



Islamic Development Bank

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A lifeline across the Niger River: the bridge at Gao, Mali



Until a few years ago, crossing the Niger River at Gao meant waiting for a ferry that might or might not be operating. This hindered progress and discouraged trade. Now, a new bridge has thrown a lifeline to the once isolated Gao Region in eastern Mali.

Mali is a land-locked country in West Africa. At one time the city of Gao was a thriving stop on the caravan route between southern Africa, and the Mediterranean and Middle East. To breathe new life into the region and link north-south and east-west routes in Mali to the modern network of roads extending across Africa, the Niger River needed to be bridged at Gao.

The Government of Mali approached the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) for a loan to build a bridge to replace the ferry service. The new bridge cuts travel times and costs, and encourages trade between countries on the southern rim of the Sahara and North Africa, as well as between regions in Mali. The bridge also opens opportunities to develop mineral deposits in the Gao Region. Not least, the bridge lessens poverty and has socioeconomic benefits – boosting agricultural production, creating jobs, and providing access to health and other services.



The Gao Bridge replaced a ferry and has made crossing the River Niger at Gao much quicker and easier.

A slow and costly crossing

Crossing the Niger River at Gao used to be slow, costly and sometimes dangerous. A 70-ton ferry operated between 6 am and 6 pm, handling at most 76 vehicles a day. The restricted service and limited capacity meant that the absence of a bridge was a major bottleneck. Passengers and vehicles had lengthy waits, especially at peak times. The crossing itself took nearly an hour.

At times the ferry was out-of-service for weeks at a time because of mechanical problems or accidents. During the dry season there was often not enough water in the river to operate the ferry safely.

Ferry costs meant that prices were higher than in other parts of Mali. The time and expense involved in crossing the river also meant that development bypassed Gao.

The bridge

The Islamic Development Bank (IDB) and the Government of Mali financed the construction of a bridge across the Niger River to connect Gao with other regions and neighbouring countries. A soft loan from IDB provided nearly 90% of the cost and the Government of Mali financed the rest. The total amount for building the 290 metre long bridge and 15.12 kilometres of access roads was US\$16.2 million. The bridge was opened to traffic in August 2006.

The missing link

The city of Gao, the meeting point of the roads from the Republic of Niger through Labezanga, from Algeria through Kidal and Bourem, and from other parts of Mali through Sévaré and Bamako, is a major economic centre in the east of Mali.

The new bridge links the Trans-Saharan Kidal-Tamanrasset-Algiers highway, the Mali road network, and routes into the Republic of Niger and Burkina Faso.

A boost to the economy of eastern Mali

Providing assistance to build the bridge is part of the Bank's strategy to support regional integration in Africa. When completed, such projects ease the movement of people and goods between countries, thereby boosting their economies.

The new bridge has opened up eastern Mali, and particularly the Gao Region. Villagers, nomads, traders and investors are flocking to Gao to take advantage of new opportunities.

"I can clearly see more business activities in the region and especially interest has been expressed for investment in different mining projects."

Mr. George Togo, Director, Governorate Cabinet, Gao, speaking to the IDB, May 2011

A shot in the arm for commerce

The bridge is a shot in the arm for business, trade and commerce. Trade within the region and with other regions is growing. The Gao Region is no longer isolated but is becoming integrated with other regions.

Gao is becoming an important hub in regional and continental transport networks. In the six years since the bridge was completed, 10 companies have set up in Gao to transport people and goods. The Gao cattle market is flourishing as cattle can now be readily trucked to Algeria, Burkina Faso, Niger and even Nigeria. Gao's main products, livestock, fish and handicrafts, can now be moved quickly to other regions.

Gao relies heavily on basic foods from the southern regions of Mali and neighbouring countries because most of the region is desert and agriculture is limited. Before the bridge was built prices of basic foods and daily necessities were higher than in other regions. The bridge has helped to bring down prices substantially and make previously scarce goods abundantly available in local markets.

Passenger and vehicle traffic has increased considerably since the bridge was completed. A large number of people, cars, trucks and carts cross the bridge every day. Revenue from customs duties has risen. New markets and businesses have sprung up in the immediate area and beyond. The city of Gao is expanding. New technologies are being brought in – houses are being built of concrete blocks rather than wood and mud brick.

Near the bridge itself, new hotels and markets are already forming the core of what will become a regional commercial centre.

A catalyst for development

In saving time and reducing transport costs the bridge has helped advance other regional projects such as the construction of the Taoussa Dam. The bridge allows heavy construction equipment to be moved to the dam site, something which would have presented enormous difficulties before the bridge was built. The multipurpose dam will provide irrigation and drinking water, and also generate electricity which will provide the reliable power supplies essential for development to places as far away as 200 kilometres.

Quick, safe and cheap

The bridge makes crossing the river much quicker. Ferry accidents and the loss of peoples' lives, trucks and animals are things of the past. The crossing is also

a lot cheaper. The small toll charged to cover maintenance of the bridge is much more affordable than the US\$7-8 charged for a vehicle to cross on the ferry.

"...this bridge [has] brought a considerable time saving – two minutes as compared to hours needed for crossing the river in the old days..."

Mr. Chierno Aboubacar Cisse, Economic and Financial Advisor, Governorate of Gao

Socioeconomic benefits

The bridge gives people living to the south of the river quick and easy access to health and other facilities in Gao at all times of day or night. They no longer need to queue or worry about whether or not the ferry is operating.

"Nobody can completely comprehend the numerous benefits this bridge has brought for the whole region. It has positively impacted on the socioeconomic life of the poor and economically deprived people of this region." Mr. George Togo, Director, Governorate Cabinet, Gao, speaking to the IDB, May 2011



The absence of a bridge across the River Niger was a major bottleneck, hindering travel between Gao and other regions of Mali.



The Gao Bridge integrates communities, promotes harmony and deepens relationships and interactions among the diverse peoples along the banks of the Niger River.

Success factors

Consistent with Government of Mali development strategy

Building the bridge at Gao was consistent with the Government of Mali's development strategy to boost growth by integrating remote regions into national and regional economies.

Aligned with wider IDB strategy

The IDB strategy for the transport sector in Mali is helping the government integrate the national road network in its eight regions and improve links with seven neighbouring countries. The IDB has also financed strategic roads linking Mali to the port city of Dakar in Senegal. The Gao Bridge is a key link in the south-north road built by IDB more than 30 years ago.

Badly needed

The absence of the bridge was a bottleneck. The bridge was badly needed to bring down transport costs, reduce travel times, link Gao to the rest of the country and neighbouring countries, and encourage trade and investment.

Building on progress

There are still steps to be taken to maximise the benefits from the bridge. Installing a weighing station to enforce the axle load limit will prevent damage from excessive loads. Although the National Directorate of Roads gained valuable hands-on experience while the

bridge was being built, strengthening its capacity further will increase the likelihood that the bridge will be properly maintained and resurfaced regularly. Similarly, strengthening the capacity of the Road Data Services and setting up an archiving system will provide ongoing data for managing and developing the national road network in which the bridge is a key link.

"...a dream that has come true"

Professor Salahadine S. Maiga, resident of Gao

IDB support played a key role in linking the remote eastern region of Mali to the national and regional road networks. Like many other strategic IDB projects, the bridge will have a positive ripple effect on development well beyond the project itself – fulfilling the IDB vision of socioeconomic development and prosperity. Not least, the citizens of Gao are proud of the bridge. They feel 'connected' and have high expectations of realising the benefits the bridge will bring.

Acknowledgements

This success story document is based on the Post-Project Evaluation Report MLI 0076 prepared by the Group Operations Evaluation Department (GOED), IDB Sha'ban 1431H (August 2010). The story was supplemented by additional material prepared from a field visit by Dr. Waleed Ahmad Addas and Br. Aamir Ghani Mir (May 2011). The preparation of the document was managed by Dr. Intizar Hussain and Br. Faisal Siddik of the Compliance and Development Effectiveness Division of the Operations Policy and Services Department (OPSD). All direct and indirect contributions by colleagues at the Bank and partners for successful implementation and evaluation of the project, and for preparation of this document, are gratefully acknowledged.

Contact for any query

Manager, Compliance and Development Effectiveness (CDE) Division
Operations Policy and Services Department (OPSD)
Islamic Development Bank
13th Floor, Main Building
PO Box 5925, Jeddah 21432, Saudi Arabia

Email: ihussain@isdb.org
Tel: (+966 2) 646 6907
Fax: (+966 2) 646 6966
www.isdb.org

Writing, design and layout by Scriptoria Sustainable Development Communications
www.scriptoria.co.uk