



Feed the Future Country Fact Sheet

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In Mali, Social Entrepreneurship Drives the Agriculture Sector Forward



Malô

Salif Romano Niang is a social entrepreneur in Mali's rice value chain.

In 2013, Salif Romano Niang and his brother, Mohamed Ali Niang, [met President Obama in Senegal](#) at Feed the Future's [Agricultural Technology Marketplace](#). The Niang brothers are the brains behind [Malô](#), a Malian social enterprise that produces high-quality, fortified rice to address poverty and malnutrition among smallholder farming communities.

This month, Feed the Future caught up with Salif to hear about Malô's progress since 2013 and how he envisions the private sector continuing to advance food security in Mali.

You and your brother spent much of your youth in Ethiopia and came to the United States to attend American universities [Salif attended Purdue and Mohamed attended Temple]. Since your father studied at Purdue and went on to pursue a career as an international food security and sustainable development expert, you both have roots in the U.S. university system as well as agricultural development. Now that you're pioneering a new model of rice processing and distribution with Malô in your home country, how are you seeing your company help advance Mali's agriculture sector?

It's funny, because our relatives in Mali told us we were crazy when we left the United States to start Malô and work with rural rice farmers! But Mohamed and I saw a real opportunity in our home country, and our American-based family members were more supportive because they recognize that launching a startup can have big potential. It's also clear to us that momentum is building behind African countries' agriculture sectors, and we wanted to be a part of that.

We're really excited about the progress we're seeing in Mali's rice value chain. One of the biggest challenges in this country is sourcing: farmers want to know that they're getting a fair price for the rice they're selling, and processors want to know that the rice they're buying is high-quality. To help build that trust, Malô is pioneering a partnership model where we purchase rice from farming cooperatives instead of individual rice farmers. This transaction helps reduce risk and control costs in order to create a stable market model.

The benefit of this system for smallholder farmers is that, assuming their rice quality meets the standards we've set in advance, Malô is a guaranteed buyer committed to purchasing rice at a fair, agreed-upon price at harvest time. When they have access to a fair and reliable buyer, we've found that farmers will spend the time and mobilize the resources to improve the quality of their harvests.

When we last heard from you in 2013, Malô was preparing to launch its first rice processing and fortification facility, with the capacity to meet the needs of more than 25,000 people per year. Can you tell us about the importance of that facility and how fortification links an agricultural product like rice with nutrition outcomes?



This facility is actually not just a first for Malô; it is also Africa's first rice fortification facility. The launch has been delayed due to various constraints, but once it is fully operational it will be a model for how to add economic and nutritional value to rice.

In Mali, 80 percent of all rice is milled on inefficient, diesel-powered machines. Milling needs to be more modern and specialized. Once we reach that point, it will improve the quality of rice products, but it will also create much-needed jobs for young men and women who are educated but struggle to find meaningful work.

One of the things we've come to realize is that, in Mali, sprinkling nutrients on rice doesn't work very well in terms of improving nutrition due to this country's socio-cultural norms. It works in the United States because there is a robust food safety system in place that people trust, so they can forego rinsing. But in Mali, washing rice before cooking it is essential and customary, so cleanliness and fortification go hand in hand. Increasingly, people are more likely to buy rice because of proper packaging, taste and, of course, price. At Malô, we're working toward a more modern, sophisticated process for fortification while also developing products that will be culturally appealing to our consumers.

Are there any exciting new products you're helping bring to the market in partnership with the farming cooperatives you're working with?

We see great export potential for Timbuktu rice, which is an indigenous, organic heirloom variety. High-value crops like these can be a game changer for smallholder farmers. Connecting farmers to export markets has significant potential to encourage existing farmers and new farmers/entrepreneurs to invest and view farming and food processing as a serious, viable career.

In your mind, what does it mean to be a social entrepreneur? How do you think the private sector can advance agriculture and food security in a profitable but also sustainable way that reduces poverty and hunger?

We see social entrepreneurship as existing at the nexus between a deep challenge and a powerful opportunity, and we're working to address multiple challenges at one time. If Malô's model succeeds and is replicated and taken to a larger scale, it will have an impact on food availability, nutrition, employment, education and the environment (e.g. energy production from biomass).

Our business philosophy is rooted in partnership with communities and our strategy is to work from short-, medium- and long-term goals, always with the vision of sustainable agricultural growth and food security in mind. We strongly believe in the power of food - from farming to grocery stores to fine dining - to drive countries like Mali forward.

What's next for Malô? How are you expanding your operations as this new guaranteed buyer model takes off in Mali?

We expect to see additional financing in 2015 that we'll use to expand our capacity, including acquiring new equipment and production space. This expansion will coincide with the counter-season harvest in June this year.

Our facility will also have a boutique which will carry fortified rice as well as fruits, vegetables and poultry products from our family farm and farming partners. Above the boutique we designed an open workspace that will be open for local and visiting social entrepreneurs.

We're working to be at the forefront of innovation by constantly studying trends in technology and business and seeing how

they can be applied at the grassroots.