Innovative messaging app tailor-made for Malians

Mamadou Gouro Sidibé of Mali could have continued his comfortable life working for the French National Center for Scientific Research, but in 2017 he decided to return to his country to develop Lenali-a voice-based social network app.

Image source: Gallo/Getty.

Unlike Facebook, Instagram and Viber, apps that rely on written posts, Lenali works with spoken language. Already it boasts 60,000 users—and counting.

Lenali integrates local languages such as Bambara, Soninke, Songhai, Mooré and Wolof, as well as French, making the app accessible to people without formal education, including those in rural areas. Anyone can download the application, register online and use it.

On Lenali, users can select their language, type in or record their name, post and comment vocally without having to read anything. Posts could be anything from personal updates to photos to news. Sidibé even thinks people could use Lenali to boost their businesses.

A mango vendor could post a photo, add audio that tells his or her location and ask people who want more info to comment by voice posts. "Everything is done without the need for writing skills," Sidibé says, though the app does accept written posts as well.

For the entrepreneur, the app is a tailor-made solution to a local problem. The literacy rate in Mali is less than 50%, according to UNESCO, which may be why the number of Facebook users in the country has stagnated at 9% despite the falling price of mobile phones and increasing internet access.

Sidibé says his goal is to boost digital inclusivity, first in Mali and later in other countries in Africa, "because the problems in Mali are the same in the majority of countries in Africa, the app could work anywhere, and in the future, we can add many languages."

Lenali was improbably conceived in a supermarket, the 44-year-old Sidibé recalls, when someone asked for his help to use the online messaging app Viber. That planted a seed for the computer entrepreneur, giving him the idea to create a platform that caters to people who cannot use text-based messaging apps, Sidibé tells *Africa Renewal*.

Currently, some local nongovernmental organisations, such as the National Network for the Development of Young Girls and Women of Mali, are using Lenali for social mobilisation.

"An essential part of the information we publicise is about reproductive health, gender-based violence and literacy," say Hawa Niakate and Aminata Camara, who work for the organisation. "We use Lenali social network to reach everyone."

Two Lenali users, Ada and Ladji, say that they advertise services and produce such as vegetables on the platform, as well as using it to host their CVs. The process is simple: they record their voices in a local language and post the messages on the platform, hoping to reach tens of thousands of users.

Starting up Lenali was not without its difficulties, Sidibé recalls. "When I was creating my first two businesses in 2014, there were no incubators in Mali. Perhaps my projects would have been more successful with the support of an incubator." Incubators are companies that support start-ups with office space, management training, funding and other help.

Perseverance, Sidibé explains, is what drives his entrepreneurial spirit. "Once you have a good project, you need to be motivated and give yourself the means to succeed." He urges all young entrepreneurs in Africa to explore opportunities in the digital industry.

Source: [Africa Renewal](#).