

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

Agriculture and life in a Senegalese village

At the invitation of the mayor, Ousmane Pame, Harwood had the opportunity to spend two weeks in the West African country of Senegal so he could learn about life and agricultural production in the Eco-Community of Guédé Chantier, Senegal (population 7,000). Guédé is located on the banks of the Doué River in the Senegal River Valley along the border with Mauritania.

The village of Guédé Chantier was founded in 1933 by French colonists in order to introduce irrigated agriculture to the region. In the process the French forced many people from neighboring areas in Senegal, Mali, and Mauritania to relocate in Guédé. Most of the people living in Guédé are Haalpulaar (speakers of Pulaar—Fulani in English).

Anyone from the American Southwest would recognize the architectural design of the buildings in Guédé with their mud-brick and concrete block construction that is often plastered over. Each property is generally surrounded by a wall with a series of rooms on one or more sides forming a central courtyard in which the meals and much of the family activity takes place. Each home is usually occupied by an extended family that may include parents, young children, as well as adult children and their families.

Animals, primarily goats, sheep and horses, are kept in a separate area inside the family's exterior walls. A toilet and a room for bathing are also found inside the family's walls, though some families bathe in the river or the canals.

The housing in Guédé is concentrated in two areas: a large rectilinear area inside a dike that protects the fields from the annual flooding of the Doué River, and a long area that winds along the high ground to the north between the dike and the river. The total housing area is 30 hectares.

Guédé has a 10-bed medical center that is served by an acute care nurse and a midwife. Well-child services are provided for children up to two years of age. A pharmacy also helps serve the health care needs of the area. The widespread use of mosquito nets among both adults and children has significantly reduced the number of deaths due to malarial infection in Guédé and throughout the nation.

Children receive their elementary school education in 3 public schools located in different parts of the village. All public education in Senegal is conducted in French, which slows the speed at which children can learn other subjects because they must first learn a new language—Pulaar, not French, is the language spoken in most homes in Guédé. At the national level, discussion is underway to permit school subjects to be

taught in the local language, with French, the national language, being taught as a second language. In that way children can learn math, science, and social studies without being held back by their lack of fluency in French.

Guédé also has a middle school which was formed in 2005. The high school was established in 2011. Despite the educational challenges, a number of those who grew up in Guédé have gone on to earn undergraduate and graduate degrees.

The community is located 16°32' north of the equator in a semi-arid area. The rainfall pattern is monsoonal with an average of 200-300 millimeters (10 inches) falling between the beginning of August and the middle of October each year. Last year's monsoon brought only 85 mm (a little over 3 inches) of rain. The monsoon season also brings flooding along the river bank where crops can be grown when the flood recedes.

Of the 900 hectares (approximately 540 acres) in Guédé, 695 are used for irrigated crops. The irrigation water is pumped from the Doué River and is directed to the fields through a series of canals. Most of the families in Guédé make their living through a combination of crop agriculture, herding, and/or fishing.

Because the temperature rarely falls below 10°C (50°F), farmers in Guédé can grow three irrigated crops a year. The first crop is grown in the cool season (January-April) and consists of tomatoes, maize, okra, cabbage, onions, and a variety of vegetables; tomatoes are the major cash crop. For the next two seasons (roughly May-August and September-December) rice is grown as a cash crop with some retained as household food.

Along the river—an area outside the dike—farmers grow a greater variety of crops as well as fruit trees. Fish ponds are also located in this area.

Guédé Chantier is governed by a municipal council of 40 members, with the mayor being elected from among its membership. The current mayor is Dr. Ousmane Pame who is an Associate Professor in the English Department at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar. Dr. Pame spends part of his time teaching in Dakar and the rest of it in Guédé Chantier.

The mayor appoints a Chief for each of the five districts in the community. Farmers are divided into a number of groups and cooperatives, each with a leader selected from its membership. There is a women's group and center in the community and with the 2014 municipal council elections half of its membership will be women. The young adults have organized themselves into a group they call the Eco-Sentinelles.

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These groups, along with Imam Ly and the elders of the community, are all working to improve life in Guédé Chantier.

Over the next several weeks we will take a closer look at agriculture and community life in Guédé Chantier.

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