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TRANSFORMING LIVES – MALI

USAID supports resurgence of art and culture in Timbuktu



Timbuktu youth perform original songs and dance about peace and reconciliation.

Photo by Yaya Bouare

"We are sure the city is ours now!"

Said Mohamed Sidy Arby, referencing the liberation of Timbuktu from extremist occupation

Telling Our Story
U.S. Agency for International Development
Washington, DC 20523-1000
<http://stories.usaid.gov>

March 2014 - The occupation of Timbuktu was a traumatic experience for the entire community, but particularly the youth, who armed extremist groups targeted as they imposed their brutal interpretation of Sharia law. For over a year, young people became prisoners in their own city or were forced to seek refuge in other areas of Mali and neighboring countries.

Extremists banned social and cultural activities and sanctioned, often violently, anyone caught listening to music. A year after the liberation of Timbuktu in early 2013, the scars and trauma of the occupation remain.

To restore a sense of normalcy to the community, as well as encourage a resurgence of art and culture in Timbuktu, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) has been working with local authorities, traditional leaders and youth since October of 2013. In collaboration with the youth council of Timbuktu, OTI organized a four-day inter-neighborhood theater competition. The competition brought critical sectors of the community and ethnic groups together to develop original plays, songs, and dances on the themes of peace, reconciliation and cultural resistance against violent extremism.

The thousands of community members, men, women, girls and boys, of all ages and from all ethnic groups and social classes, who attended each evening of the four-night event, signaled the population's growing confidence in the transition and improved security situation. One elderly man attending the event exclaimed, "with the exception of the nights of Maouloud, the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed, I've never seen a public show comparable to this in Timbuktu."

"I did not think we would ever be able to be in the same place with girls in Timbuktu," said a young boy as he danced.

This activity allowed residents from across Timbuktu's eight neighborhoods to meet, exchange, and celebrate the return to peace and cultural diversity as they watched touching performances portraying the pain and struggle the return to peace and reconciliation has involved.

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