Price fluctuations are usually bad for business. But in Mali, 2SCALE is helping smallholder farmers turn challenge into opportunity. Onions are a major food commodity in Mali, but there’s only one crop per year, so prices follow the seasons: 200 FCFA (40 US cents) per kilo immediately after the harvest, then rising to 600 FCFA, and sometimes reaching 900 FCFA during the off-season. For thousands of small producers in Bamako peri-urban and other vegetable production areas — Segou in the Office du Niger, Kayes in the west, and even Timbuktu in northern Mali — onions can provide rich pickings. An investment of $1,400 in a one-hectare farm could generate returns of $12,000 per year. But few smallholder farmers have the technologies, the organization or the business linkages to take advantage of these opportunities.

Consider the Union Mandé Jigi (Hope for Mandé), a group of onion producers in southwest Mali, about 200 km from the capital Bamako. Most of the union’s 1,020 members (860 are women) are experienced market gardeners — but they struggled.

“The variety we were using could not be stored longer than 2-3 weeks,” union president Daman Keita explains. “We had to sell immediately after harvest, at low prices. Also, we were working as individuals, not as a group. Everyone harvested and sold at the same time, so prices fell even lower.”
2SCALE partners helped address both problems. We provided the union with market information and linkages to large-scale buyers. This encouraged farmers to coordinate production, staggering production cycles to ensure steady supplies and good prices for six or seven months of the year. Training programs on crop and soil fertility management reached 2,000 farmers. And most important, we introduced a new variety suitable for rainy-season cultivation.

*Mandé Jigi* farmers were growing *Violet de Galmi*, a variety which is popular across West Africa, but can only be grown in the dry season. If farmers had a rainy-season option, they could produce two onion crops per year.

*Prema*, developed by 2SCALE partner East West Seeds, is a robust early-maturing variety (around 90 days to harvest) that flourishes under wet conditions. This new variety is being tested by 2SCALE clusters in four villages: Diola, Balandougu, Niantiguila and Ouolodo. Learning centers have been set up, providing training and demonstrations. The 2014 crop is approaching maturity, and the union expects to sell 600 tons of onions, worth 120 million FCFA ($240,000).

In February 2014, a group of bankers visited the learning centers, and are now willing – for the first time – to lend to small-scale onion farmers. For the union members, the priority is irrigation. “If we can get loans to buy an irrigation system, there will be no off-season,” says farmer Alfred Mariko. “Then we will be able to compete even with vegetables from Europe.”

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— Alfred Mariko, onion producer

The 2SCALE project is funded by the Netherlands government and implemented jointly by IFDC, ICRA and BoP Inc. 2SCALE was launched in June 2012. In the next 5 years we aim to develop 500 viable, sustainable agribusiness clusters in nine countries across Sub-Saharan Africa, reaching 1.1 million farmers.