ It offers the leadership a way to show members that Union membership counts and can produce results.

At the same time, leaders confront difficult dilemmas in this type of relationship. For example, in attending the CMDT local, bi-weekly meetings that review detailed production and marketing activities, SYCOV leaders become 'educated' in the CMDT perspective and concerns and may slowly begin to accept the point of view that 'what is good for the CMDT is good for the producers and for SYCOV'.

The development and diffusion of new cotton varieties illustrates another, related dilemma that arises from this relationship. The CMDT/CFDT depends largely on varietal selection, and somewhat less on processing technology, for the quality of its cotton. Recently, the CMDT/CFDT has pushed agricultural researchers to breed varieties with high ginning ratios that have a high percentage of fibre to seed. The consequences are not insignificant: the CMDT estimates that each percentage point increase in ginning ratio represents an increase in revenues of almost \$4 million US dollars. A higher ginning ratio in cotton varieties, however, is achieved at the expense of yield at the field level. In other words, farmers need to cultivate a larger area of higher

³⁰ In the United States, for example, the issue is not whether growers will be involved in marketing, but what their marketing alternatives might be. See Thomas Sporleder et al., 'Who will market your cotton. Producer alternatives'. Texas Agricultural Extension Service, College Station, TX, 1978.

³¹ This type of relationship borrows largely from the relationship between the Chamber of Agriculture and the government in France. See John T. S. Keeler, *The Politics of Neocorporatism in France: farmers, the state, and agricultural policy-making in the Fifth Republic* (New York, 1987).

ginning ratio varieties in order to harvest the same amount as with the lower ginning ratio varieties.³²

This technological development confronts SYCOV with an extremely difficult choice. As a good corporate partner, SYCOV is obliged to educate its members that the newer varieties with higher ginning yields will improve the cost position of the CMDT and thereby generate increased producer incomes through a higher year-end rebate on overall sales. In defence of its members' immediate interests, on the other hand, SYCOV must push the CMDT to withdraw or significantly curtail the distribution of 'undesired' varieties that members do not want. SYCOV has achieved some measure of success in influencing CMDT's varietal distribution programme, but the issue is far from resolved.³³

Such dilemmas do not offer a straightforward 'way out' for Mali's cotton farmers. One way, however, may emerge from the ability of these new farmers' unions to 'dig deep' in deliberately working to develop their internal democratic principles and procedures. In the face of tremendously powerful, and commonly authoritarian cotton production practices supported by international corporate capital, it is possible that SYCOV's strength will emerge from its own openness and internal democracy, i.e., the types of procedures that help to assure the accountability of SYCOV's leaders to the Union's members.

GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY

As discussed earlier, certain constitutional conditions are necessary for farmers to take even the most preliminary steps towards empowerment. At a minimum these conditions include protection of the public right to contradict government policy and to make demands upon policy-makers.³⁴ The negotiated resolution of the May 1996 strike

³² Sayre P. Schatz, 'Assertive pragmatism and the multinational enterprise', in Becker et al., *Postimperialism*, pp. 107–30, reminds us of the importance that private enterprises like the CFDT attach to investments in, and the control of, technology to strengthen their global interrelated production and marketing activities. With the CMDT/CFDT, this involves breeding for fibre length, colour, strength, fineness, uniformity; during production and harvest it also involves controlling for maturity and the incidence of impurities – one reason why the CMDT/CFDT has consistently adhered to a rigidly controlled programme of agricultural *encadrement*.

³³ For years, the CMDT/CFDT has been pushing the development and cultivation of glandless varieties because of their high ginning ratios and potential value of the processed seeds as a human foodstuff. The varieties require extremely demanding cultivation practices and when the capacity to process the seeds into flour and meal is developed, producers will need to look elsewhere for sources of animal feed.

³⁴ Sklar 'Towards a theory'. This is also an important dimension in several discussions of governance in African politics, see Crawford Young and Babacar Kante, 'Governance,

by SYCOV and the continuing role of the union in the new *contrat plan* negotiations suggest that this constitutionally protected democratic principle may be alive and well in Mali's Third Republic. Other evidence, including farmers' direct requests to their elected deputies to the National Assembly and the efforts by the Assembly's Rural Development Commission to address long-standing agricultural policy issues,³⁵ also suggests the presence of constitutional conditions supportive of greater farmer empowerment. Moreover, the Ministry of Agriculture has recommended statutory revisions that could amount to an organisational revolution in the countryside.³⁶ Consistent with the government's decentralisation programme, the ministry proposes legal changes that would permit villagers to establish multiple village associations in one village, each of which would be legally recognised to offer the same economic access and opportunities currently monopolised by the CMDT village associations.

Given these changes, the empowerment of cotton farmers through unions like SYCOV may well depend upon the ability of such unions to incorporate 'democratic accountability', or the obligation of union leaders to account for their conduct towards followers. At least three factors will influence the character of internal power relations and the possibilities for establishing democratic accountability in SYCOV.

First, moments of mass action, or critical events, commonly affect ways in which organisational structures actually distribute power. Having gained a place on the country's political agenda, SYCOV's leaders knew that the future of the movement depended upon the success of a series of political calculations to 'balance the ticket' and broaden the union's leadership beyond the original group of organisers from Koutiala. On the one hand, the Koutiala leaders knew that the legitimacy of the emerging union in the eyes of the country's cotton farmers and of the donor community depended upon a presidential candidate who could be seen to represent 'all cotton farmers', and not just those from the Koutiala region. On the other hand, the leaders also knew that they needed a candidate with the education, background and experience required to work effectively with government and donor agency representatives. These calculations allowed the leaders to

democracy, and the 1988 Senegalese elections', and Joel D. Barkan, 'The rise and fall of a governance realm in Kenya', in Goran Hyden and Michael Bratton (eds.), *Governance and Politics in Africa* (Boulder, 1992), pp. 57–74, 167–92.

³⁵ Josserand and Bingen, 'Economic management'.

³⁶ MAEE, 'Schema directeur du secteur développement rural, Vol. 1, Strategie générale. Vol. 2, Strategies de développement. Vol. 3, Plan d'action' (Bamako, 1992).

win acceptance of their candidate over the CMDT's nominee while retaining all seats on the Union's national governing board.³⁷ Evidence suggests that this governing board regularly exercises effective oversight of the president's activities.

Second, democratic accountability within the Union is shaped by the coexistence of both customary and contractual principles of organisational behaviour among peasant producers. Customary principles are commonly found among community and village-based labour, gardening, marketing and self-help groups. Principles of reciprocity and covenant define member–leader relationships in these groups, and indigenous (and often local community-based) structures of authority and accountability (through kinship, religious or ethnic groups) define expectations and obligations. Contractual principles arise where economic interests influence how members assess the 'costs' of their participation in a particular organisation. In contrast to the historical experience of farmers' organisations in many industrialised countries, in which contract-based organisations evolved out of and then replaced community-based or customary organisations, there is a tendency in sub-Saharan Africa for community-based organisations to coexist, and in many instances to continue, as a viable constituent unit within interest-based organisations.³⁸

The 'crises' of embezzlement and conflicts within the Associations Villageoises, sharpened by partisan politics and aggravated by continuing high illiteracy levels, represent the most obvious outward manifestation of the difficulties which this coexistence poses for establishing clear measures of political accountability within the Union. To illustrate: the CMDT established AVs as the principal mechanism for directing significant flows of economic goods and services into and out of villages.³⁹ While approved by village customary leaders, the AVs over time have tended to marginalise the older population and create a new class of 'leaders' whose power derives from their association with the CMDT and not the community. Economic change and development have thereby slowly eroded the

³⁷ For a brief review of these deliberations see R. James Bingen, 'Leaders, leadership and democratization in West Africa: observations from the cotton farmers movement in Mali', *Agriculture and Human Values* 13, 2 (1996), 24–32.

³⁸ Also see the discussion of 'the smallholder focus' in 'an appropriate development paradigm for Africa', outlined in Claude Ake, *Democracy and Development in Africa* (Washington, 1996).

³⁹ Despite this critical economic and operational role, the AVs under Malian law have no legal personality independent of the CMDT, nor are they recognised organisational units of the CMDT. See Jean-Claude Deveze, 'Les zones cotonnières entre développement, ajustement et dévaluation: réflexions sur le rôle du coton en Afrique francophone de l'ouest et du centre', Caisse Française de Développement, Paris, 1994.

‘peasant political ecology’ of interdependence and mutual need in village affairs without completely replacing customary principles of organisation.⁴⁰

For the most part, SYCOV tries to stay above this fray by encouraging villagers to work out their various conflicts of authority among themselves. By taking this approach, SYCOV appeals to villagers’ underlying support for SYCOV as their own ‘peasant organisation’ that stays out of their village affairs, but defends their interests as producers. Interviews with SYCOV members or adherents reveal the initial success of this approach through the Union’s widespread appeal as a ‘Malian peasant movement’. After decades of essentially corporatist participation through state-controlled co-operatives or party-dominated organisations, SYCOV represents the first real organisation for and by peasants. Consequently, for the time being, it appears that SYCOV leaders rely more upon a broadly shared customary-based interest in SYCOV as the voice of peasant solidarity than upon the Union as a means for dealing with clearly defined economic interests.

Third, this reliance on customary-based principles makes the building of political accountability especially vulnerable to misinformation campaigns by local-level CMDT agents. Despite a measure of ‘cotton consciousness’, the immense difficulties in organising peasants and farmers anywhere in the world are widely known; intentional sabotage clearly aggravates this already complicated task. CMDT village extension agents engage in such activities for two reasons: the perceived threat from SYCOV’s stated objective to take over local level extension; and SYCOV’s plans to manage input supply, which threatens some agents’ deals with village leaders in equipment and input distribution. Whatever their reasons, the end is that the local agents, drawing on the personal trust built from long residence in the villages, appeal to CMDT’s reliability to deliver inputs on time in contrast to SYCOV’s unproved record.⁴¹

Clearly, we are looking at a transition period in which the principles of accountability have not been fully worked out. Since SYCOV was essentially robbed of its revolution in the early days of its emergence, it

⁴⁰ See Danielle Jonckers, ‘Le mythe d’une tradition communautaire villageoise dans la région Mali-Sud’, in J.-P. Jacob and Ph. Lavigne Delville (eds.) *Les Associations Paysannes en Afrique: organisation et dynamiques* (Paris, 1994), pp. 121–34; and Leslie E. Anderson, *The Political Ecology of the Modern Peasant: calculation and community* (Baltimore, 1994).

⁴¹ The belief by many village level CMDT agents that they had bridged the customary-contractual gap in their relations with villagers may be one reason why many were so profoundly shocked when the villagers turned on them during the peasants’ revolt in 1991.

is difficult to say whether a more prolonged organisational struggle would have permitted its leaders and members to forge a defined and coherent set of principles to ensure accountability. It is not surprising that SYCOV's leaders find tremendous appeal in suggestions for the union 'to professionalise'.

Such appeals sound especially attractive since they emanate from sources apparently independent of, and sometimes in public conflict with, the CMDT. For about three years, SYCOV has been courted by several independent French organisations (Fondation pour le Progrès de l'Homme (FPH), Centre Français de Solidarité Internationale, CIEPAC, SOLAGRAL), as well as French consulting firms like IRAM and semi-governmental agencies like CIRAD, to develop its credentials as a professional association. With financing from the (ex)Ministry of Cooperation, the French farmers' group, Association Française de Développement International (AFDI) lends its weight to this argument through its programme of support for African Farmers' Organisations (AOPA, Appui aux Organisations Paysannes Africaines). With its focus on farmer-to-farmer exchange and its encouragement of regional networking among West African farmers, SYCOV's leaders find AFDI's programme especially inviting. SYCOV's participation in the Africa-wide farmers' network (APM, Agricultures Paysannes et Modernisation) financed largely by the FPH also offers special opportunities to discover how other leaders confront similar problems, and to begin developing a possible basis for international solidarity.⁴² Over time, this type of networking might lay the foundation for a regional coalition of politically active and influential cotton farmers.



The history of farmer movements in the process of democratisation and development throughout the world indicates that the future of grassroots democracy in Mali will not be easy, and that farmers must be prepared for serious setbacks as well as successes. This article has

⁴² Antoine Berthé, the president of SYCOV, is currently the president of this network, which has devoted considerable effort to informing SYCOV's leaders, as well as the leaders of several other West African cotton farmer unions, about how they fit into the gain from CFDT's world market strategy and position. See Pierre Vuarin, Bertrand Hervieu and Françoise Macé, 'Overview and future prospects: farmers, agriculture and modernisation programme', Fondation pour le Progrès de l'Homme, Paris, 1995.

explored several questions that might help us arrive at a better understanding of the grassroots potential for democracy that lies beyond governmental institutions. These questions look more to identifying the sources of mutual interest and conflict between public and corporate capital, governmental and non-governmental actors, as well as the internal organisational dynamics of farmer organisations. In particular, the article suggests that the vigorous defence of farmer interests will depend largely upon the extent to which farmer groups are able to stimulate internal accountability between leaders and followers.

Clearly, the 'CFDT family', the World Bank/IMF and the Malian government do not form a common front against cotton farmers. These actors do indeed represent powerful interests, and a major question will involve SYCOV's ability to continue to serve as a progressive political force in the face of possible cooption by such forces. The path towards democracy and development in Mali is not altogether clear. Corporatist pressures on SYCOV could easily lead to an institutional alliance that is increasingly remote from Mali's cotton producers. SYCOV's past declarations of partnership and collaboration corroborate a preference to seek compromise rather than confrontation. Such incrementalism also conforms nicely to the CMDT/CFDT preference for accommodation to protect the firm's global competitiveness and viability, and to the Malian government's interest in stable economic ties with France and the CFDT.

Moreover, the study of cotton may open new lines of inquiry concerning the future of African agriculture. Even if cotton farmers' unions across West Africa, and especially in Mali, are successful in getting a 'decent wage' for their farm family labour through a significant increase in the farm price of cotton, will African agriculture look different in the next twenty-five years as a result of the successes of the farmer 'union movement'?⁴³ Can this movement lead to fundamental changes in the forms of capital accumulation, or can such unions successfully challenge existing power structures and institutions?

At the same time, pressures on international corporate capital to adapt constructively may lead the CFDT family to foster the continued development of an open, democratic environment. Similarly, the Malian government clearly recognises the economic benefits from both

⁴³ Is smallholder agriculture Africa's destiny? If so, what are the implications for democratic practices? Plantation-type or large-scale cotton production, at least under rainfed conditions, appears out of the question. But is some type of consolidation, led by more highly capitalised growers, possible even among those with a measure of 'cotton consciousness'?

foreign public and corporate investments that accompany its commitment to democracy. SYCOV, as well, holds firmly to its democratic birthright. A key question for SYCOV farmers, however, involves their ability to play a vanguard political role and foster a 'cotton consciousness' among the new producers as CMDT expands its operations. The final hope may be found in the spirited response by Malian villagers to democracy and the myriad ways in which it affords them a legitimacy equal only to an earlier era's appeal to nationalism.