

# 'The greatest lesson we have learned is patience'

## Partnership between Malian women and Canadians stays strong

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SPECIAL TO THE OBSERVER

Teryia, a partnership between women in Agassiz-Harrison and Mali, in West Africa, has sent funds to Mali for a fourth grinder. Since 2011, Fraser Valley women, together with Malian women who also fundraise themselves, have raised enough funds to purchase three other grinders throughout the commune of Sanankoro Djitoumou.

These grinders help process Shea nuts from the Shea nut tree, an abundant natural resource growing near the commune's villages. This provides a means for Malian women to improve the quality of life in their communities through the sale of the butter, which is used for cooking, cosmetic, and medicinal purposes. The grinders are an important step in the process of making it easier to produce a higher quality of butter. The women gather the nuts then sort, dry, roast, and grind them. The final process is to stir the ground nuts with water by hand to make a butter with a creamy consistency as pictured in the photo. Access to local grinders eliminates both the need to walk for many miles to pay for the use of a commercial grinder and the labour-intensive task of hand-grinding.

Sekou Samake, Teryia's official contact and translator in Bamako (the capital city), informs us of their progress. Fatou, the original founder of Teryia, now works in West Africa for a UBC affiliate. Both Sekou and Fatou reported in early November that the three grinders are working fine, and that the women are extremely happy with them and look forward to the much-needed fourth grinder.

There have been challenges and this project is definitely a learning experience for all both in Agassiz/Harrison and in Mali. For example, being a patriarchal society, there was an initial struggle in Mali between the women and some of the men who believed they should be in control of managing the grinders. But through community gatherings which included everyone, it was decided, that the women would be the managers.

Above all, the greatest lesson we have learned is patience. Teryia is fortunate to have solid connections with Fatou and Sekou who are our primary means of communication with the women of the commune. But we have learned that communication takes much longer than we are accustomed to in our constantly connected culture. We are grateful for Sekou and his ongoing commitment to this project. He lives and works in Bamako and with the commune being a day's travel, it is not always easy or safe to negotiate the road due to weather conditions. The commune will soon hold a Bilan, which is a process for assessing the results, benefits and any challenges with the grinders.

Despite the unrest caused by the fighting in Northern Mali and the very real fear of Ebola, the Malian women remain strong and dedicated to improving their Shea Butter production. And although there have been many challenges we



A Malian woman mixes shea butter.

Submitted photo

are awed by the fact that our two worlds have connected. Teryia is a means for us to learn about life in Mali and for them to learn about Canada. It has also been a way to get to know each other better here in our own communities. When we gather to fundraise for this project or plan the next awareness-raising event, we make this 'giving for a reason' project a learning and social time together. Being involved since Teryia's beginning, I am constantly reminded of my father's words: "just think of all the hundreds of other worlds out there and the different ways that people live. You may never see them but if you learn about them and understand how they live, your world will be richer and you'll be a better person."