

December 30, 2002  
Dan Swinney

## **Report on Senegal Trip, December 13 through December 21**

### **Background and Summary:**

*Note: Almost all of the discussions and presentations were in French and some in Wolof (the language of Western Senegal). I worked through translators, so inevitably I have made errors, misstatements, and misinterpretations. This is combined with my own very superficial base of knowledge of Senegalese history and society. My apologies for any errors and any corrections are welcomed!*

I was invited by Nancy Neamtan, President of the Quebec Working Group on the Solidarity Economy and Gerald Larose, past president of the Quebec CSN labor federation and President of the Quebec Solidarity Economy Group to attend the meeting of the International Liaison Committee of the, now, Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of the Social and Interdependent Economy (RIPESS).

This Network was created by international conferences held in Lima, Peru in 1998 and Montreal, Quebec in 2001 with representation by over 35 countries. The Network is committed to the development and promotion of sustainable development and the solidarity economy as a positive alternative to global neo-liberal policies and practices, and to developing the shared partnership between the North and South in this effort. Its ranks include academics, strategists, journalists, leaders, and practitioners from labor and community development circles. This network has a vision and linkage to the World Social Forum organized in Porto Alegre Brazil over the last few years. The Committee (in formation) will include 6 people from each continent. This meeting included representatives from Brazil, Mexico, Peru, English-speaking Canada, Quebec, France, Senegal, and several people representing international NGOs. Its purpose is to organize the third conference of the Network to be held in Dakar, Senegal in November 2005. Abdou Salem Fall, the Director of the Institut Fondamental D'Afrique Noire, is the Chairman of the Network, directs the headquarters of the Network now established in Dakar, and organized our visit. Fall is a well-known sociologist and anthropologist in Western Africa and Europe. Additional support was provided by CONGAD, a confederation of Senegalese NGOs; the Centre Canadien D'Etude et de Cooperation Internationale (CECI), a Canadian NGO that provides volunteers for development projects in Africa as well as other countries; La Senegalaise d'Investissement et de Development Communautaire--the Senegalese Community Investment Corporation; and UNACOIS, the Senegalese trade association for merchants, credit unions, etc.

The eight days had three segments:

- Site visits to social/solidarity projects in urban and rural Senegal;
- An organizational meeting of the Network; and

- A public forum with presentations by members of the Liaison Committee held at the headquarters of UNACOIS—a national organization that promotes economic development and, particularly, the creation of credit unions linked to the informal economy.

Overall, it was a very successful trip and achieved its objectives.

- We visited a broad range of projects in Senegal, and identified at least two that could lead to joint efforts involving the Senegalese and members of the Network that could demonstrate the ongoing potential of the network and its approach to development;
- We took the Network to the next stage of organizational development and set the stage for expanding the Network, strengthening its relationship with similar international networks, and building for a successful international conference in Dakar 2005; and
- We successfully introduced the Network to a cross-section of development, political, and cultural leaders in Senegal from the community to the Ministerial level, winning their commitment to participate in our on-going efforts.

### **Senegal Visits:**

**Urban Projects in Dakar:** Dakar is a very busy city of 2 million people on a peninsula that reaches out into the Atlantic. We saw a very small part of the city as we hustled between meetings. There is a small, relatively modern center with a few old hotels, the presidential palace and government buildings, and other stores; but quickly this fades into poor housing, endless small markets, many sand/dirt side streets, and lots of street activity. Cars merge with horse-drawn wagons, and public city vans that provide free transportation to those who hop on. These painted vans are on their way to other cities and neighborhoods. The most popular decals on the rear windows were either Madonna or Osama ben Laden. There is the old, the traditional, the new, and the desperate all merged into a dense flurry of activity that was compelling. Overall, I found Senegal and Dakar very interesting, complex, friendly, and beautiful although challenged by the classic issues of development.

We visited a number of projects in Dakar proper including several small projects that were focused on training homeless youth and women in art crafts, sewing, and other skills that could lead to employment or micro enterprise development. It was difficult to get a full sense of the strength and weaknesses of these projects in our whirlwind tour and the fact that most of us were still at some stage in adjustment to Dakar in general, to the new time zone, etc. We had lunch at Dakar University at the cooperative restaurant organized by the Teachers Union that was currently on strike against the administration. We heard presentations about this union and its broader federation (USAS); as well as a welcoming from the President of CONGAD, the federation of NGOs in Senegal. We ended the afternoon attending the founding meeting of a housing cooperative attended by over forty

single or single parent women and led by representatives of an important Senegalese women's organization.

**Ile de Goree:** This is a required destination if you visit Dakar. This small island, less than a mile out in the Atlantic out of the port of Dakar, was the site where millions of slaves from West Africa were gathered; assessed; fattened up; and then sold and shipped to the “New World”; or died from disease; or murdered. The slave trade was active for over 300 years and resulted in the killing and/or enslavement of anywhere from 30 to 100 million Africans. The role and prominence of this particular island is debated, but it is a simple and stark symbol of the most brutal and destructive era of European global dominance. After a short ferry ride from Dakar, we had a guided tour of the buildings where slaves were held, selected, sold, and punished, as well as the churches and living quarters for the slave traders and their service staff. To add to the complexity of the island, its history, and “ambiance” is the medical school that was attended by Senghor and other African leaders and played a critical role in their education, Senghor's vacation residence, a currently-operating elite girl's school, and a large building that was a prison for Senegal after independence and will be converted to a hotel and convention center. There are a number of poor artisans who live on the island and sell their products to the tourists.

**Outside Dakar:** On December 16, we split into two separate groups to visit different sites in the rural areas and smaller cities where the Senegalese social/solidarity economy was operating. I was part of a group that focused on credit unions or “mutuelles”. We visited five: in Thies, two in Bambey, one in Touba, and one in Diourbel. These were local organizations serving smaller rural cities. Their purpose was to extend credit to the local, and mostly informal economy—providing an alternative to traditional banks that were bureaucratic and restrictive. They provide services mostly to women, building on the “Tontine” tradition—saving circles among Senegalese women. They are all supported and encouraged in various important ways by the national UNACOIS structure. These were all new initiatives. They are successful micro-credit programs that have had a substantial impact on the local economy and the development of local leadership. The effort in Bambey had a genuine movement character of local men and women really taking initiative in democratizing access to capital and expanding local business development. Most of the lending went to traders and merchants in the ubiquitous market places, cattle breeders, the development of agricultural products such as corn and peanuts, and other small ventures. They are membership organizations and typically have women well represented on the boards of directors as well as the credit committees. They are strengthening the local economy and formalizing the informal sectors in ways that are probably both positive and negative.

In all of these meetings, we learned about the local projects. We also described the interests and purpose of our committee and project—developing an economic alternative to neo-liberal practices through promoting the social/solidarity economy. There was active interest in our plans, desire for more contact and mutual assistance, and an interest in participating in work leading up to the Dakar Conference in 2005.

In Diourbel, the local group had tried to invest in a local peanut oil factory. They arranged a tour for us at the company. This is a sophisticated company that employs 250 workers

and produces peanut and vegetable oil for domestic and, at least, European markets. It is ISO 9002 certified and processes peanuts and vegetables for local producers. It is unionized. I asked about the ownership structure and marketing plans. As it turns out, they are “privatizing” this company and trying to sell it. Fall said this was due to pressure from the World Bank that is forcing the liberalization of the Senegal economy in general. According to the manager, the company is profitable. I asked if the local group would consider supporting the employees in an effort to buy the company, if viable. This approach hadn’t been considered. There was immediate interest that was reflected in several subsequent discussions including those with the national leadership of UNACOIS and CONGAD. Like in every “early warning” lead, there are many obstacles and probably good reasons while this particular project won’t happen, but a development process examining the feasibility could have broader importance in bringing labor-based capital strategies into the discussion of approaches to development in Senegal. Gerald Larose, Abdou Salem Fall, and myself will pursue this in coming weeks. There might be the potential to get international support for this initiative and test the capacity of our network on a variety of levels. An interesting place to start.

**Touba:** We had an amazing 12 hours in this holy city of Senegal and the center of a particular school of Islam—Mouridism. Mouridism is the most influential school of Islam in Senegal, and has influence in other international communities. It’s a large city with a spectacular mosque and the home of the third leader of Mouridism—Serigne Saliou Mbacke. Polygamy is common—the legal limit being 4 wives. The town is run completely by religious authorities and the Serigne (spiritual leader) or Marabout (Fr.) has total authority. Our visit included staying at the house of, I assume, a top leader; discussions with an ex-member of parliament; a huge meal of fire-cooked legs of mutton, yassa (onions and rice cooked with the meat), salads, deserts; an audience with Serigne Mbacke—the most powerful spiritual leader in the country in the morning; a tour of the mosque (which is spectacular); and a meeting with the local credit union. It was a fascinating and unforgettable experience rich with contradiction. It was a combination of African Islam, cell phones and Mercedes, incredible food and hospitality, religious zeal, feudal tradition, and the social/solidarity economy. Support was extended to our effort to build the social/solidarity economy from the Seigne.

**The Labor Movement:** On our return to Dakar, Nancy and I had the first of two discussions with leadership of the UDEN from the UNSAS labor federation. We met specifically with leaders of the teacher’s union USAS, but our discussions focused on the broader issues of the labor movement. During colonial days, there was a growing labor movement captured brilliantly in the novel about the 1947 rail strike, *God’s Bits of Wood*, by Sembene Ousmane. Following independence in 1960, there was one major federation associated with Senghor’s socialist party. In the early 1990s, the dominance of Senghor’s party (then under the leadership of President Diouf) was challenged. UDEN and other labor federations were formed. There are now 14 representing a number of different parties—some very small. UNSAS has 50,000 members including a large number of members in the public sector and state-owned companies. UDEN, the teachers’ union, has over 10,000 members. In addition to fulfilling the classic role of a union, UDEN is creating financial credit unions, health unions, and housing cooperatives. In light of the pressure to

privatize, they are faced with new and serious challenges and were open to discussing and learning about a broader range of approaches including capital strategies. UDEN is very interested in continuing contact with us and we were with them.

**Additional Labor Note:** A strong participant in the Liaison Committee is Uzziel Twagilimana. He works with the Belgian-based WM Solidarite Mondiale. This NGO works with, among other things, 30 nationally-based labor federations in Africa. He has strong ties in the Ivory Coast and will assist us in making contact with the labor movement there, and to gather information regarding on the conditions faced by cacao workers.

### **International Liaison Committee Meeting:**

This was a two-day meeting that successfully clarified the mission of the network, formalized the name, created a structure to build towards the Dakar 2005 conference, and approved a budget to cover the costs of the Secretariat as well as preparing for and holding the conference. There will be formal minutes from the meeting with the details. Some key points:

- We will develop a sharper vision statement to more specifically define what we are and what we are not;
- We will actively raise funds for the network from a variety of sources;
- The Dakar Conference will be in November 2005. The Secretariat will be headquartered in Dakar under the leadership of Adbou Salem Fall. Gerald Larose of Quebec and Hector Ortiz of Peru will be the co-assistant secretaries;
- We had an excellent meeting with Mme. Maimouna Sourang, the Minister of Social Development for Senegal. She is very enthusiastic about the effort and objectives and pledged full support;
- There will be follow-up meetings in Montreal and Brussels in the coming years.

**Public Forum:** We held a small public forum featuring a big sample of the Liaison Committee where we outlined the objectives of the Network, and members of the committee presented experiences from their country and networks. Following substantial presentations by our sponsors, we had presentations from Peru, Mexico, Quebec, the US, Senegal, and other sections of Africa. A group of 50-75 people attended including some we met on our travels.

### **Evaluation:**

1. This was a successful working meeting of the Network. It is a substantial group with commitment and a potential resource base. It has some institutional partners—Canadian, Peruvian, and Senegalese and support of key international networks. The leadership is integrated into the World Social Forum network. This meeting gave

sharper focus to the objectives established in the earlier Lima and Montreal conferences, established clear leadership, and the outline of a plan to build for the Dakar 2005 Conference.

2. This is a network that has strategic potential for CLCR and other NGOs. Building the strategic linkage around a common development agenda between the North and South lies at the heart of our vision, even though we haven't spent time and resources on it. This is a specific opportunity to make that happen on an organizational level with established partners.
3. There is a lot for us to learn from the experience, perspectives, and values of these leaders; and we have been encouraged by them to contribute our own perspectives to this effort. This is an important complement to our participation in the Work and Labour Network in its presence and experience in the informal economy. An international development strategy has to be anchored in an understanding of the dynamics between the formal and informal sectors. We can contribute to that discussion.
4. I think our continued participation in this network will enhance the quality of our work, the breadth of opportunities, our network of partners, and the reputation of the organization. There is the basis for increased contact with the African labor movement through strong contacts we established with the Senegalese as well as other NGOs. The potential project at the peanut oil company is also a good entry around a very specific project into the international development arena.
5. This Network will be an important and fascinating learning experience for CLCR.