

Model Enterprise

By Carly Learson

As the members of the Ganta Concerned Women's Group break into spontaneous dancing and singing, Yah Paye, the Treasurer of the group, looks happy and proud. She ought to be. From a small group of traumatized and abused refugees who started a street-side counselling group, Paye and her friends have now scaled greater heights and are well on the way to setting up a cassava processing plant and ten community farms, bringing employment, food and financial security to the community. Having secured half a million US dollars in funding from external sources, the group is working with UNIFEM and local NGO Agricultural Relief Services on what could be an inspiring model for women's development initiatives in Liberia.

During the 14-year civil war, Ganta, on the border with Guinea, was a fertile recruiting ground for women who were forced to cook and be sex slaves

to combatants of various hues. Many of those who fled the war by crossing into Guinea have recently returned to start a new life. Paye and Musu Kardomie, Chairperson of the Ganta Concerned Women's Group, are two such women. On

its way to establishing a thriving cassava processing enterprise. The group approached UNIFEM, and with the agency's help managed to source funding from the World Bank, FAO, UNESCO and the Government of Korea. The project,

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their return home, they found that many women in the community had been beaten, raped and traumatized and were struggling to cope with the scars inflicted by the conflict. They realized that the best way to deal with their experiences was to help each other.

The Ganta Concerned Women's Group, now with 526 members, runs adult literacy programmes and is well

also supported by UNIFEM, is one of six Results Based Initiatives worldwide -- women's economic empowerment projects focusing on specific enterprise development.

The funds have been used to lease land in ten communities, and the women

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prepared the land and planted cassava crops. On the outskirts of Ganta stands a brand new, \$75,000 factory ready for machinery to be installed to start processing cassava. The cassava will be peeled and then processed to remove the moisture and create a flour-like derivative called farina. With local women to be employed by the collective to operate the machinery, UNIFEM Project Manager Yarkpazuo Kolva hopes to process up to 1,500 kilograms of raw cassava into high quality farina daily. On acquiring enough capital, the group intends to buy cassava from other farmers in the area to process, package and sell at a profit. The peelings will be sold as animal feed to form a second stream of income.

Through the factory and community farms the women of Ganta will be able to earn a steady income and ensure there is always enough food for their children. Paye says in light of the increasing price of rice, cassava will only become more important to her community. "Liberians love cassava," she says. "It is better than rice, and can be turned into so many different foods. Cassava should feed all of Africa."

UN agency WFP uses farina for its feeding programmes because of its portability and popularity with children. Kolva has ambitions for the collective to eventually supply the WFP with farina for its programmes in Liberia. UNIFEM has also engaged a consultant to explore possible markets in Monrovia and Guinea for the product.

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had no food," says Onikel Peaten, the manager of the farm tasked to supervise the work and to ensure its completion. "That's why we are so determined here. We do not eat all day; we work hard so that we can feed our children."

Kou Pealea, a vil-

lage elder of Tonglewin, is an advisor on the project. The grandmother of 30 is suffering from a painful infection in her knee but continues to work hard in the field. "The best part of this project is seeing the community come together and create value," she says. Pealea was one of the women who took part in training provided by Agricultural Relief Services in sustainable and efficient farming practices. She is now passing on her skills to other women in her community. She believes it is only through the strength of the women involved and their resolve in making the project work that it has been so successful already. "What I want is to see our daughters and granddaughters becoming leaders in the community as well," she said.

Musu Kardomie hopes to eventually employ local people to work on the farms as profits increase, giving the women time to work on new projects. She wants to see schools built for the children in the villages around Ganta which can also be used by women to take classes in the evening. However, her ultimate goal is the expansion of the cassava industry in Ganta. And there is conviction in her voice. "Nimba county could be the centre of cassava production in Liberia, and with women in charge it will happen." ♦

