

INNOVATION LAB FOR FOOD SECURITY

Agricultural policy incentives shape the decisions of Mali's farmers, input suppliers, food processors and traders. These private sector actions, in turn, govern agricultural productivity and growth rates. Given that agriculture employs roughly 80% of Mali's labor force, policies favoring robust agricultural growth become critical drivers of economic growth and poverty reduction. The Innovation Lab for Food Security project contributes to improved agricultural policies in Mali through empirical research, outreach and capacity building.

Objectives

Launched in February 2016, this project promotes improved policies that will enhance agricultural productivity growth, improve nutritional outcomes and livelihood resilience.

Led by Michigan State University (MSU) and local partners, empirical work focuses on priority policy areas identified by USAID/Mali:

- Agricultural inputs
- Enabling environment for private sector investment
- Land and natural resources
- Agricultural trade



Agro-dealer selling farm inputs in Niono.
Photo credit: Steven Haggblade.

Activities

In order to build up local capacity for policy research, MSU faculty and staff conduct collaborative research, policy outreach and focused short-term training with professional colleagues at several local institutions:

- *Institut d'Economie Rurale (IER)*
- *Institut Polytechnique Rural de Formation et de Recherche Appliquée (IPR/IFRA)*
- *Cellule de Planification et de Statistique du Secteur Développement Rural (CPS/SDR)*
- *Observatoire du Marché Agricole (OMA).*

Research by MSU faculty and Malian scientists at IER has focused initially on three key inputs affecting agricultural productivity among sorghum and maize farmers: fertilizer, improved seeds and herbicides. Empirical investigations involve field data collection from farmers, traders, agribusiness leaders and policy makers. This research reveals a striking contrast between fertilizer (highly subsidized by the Malian government at 50% below market price) and herbicides, whose use has doubled over the past 15 years without any government subsidy or promotional efforts, driven by purely private sector innovation and marketing.

Outreach involves an ongoing series of policy workshops, professional presentations, village outreach efforts and media events, MSU and local partners gather and disseminate empirical evidence affecting key agricultural and food security

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policy decisions. To date, MSU and IER researchers have conducted farmer briefings in 58 villages surveyed by the IER/MSU team to vet initial findings, solicit reactions and amplify understanding of farmer decision-making under very complex production conditions. The farmer feedback suggests keen interest in sorghum hybrids as well as concern about growing numbers of unregistered and counterfeit herbicides.

Capacity building efforts have focused on helping faculty and students at IPR/FRA to conduct empirical research and training relevant to key agricultural policy issues. Through a competitive selection process, five IPR students are selected each year and provided with scientist mentors to help them design and execute original empirical research for their final theses.

Results

In the six months since the Innovation for Food Security project activities began in February 2016, MSU and local partners have produced:

- 4 working papers exploring policy options for agricultural intensification through improved seeds, fertilizer and herbicides;
- 3 policy briefs;
- 1 data set (an inventory of processed foods sold by Malian dairy and cereal processing agri-businesses);
- Mentoring support for 5 IPR student theses;
- 2 international presentations by local researchers at an Africa-wide professional conference in Addis Ababa.

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