



## Social entrepreneurs solving problems around the world

# How text messages are helping African farmers save for their futures

Skoll Awards for Social Entrepreneurship winner: Anushka Ratnayake, myAgro

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**Stuck in a cycle of low income due to poor-quality seeds, many farmers in developing countries find it hard to improve output, but Anushka Ratnayake's [myAgro](#) offers a secure and easy scratchcard system to help them save via a mobile phone**

Anushka Ratnayake was in a remote part of Rwanda, working for a microcredit organisation, when she had a lightbulb moment.

Local farmers had money at harvest time, but by planting time, when they needed to buy seed and fertiliser, their money had run out. "I kept hearing people saying: 'can I overpay my loan'? They were using the language of credit but describing a savings programme. I thought: what if I created a model for farmers to save?" She came up with the idea for [myAgro](#), a pioneering micro-savings project, which now operates in Mali and Senegal.

**Skoll awardee**

**Anushka Ratnayake**  
Founder and CEO, myAgro





## Fact file

Find out more about myAgro and Anushka Ratnayake, founder and CEO

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The UN estimates that approximately [767 million people](#) live on less than \$1.90 a day, and the overwhelming majority of these people are in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Many in these regions work as smallholder farmers, with about [70% of Africans making their living from agriculture](#) - yet many are unable to even grow enough to eat, and rarely have the money to source high-quality seeds and fertiliser when they need them.

Ratnayake witnessed that cashflow was a significant problem for the farmers she worked with. She also found that there were no organisations working on micro-saving programmes; that most smallholder farmers did not have banks nearby; and that [very few \(7%\) had access to traditional credit](#).



Farmer holds beans grown on a myAgro supported farm (above); a woman carries her peanut harvest in Toubatoul, Senegal (lead image). (Photos: myAgro)

“Every day, I went to the local kiosk to buy phone credit,” she says. “The store owner was a good businesswoman - she knew her customer base well, and the profit margin on everything.” But the upfront costs for the shop owner to buy items such as seeds and fertiliser were too high, and there was no space in the store to keep the quantities the farmers needed. “I thought: what if I could create a cost-effective model to enable farmers to save for seeds and fertilisers in a really convenient and easy way?”

With myAgro’s Mobile Layaway platform, farmers save for seeds, fertiliser and specialised training via scratchcards - in the same way they might buy phone credit. The cards are bought at the local convenience store, and farmers then text

the number on the card to their myAgro account. That way, they are confident their money is being saved securely. They are enrolled in the scheme at harvest time, when they have money, and myAgro helps them save and plan for the next season.



“  
**Farmers who  
participated  
increased  
their annual  
income by an  
estimated 60%**”

Shop window where vendor Penda Gueye sells myAgro scratch cards to local farmer Illiman Gueye (top); farmers holding myAgro wallets (left)

When it comes to planting season, the seeds have already been paid for and are delivered to the farmers. They can also access training to ensure their harvest has a good chance of being more successful than it has been in previous years. In Mali, for instance, Ratnayake found that farmers often have a lot of land, but do not cultivate it because the soil needs fertiliser that they cannot afford. As a result, they are not able to feed their families.

Although [43% of the global labour force in agriculture are women](#) - rising to more than 50% in sub-Saharan Africa - they are less likely than men to have access to credit or training. Ratnayake estimates that women make up around 70% of the myAgro client base, and she describes the impact of the service on women as something she is particularly proud of. “The independence that women can have if they save privately, and the pride they have from taking care of their families better - that’s incredibly rewarding,” she says.





Local farmer Ngone Gueye in Toutaboul, Senegal

So why was Mali chosen as the initial location for myAgro back when it began in 2011? Ratnayake explains that in Mali, [agriculture is the main source of income for three-quarters of the population](#). “We had a great opportunity there, the farmers are hardworking, and the villages are close together, so [getting involved] really made sense for the local stores. Also, the [population had nearly doubled in 20 years](#), so the opportunity for farmers to invest in their fields and move out of poverty was compelling,” she says. “If I could prove the savings model for smallholders to invest their own cash, then this model could replicate globally.”



Two myAgro customers selling grains and legumes in a market in Toutaboul, Senegal

After careful research and planning, the programme quickly flourished. “This scaled more quickly than I had planned, through word of mouth, the myAgro radio programme, and then [farmers] talking to their neighbours.”

The organisation now also operates in Senegal, and, across the two countries, [had 34,000 customers in 2017](#). Ratnayake estimates that on average, farmers who participated had a 60% increase in their annual average income. This has also had a knock-on effect for the owners of convenience stores, who have seen an increase in their income, and seed companies, which are also gaining a wider market. Next for myAgro is Tanzania, where it will aim to connect with established savings groups.





Farmer attending to crops in field (top); Ratnayake meets with myAgro field coordinator Ibrahima Traore and farmer Kalifa Kone in Kadiolo district of Mali (left); money from a women's savings group gets exchanged for scratch cards that buy seeds and fertiliser (right)

Ratnayake is excited about the opportunities that being a Skoll award winner will bring. “We are incredibly honoured and thrilled to be part of the Skoll community,” she says. “We can bring the myAgro story to a wider audience, network within the Skoll community itself, learn from them and maybe partner with some of those organisations in the future.”

Through the product margin it makes on each item sold, myAgro [expects to be sustainable by 2021](#). “Our goal is that by 2025 we will have reached a million smallholder farmers, doubling their income. That’s an increase of \$550 per family per year,” she says.

[myagro.org](http://myagro.org)

This microsavings model is reaching a new segment of farmers who are among the poorest on the planet, many of them women

Jude O'Reilley, Skoll Foundation

#### **What are the Skoll Awards for Social Entrepreneurship?**

The **Skoll Foundation** was set up in 1999 with the aim of driving large-scale change through investing in, connecting and celebrating social entrepreneurs, with the awards taking place annually since 2005. The awards are about “shining a light on what is working in the world” according to president and chief executive Sally Osberg. “We wanted to invest in solutions to the world’s most pressing problems. The Skoll Awards are a way for us to do that,” she says. “We see entrepreneurs as agents of opportunity, of creative disruption.”

Organisations are nominated by Skoll's network of partners, for qualities such as impact potential, collaboration and innovation, and must be led by visionary social entrepreneurs. Each winner gets a \$1.25m three-year core support investment to scale work and increase impact. This year, five of the six awards have been presented to women, something Osberg thinks is significant. "There is a perception that women entrepreneurs either don't exist or don't prevail," she says. "We wanted to see if we could prove that wrong, and I believe we've done that."



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