More than 100,000 Malians suffer from diabetes. Doctors estimate that only 30% of these patients can afford the required medical treatment and this leads to a disproportionately high prevalence of complications such as high blood pressure and serious retinopathy. Therefore, together with the WDF and three hospitals in the city of Bamako, the SDM has decided to sensitize the Malian population about diabetes and explain the link between food habits and diabetes, starting in the two major communes of Bamako.

The overall aim of the work is to develop and implement a national diabetes nutrition programme. In the longer term, thousands of people with diabetes as well as those at risk of developing diabetes will benefit from this project as healthy eating will enable them to prevent and control diabetes, minimise complications, and reduce medical costs.

“We knew that we had to take local food habits and socio-economic issues into account in order to succeed. Therefore, our first task was to carry out a thorough nutritional evaluation study. The study, consisting of anthropological, socio-economic investigation as well as dietary recall has provided us with the required in-depth knowledge” explains Mr. Stéphane Besançon, director of programmes of the Santé Diabète Mali NGO.

“’The study has given us a clear understanding of the dishes prepared and consumed in Bamako and the food habits of people with diabetes. This knowledge allows us to set up diets which take into account both the best foods and the socio-economic profile of every patient. This is essential in order to convince Malians to follow and stick to a specific healthy diet,” Mr. Besançon adds.

Cultural barriers for prevention
Typically, Malians consume three meals: breakfast, lunch and dinner. The traditional way of eating is with the hand in a common dish. This raises many difficulties for those with diabetes in the follow-up to the diet, as it prevents control of the quantity of food ingested. Further, the common dish rarely corresponds to what is advised for people with diabetes. On the other hand withdrawing from the common dish creates social problems for these people, as he/she is gradually isolated from the group. In addition to this, financial independence is required, as he/she needs to be able to pay for the condiments of the special diet.

Also, the public attitude to obesity is a great challenge to the project. An overweight woman is seen as a social success, with good health and a husband who takes good care of her. Loss of weight on the other hand is considered to be a sign of disease or financial difficulty. This makes it almost impossible for doctors to prescribe a diet as the necessary treatment. Consequently, the education of doctors and nurses is another essential task for the project’s success. Nutritional training for health care professionals will be initiated in 2006.

“The WDF-funded nutrition study is the basis of this five-phase project. We have made a good start to the project and already achieved good results. We expect the whole project to be completed in 2007,” Mr. Besançon concludes.