2SCALE partners are helping Mali’s sesame sector translate its enormous potential into reality. We’re doing this the 2SCALE way, bringing partners together to help private agribusinesses become more competitive. One example is PROSEMA (Society for Promotion of Sesame in Mali), a company that buys sesame from smallholder farmers, processes it into premium-grade product, and exports to China and Europe. In eight years, PROSEMA has grown from fledgling producer to market leader in a competitive business.

In 2011, the company installed a modern processing facility capable of cleaning, hulling and grading 6 tons of sesame per hour. They also began expanding their farmer network to ensure consistent, high-quality supplies. Today, this network includes more than 13,000 smallholder farmers in 270 villages, planting 9,000 hectares of sesame.

Many partners contributed: the Netherlands Foreign Ministry, the Dutch embassy in Mali, the Common Fund for Commodities, the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) in Amsterdam, and the Syngenta Foundation supported or partnered with two Netherlands-funded projects, 2SCALE and DEBPEA. Both projects worked closely together to provide technology, training and support to the company and its farmers.
The key was to improve farmers’ production skills as well as financial awareness. Innovations were introduced such as a low-cost seed drill that is four times as fast as traditional manual sowing, reduces seed costs by half and significantly improves germination. Some 2,800 farmers attended farmer field schools and other training programs in 2012 alone. We’ve helped create Bene Yiriwali Bulon (meaning Call Sesame), a stakeholder platform that links six producer unions with other players such as marketing companies, traders, transporters and banks.

In the past six years, farm-gate prices of sesame have increased five-fold. In the past 3 years, the typical agribusiness cluster member has expanded her sesame field from a quarter hectare to two hectares. This season, PROSEMA introduced Mali’s first traceability scheme for sesame. Once it’s fully operational, buyers from Europe or Asia will be able to pinpoint the origin of every bag of sesame back to the producer and the field where it was grown.

The next target is to have a stronger marketing system, with less ‘side-selling’ and better adherence to contracts. We’re also helping PROSEMA explore potential new markets such as processed food products to China, sesame cake to West Africa, even organic sesame to Europe. The encouraging sign is that 2SCALE clusters are able to negotiate better prices — in effect setting a ‘reference price’ in local markets.

Soumaila Coulibaly, Director of PROSEMA, explains: “China has millions of new middle-class consumers for whom sesame products are no longer a luxury, but part of the daily diet. This is a seismic shift in the industry.” With the right partnerships in place, and a billion customers waiting, sesame in Mali is ready for takeoff.

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.