



# USAID | WEST AFRICA

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## SUCCESS STORY

### Historic AGOA Export Reaches Retail Giant

#### USAID assistance to Malian artisans helps fulfill Hallmark export order.



Photo: Elizta Barzakova/ WATH

One of nearly 500 Malians employed as a result of the Hallmark order stitches a bogolan gift bag.

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Mali’s handcrafts industry is abuzz this year, as artisans across the country prepare thousands of handbags for Hallmark, the largest greeting-card company in the U.S. The bags, made from traditional Malian mudcloth called bogolan, debuted in October at Hallmark’s Gold Crown stores under the (PRODUCT) RED label, part of a widespread commercial initiative launched by Bono and Bobby Shriver to raise money for AIDS relief in Africa. But for nearly 500 producers, mostly tailors and cloth dyers, the benefits have already materialized: months of steady work earning more than twice or three times Mali’s minimum wage.

The sheer size of the order, which included bags and bead strands for greeting cards, shipped weekly, makes it one of the largest single handcrafts purchases ever made in Mali. But the order is groundbreaking in other ways too. It’s the first export Mali has shipped under a provision of the U.S. African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA) aimed at handmade textiles, which gives the order duty-free status in the U.S. It’s also the first time Hallmark has done business in Africa – getting assistance along the way from USAID.

“Without the technical assistance and on-the-ground support, this project would not have been possible,” said Frank Masterson, capacity resource manager for Hallmark. “It was important to us to find an authentic item to sell, to not only give money back from our other items but help in economic development along the way.”

USAID’s West Africa Trade Hub provided information, photo samples and financial quotes from three countries in West Africa before Hallmark selected Mali Chic and Farafina Tigne, both Hub clients. To help the businesses handle the order, including tight deadlines and strict quality control criteria, the Hub worked with the Peace Corps Volunteers to help bridge the language and cultural gaps between Hallmark and the Malian businesses, while providing business education and on-going assistance to the Malian owners and staff.

The Hub helped assess production capacity, assist with costing, accounting procedures and bank loan applications. Hub staff provided cultural context during a July evaluation by Africa Now, which Hallmark hired to determine if the bags were being produced under ethical working conditions, i.e. no child labor or withheld wages – with fully satisfactory results. Hub experts even worked with Customs officials from the Government of Mali to help administer the AGOA provisions that allow for duty-free entry of handmade and ethnic-print fabric. The exposure to both the rigorous standards of the U.S market and the administrative requirements of AGOA primed the pump for continued export flows.

As the quality of weekly shipments improved, Hallmark placed more orders for bags and added beaded strands to decorate greeting cards, assembled by Farafina Tigne. The experience is one Masterson and Dennis said they would recommend to others wanting to do business in Africa.

“It’s been so rewarding, being able to talk directly to producers instead of dealing with some factory,” said Hallmark’s art director, Erin Dennis. “It gives you a real awareness of what people are going through, how this can affect their lives.”