

# VOICES

*from the* FIELD



{SUMMER 2010}

A Trickle Up Savings Group  
Meeting in Sangha, Mali

## The Power of Sisterhood: From Savings Groups to Bank Accounts

*By Molly Ornati, Trickle Up Program Officer for Savings (Molly pictured fourth from bottom left)  
Sevaré, Mali (Spring 2010 Field Visit)*

The excitement is palpable in a tidy meeting room in Sevaré, Mali, where representatives of 40 Trickle Up Savings Groups have come together for their annual meeting. The women are looking their best, in clean, crisp and colorful dresses, with complementary headwraps, delicate braids with cowries, mouth tattoos and hennaed feet. "The Fulani should sit with Fulani, Dogon with Dogon, Bambara with Bambara and Songhai



*Left: Trickle Up participants receive calculators and learn how to use them. Bottom: Savings Group Meeting near Sevaré, Mali*



with Songhrai,” says our Trickle Up Mali Regional Representative Judith Larivière, indicating that people need to sit with their ethnic group in order for the translation of three languages to be conducted efficiently. The participants are the presidents, secretaries and participants from their Savings Groups, who were sent as representatives to be trained in how to open a bank account. They have traveled alone from villages as far as six hours away, to spend two days in training. They are often the sharpest members or leaders of their group and they greet and tease each other warmly, as they met here one year ago for their first training. As the Trickle Up Program Officer for Savings, I have traveled to Mali to observe the training and glean a clearer understanding of how our Field Office links Savings Groups to the “formal” financial sector.

*“If you see we are all happy it is because we have all found hope with our savings group and benefited from this training.”*

The participants in the meeting have been saving for at least two years, and most of their groups have at least \$2,000 in savings. For the sake of security and to facilitate access to more lending capital, Trickle Up trains these advanced groups on how to open a bank account. Using stories and illustrations, Judith explains to the group the five key questions you must answer in order to evaluate a bank, what documents are needed and the logistical process of opening a checking and savings account, how to negotiate the terms of a loan, how to use a calculator,

and how to do a cost/benefit analysis of opening a bank account vs. investing your capital locally. On the last afternoon of the workshop three local bank representatives come to speak to the group, explain the loan terms they offer, and answer any questions the women have.

In a feedback session one participant shared, “If you see we are all happy, it is because we have all found hope with our savings group and benefited from this training. If you are in dire times, I hope God will bless you as you have blessed us.” To which Judith replied, “You are here as a representative of 24 people. If you

have appreciated what you have learned, we want you to go back to your groups and teach them what you have learned, and send them our greetings and encouragement.”

In moments like this it has been so inspiring to see how a low-cost program can yield not only an increase in income but also a powerful change in attitude that is vital to fuel someone’s journey out of extreme poverty. When you see the groups at the initial trainings, participants looking hesitant and wary, and you see them a year later, proudly showing you their ledger books, looking visibly healthier and happier, I

## Quick Facts

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100% of Trickle Up participants join Savings Groups (SGs)

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Since 2004, Trickle Up has started over 1,054 SGs in Mali

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25% of SGs are over three years strong

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Average meeting attendance rate is 90%

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Drop-out rate is under 2%

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can’t help but think of a phrase from my youth: “Sisterhood is Powerful”. It makes me convinced that women are wonderful collaborators and they can achieve so much, particularly with each other’s support.

All Trickle Up participants are integrated into Savings Groups. In the three regions where we work, Central America, West Africa and India, there are three different methodologies used which fit the culture and context of each region, but the one thing the women all share is the incredible enthusiasm and commitment to each other and the group.

What are Savings Groups? They are groups of between 15 and 25 women who live in the same or nearby community, and are trained in how to save and lend among themselves. These groups meet weekly, bi-weekly or monthly, each contributing a minimum savings amount, which is usually between 10 cents and \$1, using a heavy metal box with three locks to store their savings. After about six meetings they begin to grant each other loans, at a low interest rate predetermined by the group. They use these loans both to invest in their business and for personal needs they cannot address otherwise – i.e. medicine for their children or to fix a leaking roof. The Savings Groups enable the participants to access loans in their local village at reasonable rates, develop good savings habits, and build the value of their savings through the interest the group earns. While we call them “savings groups,” they are in fact “savings and credit groups.”

Visiting the Savings Groups in the field I was struck by the obvious excitement and dedication of the group members. I found many members eager to share their experience and stories. One participant said, “The group makes us stronger. Now you don’t have to look elsewhere if you have a problem with your children. You don’t have to beg and feel embarrassed if you have to take a loan.” Another woman confidently said, “Before I had to wait for my husband to give me money. Now I have my own money so I am free to express myself. When you are poor, you have to be courageous.” When I asked one woman if the group members were friends before she smiled and said, “No, but now we are one,” raising her index finger. The women eagerly show their savings box and the money it contains. I feel delighted to be their witness, to acknowledge their hard work and praise their results.

Trickle Up implements the savings program with a relatively small investment (approximately \$20 or less per participant), yet the impact is profound. Women report improvements in their self-esteem, their relationships with their husband and children. They also report an increased sense of security and hope for the future. Although Savings Groups vary in the degree to which they address community issues, some groups have become a force to contend with. In India, for example, one savings group closed down a liquor stall in a village where alcoholism was a problem. In another case, an entire savings group gathered daily to sit in front of a woman's home, shaming the husband until the abuse came to an end. The savings groups give sustainability to Trickle Up's work, as after our support is ended, there is a community organization in place that both provides a strong network of support and ongoing access to credit. As one of our participants explained, "Even community members who are not part of the group have benefited. Now they can buy vegetables, eggs and other things at a lower price and they don't have to travel to the market. We have more products in town now."

These groups not only build financial capital, they also build what development professionals call "social capital": the ability to speak in front of a group, connections to different resources and confidence in their potential and ability to solve their own problems. These results are not only expressed to us, but are evident in the energy, warmth and harmony of the groups.

What lies ahead for these Savings Groups? That is for the members to decide. In many communities, for the first time, women have a platform from which they can work together and pursue their goals, whether that is building a well for their village, hiring a teacher for the school house or being a source of support in the event of a flood. When you visit the groups, you can't help but feel the potential.

Help more women start their journeys out of extreme poverty.

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