



One puree at a time: How a small enterprise uses social media to feed Senegal's babies

An overwhelming reliance on imports and inefficient processing chains have contributed to Africa's challenges with food insecurity. Senegal's first organic baby food startup is strategically using popular technologies to move the country from its dependence on imported baby food.

Author / Photos: Ruona Meyer, Editing: Tanja Krämer

"Vraiment??! Waañi ko...Où? En Ukraine? Deedet..."

Aissatou Diallo rapidly switches between French and Wolof, a language spoken by almost all 16 million of Senegal's population. Her brows rise, then furrow with every other word, her headscarf moving with each shake of her head. "What has the war in Ukraine got to do with the price of baobab powder in Senegal?" she asks. The mythical, medicinal tree with fruits rich in fibre and vitamin C are so common, that a popular wrestler is nicknamed The Baobab. "We grow the tree here! I think these people just want to use a sad situation in Europe to raise prices", she concludes with a shrug.

Diallo, 24, is on a WhatsApp call, trying to source fruits and vegetables for Le Lionceau, Senegal's first organic baby puree manufacturer. Since 2018 the company has served thousands of infants whilst combating food waste, nutrition literacy gaps and gender inequality through its strategic use of social media.



Aissatou Diallo oversees the procurement of over 2,000 tons of fruit and vegetables per year

It all started when Le Lionceau Founder Siny Samba lived in France, working as an agri-food engineer for baby food brand Blédina, manufactured by Danone; one of Europe's largest food companies. "I would visit home (Senegal) and see various imported baby food brands; mostly the brand I was working for. Even as I was happy to see this brand, I did not see our local meals," she said.

Years later, Samba's recollection is backed by recent statistics. Less than [30%](#) of Senegal's agricultural products are processed locally, at least [a third](#) of all vegetables produced are lost on farms, and about [70%](#) of Senegal's food needs are imported.

Wasted mangoes spark entrepreneurship

But it was hearing about huge mango losses that made Siny Samba return home to begin competing for a stake in Senegal's baby food market. About [65%](#) of all mangoes grown here are wasted annually – around 88,000 tonnes. "I thought maybe we can reduce these farm losses while producing baby products", Samba says. "Recipes that make mothers say, 'Oh, wow. This is our traditional food.' That was when I decided to come back home."

Now, five of Le Lionceau's 21 products incorporate mangoes. The full range is based on other staples like bananas, carrots, sweet potatoes, beetroots, courgettes black-eyed peas (niebe) and pawpaws, but also includes superfoods fonio, moringa and baobab as well as native ingredients ditakh (a fibrous fruit), solom (a sweet-sour type of tamarind), and millet-based biscuits. Senegal's signature savoury dishes Thiéboudienne (rice and fish), Miam'Fe (peanuts and meat) and Yassa poulet (chicken-based) also feature. The products are currently being used by at least 16,000 babies mainly across West Africa. In all this, social media plays a strategic role.

Le Lionceau co-founder Siny Samba says beetroot is the least-selling puree for her young customers--including her own son



Voice messages are solving SDGs

The company uses social media for crucial aspects of its food procurement, processing and sales value chain. The first banana-millet recipe was tested through a WhatsApp group of parents, which still exists. After production, Le Lionceau began direct sales, for a year and a half. "We were selling from WhatsApp, other social media and direct phone. After almost two years, we began selling to retailers, so we have maintained

both streams," Co-Founder Siny Samba says. Thereafter, storefronts were added to the WhatsApp and Facebook pages; customers can buy purees, cereal packs and biscuits for between €1 to €2, and bulk subscription packages range from €26 to €53. With this prices the products are competable to other, imported baby purees.

Social networks are a "powerful lever" helping African businesses soften the blow of foreign competition, says Dr Assane Beye of the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, who has published studies on smallholder farming in Senegal, in collaboration with the University of Bonn.



Fruit and vegetable supplier Gora Wade checks his phone before continuing his workday; he uses WhatsApp to ease some administrative paperwork

"Faced with foreign competition, many companies in underdeveloped countries have suffered greatly from low competitiveness. Beyond profit margins, social networks have become a method of socializing economic activities", he says. "A large part of the population does not have formal education and cannot read or write. These technologies remove the barriers of literacy in the sharing of knowledge, thereby contributing to achieving the SDGs."

In the production chain, WhatsApp is the primary communication tool with suppliers, and it bridges literacy and language gaps.

Abdoulaye Mande, a fruit and vegetable supplier says: "WhatsApp is for product samples. A photo allows me to better recognise the product you are looking for. It allows me to avoid unnecessary transportation and save time." Keur Ndiaye Lo, where Mande, 30, works, is a farming region renowned for vast food exports—and losses. When smaller businesses like Mande's run out of storage space or the weather conspires to hasten spoilage. They use WhatsApp to contact buyers like Le Lionceau.

"I have had mangoes that were not ripe and I delivered, so they stored them. What is profitable for me is to deliver a large quantity at once."

Farmers achieve seamless invoicing

WhatsApp helps to not only prevent wastage, but also makes payments easier to process. Some suppliers send invoices and receipts to Le Lionceau using the application. They

operate with data protection in mind, and immediately delete these documents, or use disappearing messages.

Amid challenges such as network connectivity electricity to charge phones and the reality of phone sharing in households, Le Lionceau also uses social media to communicate with 350 smallholder farmers it works with across northern and southern Senegal.

It is also deployed to train and monitor 30 women in rural areas, who are taught to process fruits and vegetables before they are transported to the capital Dakar. "We buy these processed products from them. We also use the opportunity to sensitise them on nutrition, breastfeeding, and how to make their own baby meals—with steam, not high heat," Samba says.



Le Lionceau uses social media to assist with invoicing and crop identification. This supports the businesses of suppliers that deliver over 2,000 tonnes of food every year, to the company.



WhatsApp is used by farmers to solicit sales of surplus fruits and vegetables. This prevents farm losses and food waste, and also saves transportation costs.



Social media quizzes and Parent of The Month competitions are used to educate thousands on child nutrition. Parents call, or send voicenotes about their children too.



Social media assists in managing networks of rural women Le Lionceau trains in food processing and early life nutrition. The women sell their processed goods to buyers, including the company.

WhatsApp redistributes socioeconomic power

As of 2020, [family farms](#) in Senegal employed two-thirds of the working age population and accounted for 80% of the country's entire agricultural production. Whatever gains these farms can make is impacted by the reality that of [15,000 businesses](#) that manufacture food products, only 20 were considered large scale operators.

In an email interview, Assane Beye of the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakarsays: "In the past, many projects aimed at disseminating alerts or market information to improve the well-being of producers failed because the information was in written form and therefore inaccessible to most people. With social networks that allow information to be transmitted in voice form, it is easier and more efficient." Some producers achieved higher sales margins through social networks that allow them to learn about current market prices before they even travel, he adds. "This approach is particularly used by breeders who share photos of animals they wish to sell; interested parties can call directly to haggle, then have the animals delivered."

"WhatsApp is not just a platform that is used to spread fake news", says Idayat Hassan, Director of the Centre for Democracy and Development, and co-editor of the research anthology *WhatsApp and Everyday Life in West Africa*. "For us here as Africans, it is one of the single biggest technological innovations on the continent. It is able to redistribute or balance the power dynamics amongst people, relatively cheap to access," she adds.

Connecting for child nutrition education

Le Lionceau uses social media channels to educate parents on the "First 1000 days of nutrition," through tips and quizzes that have prizes. There is also the Parent of The Month competition. Pape Gueye, a cashier based in Thies, east of Dakar, recently won the Father of the Month title. "From buying in the local supermarket, I now buy only using WhatsApp. If

From our 100eyes Community

"How affordable is this organic alternative for **low income families** who may need it the most?"
Oluwaseun Durojaiye, Advocacy Worker

"Access to purees is complicated here by storage, logistics. We add infant flour options, which are **cheaper and transportable**. Also, exploring partnerships, to distribute freely to the most vulnerable people."
Siny Samba, Co-Founder Le Lionceau

"How do you **reach your buyers**?"
Martin Schwarz, Theologian

"Mostly by digital campaigns. We have WhatsApp as the hub. And up to **90% of our customers** first heard of us through digital. It is when moms tell other moms about the products."

"Do local ingredients have enough **nutritional benefits**?"
Nour Trabelsi, Postgraduate Student

"Yes, of course. We have baobab fruits, black-eyed peas, different raw materials. We just have to process them well, to have products with high nutritional value. **Africa has various superfoods** that we should value, and transform for our babies."

Photos: D'Lola media, Nico Bahy, Nour Trabelsi and Ruona Meyer

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ever the social networks were to close their doors? It would be very painful," he says.

A quick scroll through the Facebook page also shows mothers routinely using the comments section to merge their deliveries into one transaction, to save costs.

Thies, where Gueye lives, ranks among the most fertile regions in Senegal. It will be home to a new Le Lionceau factory planned for end-2023; the aim is to triple the current production capacity of 800 purees and 300 cereal boxes daily.

Limitations nevertheless persist

The global organic baby food industry will move from a market size of [\\$6bn in 2021 to \\$12.2bn](#) by 2028, based on increasing demand for healthier diets—some Le Lionceau parents ask about what foods are kidney friendly, or will stop allergy flare-ups, for example. Behind this boom, comes several hurdles that affect both European and African entrepreneurs. For example, in 2018 when Le Lionceau was starting, in Europe, the German food startup Babyviduals was shutting down. Founder Wolfgang Pöhlau [wrote on Facebook](#) that the company had "underestimated" the "enormous financial resources needed for advertising and distribution."

Samba admits feeling the same pressures, but says maintaining "proximity to the customer" is the best advertisement, and Le Lionceau invests time and staff on this.

"It's the mums who are going to tell others about the products. People message us, call us, even on Saturdays. We say how are you? They say oh my baby didn't sleep well last night. Moms really love to chat and this makes us more human, not just a company."

While staff manage 15 to 20 calls and countless messages daily, another challenge is that the social media apps Le Lionceau relies on for engagement, logistics and sales could one day disappear.

For Djenaba Kalidou Sow, this would have a direct impact on her and 14-month-old daughter Fati. "I would feel very bad, wouldn't know what to do, because it's the only way I use to get Lionceau products," the bank agent based in Dakar says.

"I start work very early at 7:30 am and I have to leave the city center early to get home, otherwise there are traffic jams. I don't want to tire her out even more by getting stuck in traffic on the way to the shops. And on the



Le Lionceau introduced a line of powdered cereal, to cover a broader customer base. The powder is cheaper than the porridges in jars.

weekends, it's not easy to go to the supermarkets to get products."

Baby puree jars must be imported

Other hurdles for Le Lionceau are taxes, distribution and baby puree jars. Senegal doesn't manufacture the glass jars used by Le Lionceau, so social media is used to solicit returns of the jars, in return for free delivery or discounts on products; since 2019, over 30,000 have been returned. To enhance distribution, the company partnered with a carrier that delivers across Senegal and Cote D'Ivoire. Still being deliberated is a move to get Le Lionceau products on Amazon. In all this, Samba feels social media will remain crucial.

Researcher Idayat Hassan feels the emphasis should not be about one type of social media application, but more on the features, citing the popularity of similar app Telegram on the continent. "There are, and will be other replacements for WhatsApp; entrepreneurs and users (especially the elderly) should be supported to make the transition."



Manager Aissatou Ngom accepts used jars for recycling; puree jars are not manufactured in Senegal

She adds that non-Africans should expand their definition of technology for development. "In thinking about what constitutes technology, people should never stop thinking about context – that context matters. WhatsApp is responding to African contexts in a bigger way than what other platforms are doing, and it should not be belittled in any way."

For Professor Beye, "in Senegal, as in Germany, the use of networks can be a powerful lever for raising awareness. Awareness through social networks is the only way of creating a critical mass of people aware of ecological issues. They can make the words of those who know, accessible to all segments of the population."

On a smaller scale, social media is also connecting people from all over the world. WhatsApp brought clients from Europe, America and other African countries, says Aissatou Ngom, Business-To-Customer Sales Manager at Le Lionceau: "We have about 15 clients in France. There are also grandmothers living in Europe who order for their grandchildren here in Senegal. Other clients take advantage of stopovers to buy, but for many foreign clients, they send us a relative here who takes the little pots to them."

One of these customers is Paris-based student Timo Mendes, whose toddler Ial Nathan interrupts his father's attempt at answering questions. "I use WhatsApp more than Instagram, to contact them; mostly by message, it's really convenient, especially since we are abroad. I make my order, send it and I wait for my delivery. He can eat three jars in an hour, the small ones of course!"



"Social networks have become a method of socializing economic activities. These technologies remove the barriers of reading and writing in the sharing of knowledge, thereby contributing to achieving the SDGs."

Assane Beye, Lecturer-Researcher, Cheikh Anta Diop University, Senegal



"WhatsApp is allowing people to solve all the big SDGs without going into the innovation. WhatsApp is responding to African contexts in a bigger way than what other platforms are doing, and it should not be belittled in any way."

Idayat Hassan, Director, Centre for Democracy and Development, West Africa

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