

Mali hopes to revive industry and increase exports

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The shops in Mali are full of imported goods from Europe, the Middle East and Asia. This, Mali's captains of industry maintain, is not necessary. Mali can produce a lot of what it consumes at home. But for that to happen, there needs to be a wholesale revival of its industrial sector. Can it be done?



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This used to be a very familiar sound throughout most of Mali's territory. From Gao to Sikasso, factories produced a wide range of consumer goods. But a lot of that is gone.

"We are," said industry representative Cyril Achcar, "now essentially a nation of traders. There used to be industry, mostly run by the state. Eighty per cent of that has disappeared between 1970 and 1995."

Achcar comes from a family that began developing industry in the late 1950s. He is not only one of Mali's few remaining manufacturers – he also lobbies relentlessly for its interests.

Not all is gone. Some factories still work in and around the capital, Bamako, and in urban centers like Kayes, Sikasso and Koulikoro; but, the list of products is short: dairy, some meat products, dried herbs and spices, one textile company, a packaging firm, the inevitable cement factory and some hardware.

No longer under the protective umbrella of the state, there is little Mali's manufacturers can do against mass-produced goods, mainly from Asia. The picture is repeated across the African continent.

Can Malian factories, the engines of an emerging economy, be brought back to life?

Any decent industrial policy will have to tackle a long list of problems. They include: expensive electricity. Poor infrastructure. A tax regime that discourages investment, and, competition from mass producers like China and neighboring countries like Senegal that can produce goods more cheaply.

Where to begin? The answer: on the land.

Fatoumata Haidara Bah leads a government agency that helps Mali's agro-industry to become more competitive. Her agency concentrates on mangos and maize. The mangos are for export and the maize produces high-quality feed for cattle and poultry.

The real goal is to produce more jobs for Malians, especially the young.

Cyril Achcar thinks it can be done but says it's a long road back to Mali's industrial recovery.

It may help to join forces with Burkina Faso and Niger, landlocked like Mali and in similar circumstances. The markets are there, the ideas and plans are there; what's needed now is more government action to ensure that investments come in, budding industries are protected and unfair competition is eliminated.

Made in Mali? As far as the country's industry leaders are concerned, all one has to do is believe in it.

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