

Benkadi Project

"To live together is very good"

Annual Newsletter

2009



In 2009, the Benkadi Project continued its efforts to increase educational opportunities and address health and basic human needs among children and families in the impoverished country of Guinea, West Africa.

Our work remained a grassroots effort, fueled by a network of relationships we have established with local community leaders in Guinea and a growing number of individuals and groups in the United States, Canada, Europe and other countries. Together we have built a bridge of friendship and support that spans thousands of miles and that has truly made a difference in the lives of ordinary people in Guinea over the last six years.

Co-founders Helen Bond and Amy Lusk continued to lead the Benkadi Project, working closely with our Lead Advisor, Famoudou Konaté, a native of Guinea and a celebrated master of the traditional music, dance and songs of his home country.

Progress in 2009

This past year, the Benkadi Project used funds collected through musical performances, educational presentations and hundreds of donations to:

- ◆ Continue to offer operational support to the school we helped building in Sangbaralla several years ago;
- ◆ Monitor the wells we had built or repaired in the previous year in Sangbaralla and Senekoro Villages (all were found to be in working order);
- ◆ Begin planning for a well construction project in another small village called Menkiné; and
- ◆ Begin construction of a new Youth and Community Center in Sangbaralla

The largest effort we undertook last year was to work closely with the Elders of Sangbaralla Village and its young people to support their dream of creating a new Youth and Community Center in the village. The Benkadi Project is committed to working closely with leaders on the ground in Guinea and responding to the priorities and needs



Students in front of the new school house (opened in 2005)

they identify whenever possible. With this in mind, we decided to provide funds to move forward with the new project.

Sangbaralla has a vibrant artistic culture that is centuries old, in which all people in the Village participate. Community leaders believe that maintaining their artistic traditions is an essential source of strength and resilience for their people, particularly, the children and youth in their community, given the extreme poverty in which they live. And like all parents, parents in Sangbaralla are seeking positive and community-building activities for their children to engage in that will build personal strength, self-discipline and character, and help them grow up to be productive adults.

Last year, Village leaders asked the Benkadi Project to help construct a new arts and community center where their youth and others could study and perform music, dance and other art forms. The project would express the pride their community feels in its culture and the value they place in nurturing their children and transmitting their heritage. Famoudou Konaté summed up the spirit behind the Youth Center project, saying simply in French, *"Les jeunes sont l'avenir"* -- "young people are the future" -- and we must therefore invest in them.

In addition to arts and cultural pursuits, the building will also provide a location for other youth events, community meetings and civic activities in Sangbaralla. Until this point, the Village has had no large public structure available to fulfill these functions for the community. The absence of such a facility has posed additional challenges for Sangbaralla during the rainy season, which lasts 4-5 months each year.

Youth leaders in the Village (*"Barati"*) met with Helen Bond when she was in Guinea earlier this year and pledged that they would take responsibility for leading the planning, design and physical construction of the new Community Center and for maintaining the building once it is constructed. After preparing the site and mapping out the dimensions of the building, they traveled to a town several kilometers away to purchase the first load of 45 bags of cement, which were then transported back to Sangbaralla and then across the Niger River by boat. Young people carried all of the bags across the village to the construction site and then began building the structure by hand. A



combination of cinder blocks and hand-made mud bricks were used to build the structure. The youth leaders established a construction schedule that required different groups of young people organized by age (as is customary in their culture) to work on assigned days. Many more trips were made to secure necessary materials and many, many ours were spent building the new building. Above



all, these youths were determined to take full responsibility for building the facility. Construction continued through the spring until the rainy season arrived, and resumed this fall.

The new Youth and Community Center began to rise up gradually out of the savannah and word of the project spread to other villages and towns across the Hamana region in Guinea. As was the case when the new school building was built several years ago with Benkadi donations, local people and government officials began traveling to Sangbaralla to learn about the Community Center project and watch the progress. The idea of a single community making this type of major investment in its children and youth – to establish an arts center for their use and development – was unheard of in their experience. People are now talking about how this project will be good for young people and for the fabric of the community in Sangbaralla. They also believe it will serve as a model for other community-building efforts in the region.

Looking Ahead

When Helen returns to Guinea in December 2009, she will travel to Sangbaralla to check progress on the Youth and Community Center (we expect it will either have been completed or be close to completion) and to learn more about the Village's plans to utilize this new resource for their community.

While she is in Guinea, Helen will also put new Benkadi Project donations to use through a variety of community-based projects in several villages in the country. We have a list of priorities across which we will deploy our available resources. Specifically, we plan to:

- ◆ **Build a new well in the village of Menkiné**, on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean north of the capitol of Conakry. This village is populated by members of the Susu ethnic group in Guinea. Residents of the village currently draw their water from a stream that runs through the village, creating sanitation and health hazards. Constructing the well requires purchasing the new pump and bringing in heavy equipment for installation. We'll be coordinating this effort with Fodé Camara, a native of Menkiné, who also assists Famoudou Konaté with drumming workshops in the United States each year.

- ◆ **Continue operational support** of Sangbaralla elementary school.
- ◆ **Provide additional support for the new Youth and Community Center** (possibly furniture and other start-up costs).
- ◆ **Provide seed, tools and other gardening supplies to elderly women** in Sangbaralla to assist them in growing vegetables for consumption and to sell at the small village market to generate income for their families.



- ◆ **Offer medical assistance** to individual children and adults with significant health issues and illnesses.
- ◆ **Monitor functioning of our previously constructed wells.**
- ◆ **Visit all of the three villages** with whom we've been working to assess ongoing needs and explore future partnerships.

As always, we appreciate the support of friends across the globe who have made the success of the Benkadi Project possible thus far. Hand to hand and heart to heart, we are making connections across the miles and improving the lives of children and families in Guinea in important ways. We look forward to sharing our progress in the year ahead! *The Benkadi Project is affiliated with the Motherland Rhythm Community, a 501c3 non-profit organization.*

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GUINEA FACTS:

- ◆ 9.8 million people
- ◆ The size of Oregon.
- ◆ In recent decades, Guinea has experienced significant economic and political decline.
- ◆ Chronic unemployment and persistent corruption have led to widespread poverty and limited access to health, water, sanitation, and educational and economic opportunity.
- ◆ Life span averages 55 years.
- ◆ Most people live under the global poverty level of \$1.25 per day.
- ◆ Literacy rates are very low.
- ◆ 150 of every 1,000 children die before their 5th birthday.
- ◆ Since independence from France in 1958, Guinea has not had a peaceful transition in power - most recently, in December 2008, there was a military coup after the death of Guinea's longtime dictator.
- ◆ In September of this year, government soldiers open fire on tens of thousands of citizens protesting the military ruler's decision to run in national elections. Over 150 people were killed and many women were sexually assaulted by the soldiers.
- ◆ In response, the United States sent an envoy to Guinea to meet with the military leader, denouncing the violence and insisting that he take full responsibility for the military's actions and not run in the upcoming Presidential election.
- ◆ While the situation in Conakry is still tenuous, things are better in outlying areas and we feel it is safe for Helen to work on our Benkadi projects.



Co-Directors, Helen Bond & Amy Lusk



Project Advisor, Fodé Camara



Project Advisor, Famoudou Konaté