

Taking on the Locusts: OFDA's Cross-Border Initiative Lays the Groundwork for Future Regional Responses

By *Alexandra Riboul*

Meeting in Saint Louis, Senegal, on the evening of October 27, 2004, the members of the Joint Operations Cell (JOC) debated which areas the six OFDA-funded airplanes would spray against desert locusts the following day. A diverse group, the JOC included USAID disaster experts and military and agriculture personnel from the governments of Senegal and Mauritania. The day had been busy, with the 6 planes completing 12 sorties and spraying 15,400 hectares in Mauritania and Senegal with Malathion 96 ULV (ultra-low volume)—a pesticide widely used for locust control. Ground survey and monitoring teams, comprising local villagers who tracked the locusts during the day and fed information to the JOC concerning the locusts' location at night, had discovered new locust swarms on both sides of the Mauritanian-Senegalese border. There was still much work to be done!



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USAID, Mauritanian, and Senegalese agricultural and technical experts plan upcoming locust-control missions inside the Joint Operations Cell located in Saint-Louis, Senegal.

The voracious locusts—each capable of eating its own weight in food and traveling more than 100 km a day—were devouring crops and pasture lands in several Sahelian West African countries and threatening families dependent on farming and livestock for survival. The locusts could not have invaded the Sahel at a worse time: it was the lean season, right before the harvests, and the population was more vulnerable to food insecurity than at any other time. Food stocks were exhausted and all the money earned from previous harvests had been re-invested in seeds and tools that were supposed to show results in just a few weeks. At an average density of 500,000 locusts per hectare (approximately 202,430 locusts per acre), a medium-sized swarm can eat the same amount of food as approximately 2,500 humans per day. The large swarms traveled easily and rapidly from country to country in the region, and yet initially each country was addressing the problem with ground and aerial spraying independent of its neighbors and with inadequate transboundary coordination.

In response to the worsening locust crisis, USAID deployed a DART in late September 2004. During meetings in early October, the DART and the Mauritanian and Senegalese authorities created the JOC and established the structure of the cross-border operation targeting the agricultural areas along the Senegal River valley that divides Mauritania and Senegal. This collaborative approach of launching and managing an aerial spraying operation to treat locusts in Senegal and Mauritania brought together national government officials already involved in anti-locust campaigns and ultimately strengthened the impact of the initiative.

The discussion held on the evening of October 27 was an example of one of two daily meetings held by the JOC since the beginning of the spraying operation on October 12. During the morning sessions, the JOC discussed the day's work and any incidents related to the flight missions and reviewed fuel and pesticide stocks. At the evening meetings, the JOC charted the next day's spraying. During the 30 days of the operation, the OFDA-funded airplanes completed 187 sorties and treated a total of 382,850 hectares. The total number of hectares treated during



An OFDA-funded airplane sprays locust-infested areas in Senegal.

the operation represented more than 50 percent of all hectareage in Mauritania and 30 percent in Senegal treated by the respective governments, FAO, and other donors during the same time period. While the aerial spraying concentrated on protecting the fertile farm and pasture lands along the Senegal River, areas further north and south—including near or in Nouakchott, Mauritania, and north of Dakar, Senegal—were also sprayed.

The aerial spraying campaign protected hundreds of thousands of hectares of crops and pastureland in Senegal and Mauritania. The JOC was a vital component of the campaign's success, making it a model for future international cooperation forums. President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal even recognized the group's work during the International Scientific Locust Seminar held in Dakar in January 2005.

The day after the DART concluded the aerial spraying campaign, General Papa Fall, Chief of Staff

of the Senegalese Armed Forces, visited the JOC and thanked the DART for its support and expertise in combating the locusts. Building on the experience, General Fall expressed optimism that in the near future West Africa would establish its own regional disaster response office—enabling the countries to respond to disasters that fall within and across their borders without relying on outside assistance.

According to Amadou Diallo of Mauritania's Center for the Fight against Locusts, "Operating from three bases in Senegal and Mauritania, the USAID-contracted planes have treated over 380,000 hectares. It has been a grand success, saving thousands of hectares of crops along the river valley." As for Fodé Sarr, regional director of Senegal's Ministry of Agriculture, the aerial campaign succeeded because of strong cooperation with Mauritania and USAID. "Working closely together, we reached far beyond our initial goals. This exercise has laid a solid foundation for future collaboration."