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Jottings

You support
women's
empowerment
all around
the world.



*Fanta Traoré,
a farmer in Mali,
in her onion field with her
grandchild, Moriba Traoré.*

Photo : CAB Demeso

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Photo: Sylvie Perrais/USC Canada

Fanta is a mother of eight, grandmother to 13 and guardian to one very useful grain that everyone had thought lost for good.

Photo: CAB Demoso

The secret life of seeds

Fanta Traoré is a farmer with a secret.

Of course, she didn't know it was a secret at first – it wasn't until she got together with dozens of other farmers from her region that she realized.

With support from USC Canada donors like you, the farmers gathered for an audit of what seeds they save and what ones they've lost, so they can work together to conserve and grow their local seed diversity. The audit begins with farmers listing all the seeds they save.

As it turned out, Fanta is the caretaker of a very rare seed indeed: n'guéné sorghum, a traditional local grain.

Today, standing in a grove of young Baobab trees in her village, Zorokoro, Mali, she recounts the moment at the gathering when she revealed she was saving the sorghum seed.

Her peers were shocked and excited. They had thought the sorghum lost for good.

"When I showed I had the seed, there was a sense of relief among many of the women who believed the variety had completely disappeared from the community," says 56 year-old Fanta, who has been involved with USC Canada since 2002. Five women asked to borrow n'guéné seeds from her right there and then.

This scene is a familiar one. Pressure to grow export crops, adoption of industrial farming practices, and climate change make losing seeds – even treasured local varieties – all too common. Seeds, and the unique crops they grow, go extinct all the time.

But this time, while the n'guéné sorghum fell out of use in her

community and beyond, Fanta grew and saved it, year after year. She liked its knack for producing grain earlier than other types of sorghum. Even with the climate changing around her she could depend on it to provide her with an early harvest.

Plus n'guéné sorghum had always proven a yummy, nutritious, easy-to-prepare daily meal for her family – no insignificant factor when you have 13 grandkids for whom to make food.

"Since I have more than a dozen grandchildren, I kept growing this variety to keep up with their growing demand for dinner!"

Fanta's grandchildren aren't the only ones who depend on her now. With support from donors like you, she planted the very Baobab trees she now stands among. She and other women from her village and as far away as the capital, Bamako, harvest the thin green Baobab leaves to sell at market. At the beginning of the rainy season when food is most scarce, these leaves provide a steady income.

She never had the chance to go to school but, with your support, she has received training, gained new skills, and farms good, diverse food in a difficult region. With her expertise, Fanta is now a teacher to budding new farmers. Fanta even founded a farmers' association in Zorokoro which helps its 43 members source good seeds.

Through all this, she earned enough income to put all eight of her children through school.

"The support of the program has greatly improved my living conditions." ✨



Photo: Beatrix Oliver/USC Canada

Your support means better quality coffee – and a better quality of life



In your late teens, the future can feel uncertain at the best of times. It's a time of transition and searching for what's next.

For Jeidy Marilú Domínguez Morales, the future felt far from home and family, in a city well outside her village of Campanario 2, Intibucá, Honduras.

"I had plans to leave for Spain," she says. "I wanted a better life."

As a young woman, there weren't many job opportunities or avenues for education available to her in her hometown. That is, until she met Victoria Aguirres, leader of the local women's farming group that your donations support. That's when she found both.

Victoria showed Jeidy how farming could be her opportunity to learn valuable new skills and use them to earn a living. The best part: she could do it all in her own hometown.

Jeidy dove into the training that your support makes possible. She learned about sustainable farming and shade-grown coffee. Inspired, she asked her father, José Domínguez, for a slice of land where she could put her new farming expertise into practice. But she had one more request: that the land title be under her name. And he said yes, making Jeidy one of a small number of women who hold title to land in Honduras.

Today, Jeidy is 23 years old and proud of her burgeoning enterprise. She grows diverse vegetables, fruit trees, and high quality coffee. Through the women's farming group that you support, she sells her coffee directly to buyers, skipping the middleman and fetching a better, fairer price.

"We don't have to leave the community," says Jeidy, who is already planning the future of her coffee business – a future rooted in her home, Honduras.

"It's not overnight that you'll achieve the results you want, but now I'm sure they can be achieved." 🌱

You support re-sil-ience // the ability to recover quickly from hardship

Natural disasters often hit farmers the hardest. Devastating events, like last year's flooding in northern Bangladesh, can strip farmers' of their homes and livelihoods, putting their resilience to the test.

Your generous contributions to farmers, like Koushola Rani, go toward making sure they are able to bounce back.

Koushola's home, yard, compost pits and vegetable plot were all inundated for three days, drowning her crops and destroying most of her property. Most of the other women you support faced similar situations.

When the water receded, these thousands of women immediately went into recovery mode and their seed saving, farming and compost skills kicked into action.

Your donations and their preparedness meant they were able to rebuild and replant. 🌱



Photo: Udayan Kur Seba Sangsitha



Putting your values into action

When long-time donor Dr. Ann Denis started teaching sociology, gender was rarely examined.

“‘Society’ either implicitly meant men or was an undifferentiated mass,” says Ann, now an emerita professor at the University of Ottawa. “So one of the things we started to ask was, ‘where are the women?’”

In countries where donors like you and Ann support USC Canada programs, the answer to that question is often the field or garden. Women work long days to grow food for their family and community, usually without access to credit or their own land. Membership in farmers’ cooperatives tends to be reserved for men, and since men often focus on export agriculture, agriculture to meet local needs gets overlooked.

When women have the freedom to reach their full potential, it benefits everyone in their community. That’s why donors like Ann have been supporting USC Canada’s work with women for decades. It’s also why Canada’s new international assistance policy prioritizes the empowerment of women for building a more peaceful and prosperous world.

But how can Canadians help women in other countries empower themselves?

“I think there’s a delicate balance in what we do. We should not be imposing a western model on others,” says Ann. “In my experience, women usually have a very acute analysis of what is going on in their own society. That’s something we should support.”

Ann has been donating to USC Canada since 1969. She has witnessed the organization’s mission evolve over time, from Dr. Lotta Hitschmanova’s early focus on post-war Europe to today’s work with farmers.

“I’ve always liked USC Canada’s approach. It’s about helping people be more self-sustaining, rather than simply giving to the unfortunate,” she says.


“Work with farmers and seeds has merit both overseas and in Canada. Supporting farmers is important for survival, in terms of feeding ourselves. Here, we’re perhaps not as conscious of its importance as we might be because we depend so much on international food chains and a certain amount of exploitation, unfortunately.”


Exploitation is the reality of many farmers today. But as the stories of Fanta, Jeidy and Koushola show, it doesn’t have to be that way. Farmers around the world are leading the way towards their own empowerment, and inspiring others in the process. Thanks to generous donors like you and Ann, USC Canada can continue to support them.

When women farmers thrive, the world becomes a better place for us all. 🌱

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