

Jean Dark Gnagne now owns and runs a fabric shop in Dabou because of a small loan from the United Methodist Women-supported Clef Sarepta in Côte d'Ivoire. Photos on pages 20-24 by Nile Sprague.

Giving Hope Credit

WOMEN-RUN CLEF SAREPTA BANK IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE IS GIVING WOMEN ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES AND NEW INFLUENCE IN THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES.

by NILE SPRAGUE



I traveled to Côte d'Ivoire in November of 2010. I had to delay my initial visit because of the first round of presidential elections, and then when I finally did visit, I had to leave the country again quickly before the second round of elections, both times due to fears of instability. At the time of this writing, the power struggle following the presidential elections had left the country in a state of political uncertainty and chaos.

This is the context in which United Methodist Women of Côte d'Ivoire are in mission. Clef Sarepta is one way these women organized for mission are help-

ing themselves and others gain economic footing in Côte d'Ivoire.

Clef Sarepta is a microfinance bank established in 2001 by United Methodist Women in Côte d'Ivoire. *Clef* means *key* in French, and is an acronym for *Caisse Local Épargne Finance*, meaning *Local Finance and Savings Bank*. *Sarepta* is a reference to the biblical story of the widow of Sarepta, who gave the only food she had to the prophet Elijah, though it meant she and her son would have nothing to eat, and then a miracle occurred, and there was enough food for all of them (1 Kings 17:9-16). The bank seeks to

empower women by providing financial support for microenterprise and thus giving the women a means to make a living and become independent. United Methodist Women members in the United States support the program through their Mission Giving grants, which increases the bank's capital and ability to give loans.

"As we traveled around the country, in all the villages we visited we found the same difficult situations. Women begged us to help them fight poverty, to help send their children to school, and to give them assistance to start their own businesses," said Dorcas Adou, na-

tional president of United Methodist Women in Côte d'Ivoire. "To assist the women, we started a small savings group. We came together every month and each contributed a small amount of money, and one woman would have a turn to receive the collection. The objective was to collect enough money to help the women finance some sort of microenterprise. However, when Clef Sarepta started, we saw it would be more effective to orient all of our efforts and attention toward the bank."

Adèle Edjeme Yed, 62, is chief executive officer Clef Sarepta bank. She was the president of United Methodist

Women in Dabou District, east of the Ivorian capital, Abidjan, and had traveled throughout her district, meeting women and talking with them about their lives, when the women decided to start a bank.

"I discovered how poor many women were," she said. "Women and young mothers started asking me for a means to start a trade or business. They were dependant on their husbands for everything. Even to buy a box of matches, they had to ask their husbands.

"As a sort of test, we started by giving a small loan of 5,000 CFA francs [about U.S. \$10] to some of the women that

were in need. They used the money to start small enterprises, like selling fried plantain or rice and other food products. Instead of giving them a fish, we wanted to teach them to fish, we wanted to help them start something that would be self-sustaining.

"We asked the women to repay the loans after two months, and they all did. From this small success, we were inspired to start the bank, and we opened our first branch in Dabou. We invited the women to open accounts and start saving. After six months, we were able to give our first loans."

Ms. Yed said it was difficult to find



Pelagie Credi, 20, works on a loom at the textile weaving business of Mary Aboua Fattoh, who got a loan to build her business from Clef Sarepta bank.



new members to join the bank at the beginning. Sometimes only five new members would join in a whole month. People did not really trust the bank because they had experience with other banks that had stolen or embezzled their money.

“Many people doubted our ability because we were women,” Ms. Yed said. “They said, ‘These are just women; they will not go anywhere. They will start this bank and then quit after awhile.’ Even the male leaders within the church did not give support or encouragement at first. Still, we would go to local communities to educate people and recruit new members, and the national president of the United Methodist Women would encourage women to join the bank at our annual assemblies.

“When we started giving the first loans, then the people recognized, ‘Yes, this is a real bank.’ Word spread and the project started gaining momentum.”

In 2005 the women reached a turning point and really started to see success. Today the bank has about 3,000 members and three branches in Dabou, Abidjan and Sikansee. Originally the bank only served United Methodist women, and its clientele is still primarily women. However, since 2006 the bank has been open to everyone and now serves youth, men, corporations, pastors, and churches, regardless of religion.

“We give loans with lower interest rates than most banks,” Ms. Yed said. “The national average is 20 percent annually, but we charge only 17 percent. This money is used to manage the bank and pay salaries, rent and utilities.”

Clef Sarepta also has a below average loan default rate. A 2008 study found that the national average was a 50 percent default rate on loans. At that

time, Clef Sarepta’s default rate was 35 percent. Since then it has taken measures to reduce the default rate further, and it is now just 10 percent.

Ms. Yed said the bank plans to expand its services to include money transfers and investments in house construction.

“Currently, our biggest limitation is a lack of capital,” Ms. Yed said. “We want to give more loans and bigger loans, but we cannot because we have limited funds. We want the bank to grow more. When the members increase, so will the capital in the bank, and we will be able to give more loans.”

Changing lives

Clef Sarepta is changing the lives of women and children in Côte d’Ivoire.

Akpass Celestine Gnagne, 61, a mother of four living in Abidjan, joined Clef Sarepta three years ago and has taken and repaid two loans in that time. She sells traditional fabrics, jewelry sets, plastic containers and children’s toys in her shop on the street in front of her home.

“I received a calling from God and set up this ministry next to my home,” said Ms. Gnagne, who is a member of the United Methodist Church and a lay preacher. “Anyone who needs to hear the word of Jesus is welcome here.

“I help women from my neighborhood and ministry establish bank accounts with Clef Sarepta. Many of them cannot read or write, but they trust me, and I help them and keep their savings books for them. Many are very poor

Akpass Celestine Gnagne displays her wares in front of her street-side stall in Abidjan.



women or widows, and they have no means to support their daily living. Even when they have nothing to save, we help them get started with an informal savings group among us. If there are 10 of us, we might collect 1,000 CFA from each (about U.S. \$2), and the money would go to a different woman each month to start her savings account.”

Ms. Gnagne educates the women and is responsible for the safekeeping of savings books for about 20 illiterate women. She has assisted many more in establishing accounts with Clef Sarepta.

Victoria Okezie, 35, is another member of the bank. The mother of four lives in Dabou with her husband and family, selling traditional fabric and fried cakes in a small shop near the mar-

ket. Ms. Okezie joined the Clef Sarepta bank about four years ago and also has accounts with two other banks.

“I want to start a business milling flour for bread and cakes,” Ms. Okezie said. “Currently, everyone in Dabou who needs flour milled must travel three hours each way to Abidjan, so it would be a great service to offer locally. I need a loan of 6 million CFA francs (about U.S. \$12,000) to buy the equipment. Clef Sarepta can only give me 1 million franc, so I have to put together loans from several banks.”

Since the political problems of Côte d’Ivoire started about eight years ago, things have been very difficult, Ms. Okezie said. “Many foreign business people left and went back to their own countries,” she said. “They employed

people before and made money flow into the country, but since they left, nothing moves anymore. Only food sells easily now. Like most people, I am afraid to spend money on something because I don’t know how things are going to end up.”

New respect for women

Madeleine Meledje, 48, is a mother of seven children and lives in Dabou with her family and husband. She stopped school in third grade and today trades in the villages, selling in a variety of products, depending on the season, including plantain, vegetables, jewelry, clothing and fabric.

“Clef Sarepta is my first bank,” Ms. Meledje said. “I started saving with them over eight years ago, and I save

consistently every month, about 150,000 CFA francs (about U.S. \$300). I have taken three loans and used them to buy various products that I resell. I have fully repaid all my loans.

“In the past, my husband would give me a little money to make small business, like selling fried cakes. But today I am independent, thanks to Clef Sarepta. Now, when there is a decision to make at home, I say my opinion, and my husband trusts me. He says, ‘You have the power and the means to do it.’”

Clef Sarepta about four months ago to buy supplies. Ms. Fattoh sees her business as an opportunity to create jobs and help other people.

“I trained to make these traditional textiles in Burkina Faso. It is in very high demand here and is already selling very well — all the product you see here has already been sold,” she told me, pointing to her wares. “I am a widow, so I must support my children alone. I use the profit from my business to pay for my children’s schooling, to pay my bills and to buy more supplies to continue my business.

“Without help from Clef Sarepta, I would not have been able to continue my business. Now I am developing a plan for expansion, and will submit it to the bank for another loan.”

Jean Dark Gnagne, 63, is a single mother with a son and six nieces and nephews living with her in Dabou while they attend school. Ms. Gnagne joined Clef Sarepta in 2003. She runs a

business selling traditional textiles from Benin and Togo and saves about 20 percent of her income with the bank each month. She has taken four loans, each used to expand her business.

“Before receiving my first loan from Clef Sarepta, I didn’t have a shop,” she said. “I would buy textiles and sell them door-to-door at people’s homes and businesses. When I was a mobile seller, I would often sell on credit, and at the end of the month I would have to go back and collect the payment. Sometimes people would cheat me and disappear with the fabric and not pay.


“I used a loan from Clef Sarepta to open my shop. I needed a larger quan-

tity of products to open the store and to attract more customers. Since opening the shop, my income has doubled, and I no longer have a problem with people cheating me. Thanks to Clef Sarepta, I am now self-sufficient.”

Financing hope

In a country with a great deal of poverty and women facing many challenges, United Methodist Women-funded Clef Sarepta bank is making it possible for women to improve their lives and secure some financial stability for their families.

“There are problems of teen-pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, human trafficking and slavery, and illiteracy and low education rates among women,” Ms. Adou said. “Many women’s husbands died in the war, or their husbands lost their jobs because businesses closed. Countless women are finding themselves the head of the household, compelled to work and support their families.”

In this context, the women-run Clef Sarepta bank is radically reshaping lives, empowering women to lift themselves out of poverty and become influential within their families and communities. By making loans more accessible to the women of Côte d’Ivoire, the bank helps them start their own businesses, become independent, and pay for the schooling of their children, which breaks the cycle of poverty and leads to a happier, healthier and more prosperous future for all. 

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Madeleine Meledje makes a deposit at the Clef Serepta bank branch in Dabou.

When one of Ms. Meledje’s daughters graduated from high school, she paid for her higher education. Without her earnings from her Clef Sarepta-financed business, Ms. Meledje’s daughter would not have been able to continue her studies.

Mary Aboua Fattoh, 49, is a widow, a mother of three and a missionary in charge of about 50 other missionaries, living in Abidjan. She used her own money to start a weaving business about a year ago and took a loan from