



## Improving the resilience of rural communities in the Sahel through pro-equity agroecology interventions



**POLICY NOTE**

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**Cover photo**

*Cover photo: A man standing next to cereal stocks in a newly set up warrantage room in the village of Sanda (Mali).*

*Credit: Association Nourrir sans Détruire (ANSD)..*

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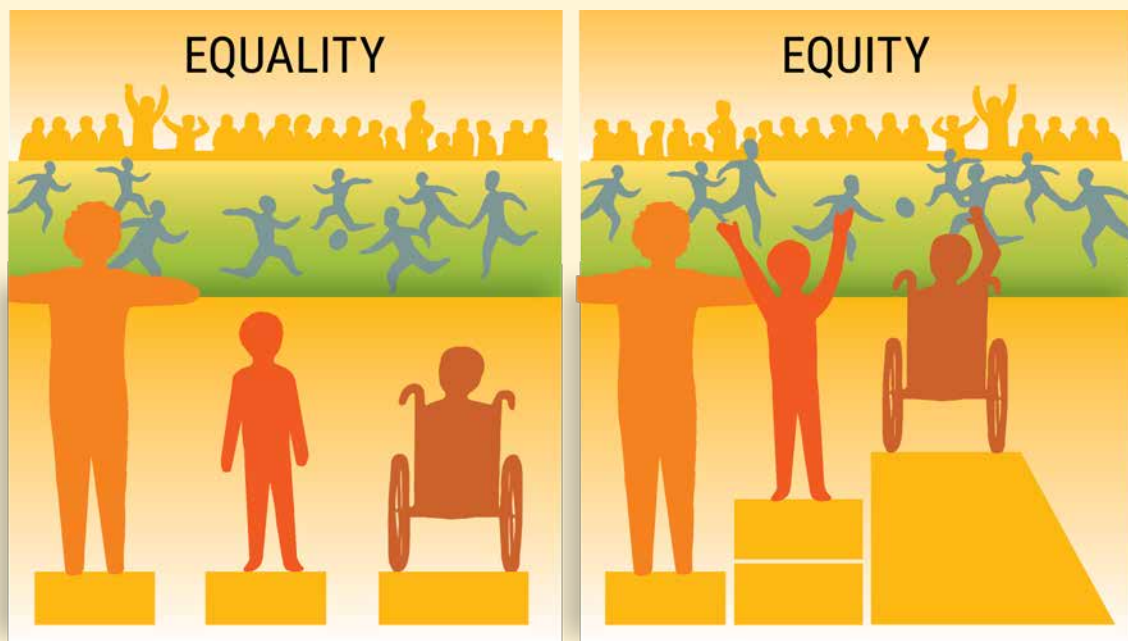


## Key messages

- An estimated 12 million small-scale farmers living in the ecologically fragile, risk prone drylands of the Sahel are in a crisis. They have become chronically vulnerable to food and nutrition insecurity because of land degradation, declining soil fertility and climate change.
- A growing percentage of dryland farm households have become ultra-poor, living on less than 0.50 US dollars a day. They suffer from hunger, not only in bad but also in good rainfall years. They are forced to adopt negative coping mechanisms, including taking exploitative loans, selling their animals, eating their seeds stocks, and reducing the number of daily meals.
- Many dry land farm families are caught in a vicious downward spiral of declining productivity and loss of assets. They end up in a **“hunger–poverty trap” characterized by a severe “resilience deficit”**. They are so vulnerable that even the mildest shock generates a widespread crisis across the Sahel requiring humanitarian aid.
- In the dry land Sahelian context, this inequity issue is multi-pronged: firstly, large socio-economic disparities exist within rural communities; secondly, ultra-poor farm households cannot extricate themselves from the ‘hunger-poverty trap’ without specialized external assistance; training in improved agroecological practices that sustainably increase food production, improve soil fertility, regenerate natural resources (trees, water, pasture, biodiversity) and help farmers adapt to climate change help, but are not enough.
- The key message of this policy note is that the foundation for all successful resilience activities in the dryland areas of the Sahel must be based on a progressive transformation of the farming system through agroecological intensification that fully addresses the issue of equity in the rural communities reached.
- The benefits of agro-ecological-based measures on dryland farming systems will only have a limited impact if embedded mechanisms that contribute to inequity within communities are not addressed. Adequate social and governance safeguards need to go alongside such measures so that the specific needs of different wealth categories of households and the most vulnerable individuals are taken into account.
- The “most vulnerable” are not a homogenous group. Resilience initiatives need to better recognize and take into account that rural communities are complex and dynamic. In agricultural development programs, it is critical to identify which households and individual groups are the most vulnerable to food and nutrition insecurity, and tailor specialized support to meet their specific livelihood needs within the wider community program to promote agroecology.
- Empirical evidence indicates that measures focusing on the livelihood improvement of rural communities through agricultural programs often deepen the marginalization of women and resource-poor farmer households through non-participatory, socially non-differentiated and gender-blind activities. The more affluent, literate and connected households are more likely to “capture” the benefits of such programs and improve their resilience. However, these same measures often fail to improve the livelihoods of the most vulnerable, resource poor households and marginalized groups who cannot easily benefit.
- The impetus to adopt “equity redress” mechanisms is even more justified in the light of the observed erosion of solidarity mechanisms, precipitated by “permanent poly-crises” (climate, water, soil, food) the Sahel has known over the past decades.

- However tackling equity issues may give rise to sensitivities as agricultural development programs affect and are affected by complex community dynamics and touch on individuals' personal livelihood strategies. By virtue of being external agents operating on the relatively "neutral" ground of agro-ecology, the non-governmental sector and Civil Society Organizations may have more room to maneuver to promote pro-equity interventions. But these need to be driven through a participatory and inclusive approach that takes local dynamics into account, and work in close coordination with local government.
- A combination of strategies can bring about a shift in the way local communities regard this issue of equity; starting with culturally sensitive awareness raising that will persuade communities to accept this necessity of tailoring specialized support in favor of the most vulnerable from the outset.
- Community leaders must be enabled to engage as the primary local actors within agroecological programs to categorize households by wealth/poverty status, and to manage equity-focused activities. These can include the establishment of women credit and saving groups, the development of "warrantage" (collective grain storage) schemes; the establishment of seed banks; the selective donation of improved seeds; the selective and rotation-based donation of pregnant livestock, all focused on the most vulnerable individuals.

#### Difference between equality and equity





## To the attention of decision makers

### Actors working at the national policy level can:

1. Promote a strong pro-equity focused national agricultural policy framework to support agroecology as the foundation for resilience, sustainable agriculture, and adaptation to climate change.
2. Create and apply a national coordinated strategy, aligned to the national “AGIR” (Global Alliance for Resilience Initiative), to strengthen the institutional capacity of municipal councils. This involves skills and abilities to lead an inclusive and participatory, multi-actor process to prepare, implement and assess pro-equity, resilience oriented development plans and budgets.
3. Create positive incentives and develop the institutional capacity of technical services to provide support to dryland farmers for adapting and scaling out of agroecological practices with proven potential to restore soil fertility, improve production, and reverse land degradation.
4. Ensure sufficient resources are available to municipal councils to apply these plans.

### Actors working at the decentralized rural municipal level can:

5. Train staff to ensure a more systematic understanding of inequity within the relevant sectors, incorporate equity considerations in the elaboration of local development plans and strengthen local, community based organizations that can become the prime drivers of equity focused agro-ecological development.
6. Assess and understand the exploitative processes, including the negative coping mechanisms, that chronically vulnerable households use to survive, in order to find ways to help them escape from the hunger debt trap.
7. Develop context specific, grounded resilience strategies using a participatory action research approach to observe, diagnose, test, adapt, assess, and share experiences to address equity.
8. Positively discriminate in the allocation of support and material assistance to favor the most vulnerable groups, so that they are enabled to play an active part in re-dressing imbalances in their ability to adopt agroecological practices, aggravated by the stresses and shocks affecting the drylands of the Sahel.

## Why integrate an equity consideration into the design and implementation of agroecological programmes?

### Rural communities are not homogenous. Differentiated levels of wealth and vulnerability to food and nutrition insecurity call for well targeted interventions

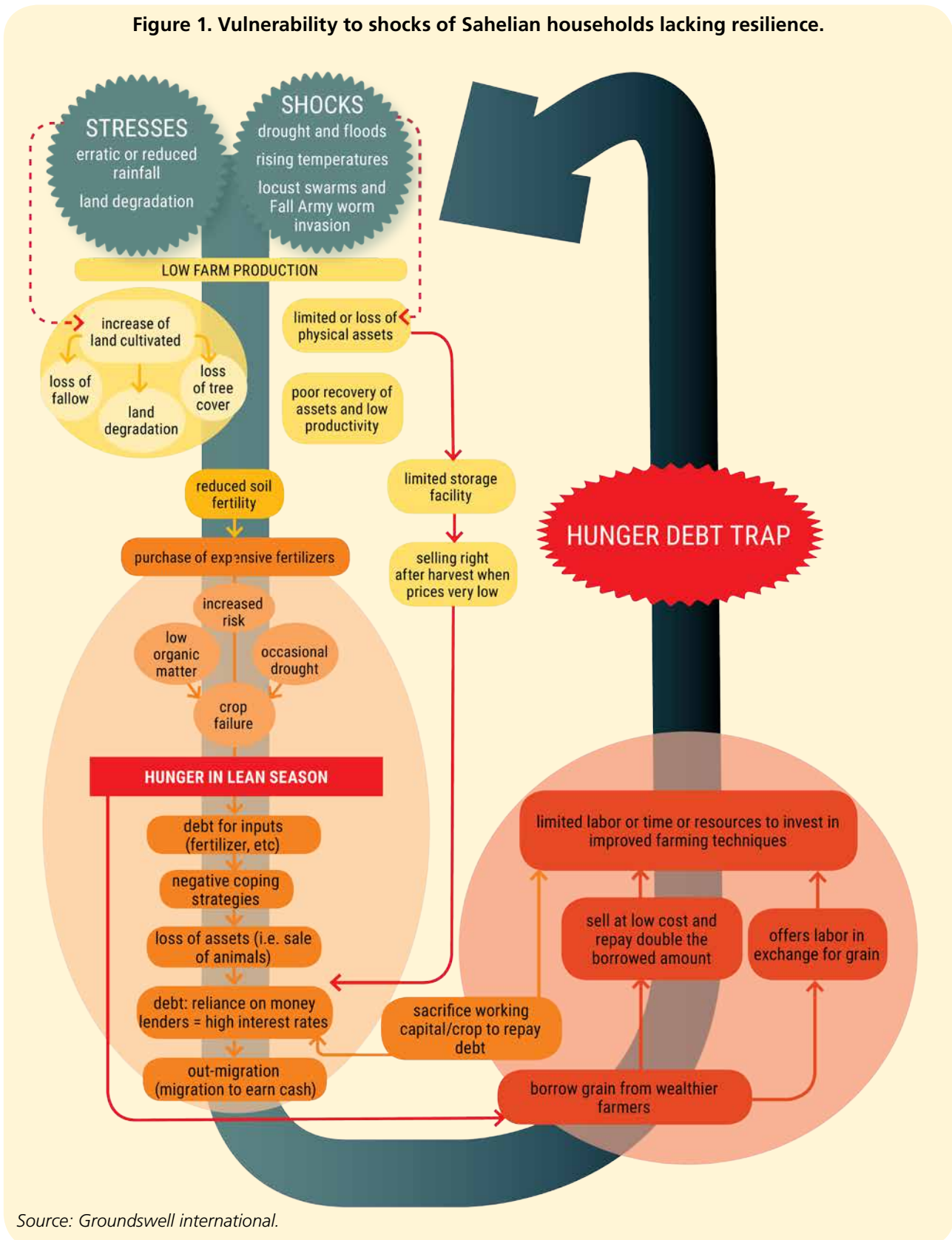
Even though Sahelian countries have been reported to achieve strong economic growth over the recent years, the food and nutrition crisis persists. The United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimated that in 2017, over 30.1 million people would be food insecure. Of these, OCHA predicted that 12 million people would need emergency humanitarian assistance.<sup>1</sup>

The harsh reality is that inequalities between households in rural communities in the drylands are deepening. The benefits of economic growth are not reaching the poorest. This discredits the “trickle down” paradigm according to which economic growth will benefit the population as a whole. Key economic development policies are failing to generating inclusive economic benefits, entrenching inequalities and are also falling short in terms of building local resilience.<sup>2</sup>

Household economy assessment (HEA) studies across the Sahel have revealed a huge gap in the level of food security between relatively poorer households and wealthier households within the same communities.<sup>3</sup> These

socio-economic disparities have been shown to foster exploitive relations, compounding the erosion of traditional solidarity systems.<sup>4</sup> They also indicate that resilience of rural communities to shocks and stresses is declining overall, affecting the majority of the population but most severely the poorest farm households. The complex ramifications of the poverty-hunger trap affecting the most vulnerable is illustrated in figure 1.

**Figure 1. Vulnerability to shocks of Sahelian households lacking resilience.**



Source: Groundswell international.



## The risk of reinforcing inequality through agricultural project interventions

The key issue from a programme design and implementation perspective is that approaches guiding agricultural support initiatives in general (and this includes agro-ecological programs) tend to be non-participatory, socially non-differentiated and gender-blind. Taking into consideration the hunger-debt trap and gender issues prevailing in the villages can prove challenging for agricultural programs supported by those working in the non-governmental sector who prefer a “community approach”.

NGO field staff often have limited capacity beyond their technical skills. They see their mandate as scaling-up agro-ecological practices, reaching as many households as possible with improved farming practices to increase yields. This is an endeavor that comes with its own set of challenges in drought-prone and resource poor communities. But such agricultural development initiatives will fall short of their objective to improve the food security and resilience of farm communities if they fail to adopt strategies that will ensure reaching the most vulnerable.

Practitioners have also observed that traditionally, when adopting a homogenous approach in the roll-out of agricultural development support activities, it is often the better-off households (i.e., those endowed with more productive resources, who are more literate and better connected) that manage to capture the benefits of these activities<sup>5</sup> (Bourgou 2018). They are in a way an “easier” constituency with whom to work. The poorer households are just not able to engage in the same way and reap far fewer benefits, if any at all.

Consequently, agroecology based resilience initiatives may paradoxically tend to further entrench situations of inequality, as the poorest (and most vulnerable) households. Organizations whose vision and purpose is to strengthen resilience need to systemically address the underlying factors of inequity and social exclusion.

## Key levers of success for ensuring the integration of equity in the implementation of agroecological programmes

The need to address equity in the implementation of resilience building activities is often cited in theory but fails to become manifest in practice. Protecting and improving rural livelihoods, equity and social well being were identified by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) as one of its core principles for sustainable food and agriculture<sup>6</sup>, and by many other organizations, but the sector lacks well documented experiences of how this can be done.

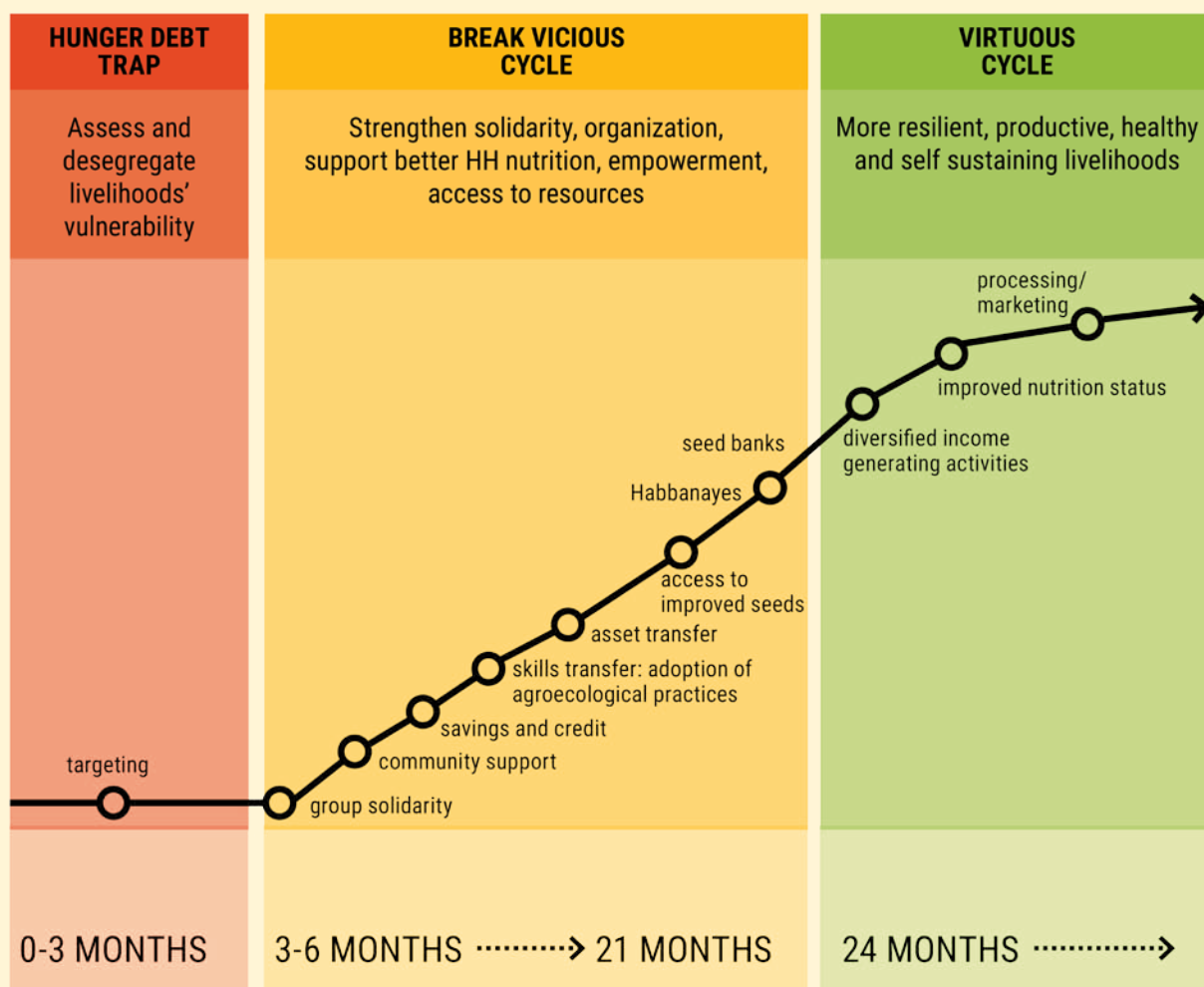
A review of field experiences allowed Groundswell and its partners in Senegal, Burkina Faso and Mali to identify the following factors as “levers of success” to embed equity into the implementation of agricultural development initiatives that are resilience oriented and based on agroecology. These are captured in an adapted version of the “graduation model” in figure 2.

### What is agroecology?

Agroecology is an approach to farming that mimics the functioning of local ecosystems,<sup>8</sup> allowing for “food production that makes the best use of nature’s goods and services while not damaging these resources.”<sup>9</sup> It is a science that applies ecology to the design of farming systems; uses a whole-systems approach to farming and food systems and replaces “external inputs by natural processes such as natural soil fertility and biological control”.<sup>10</sup> Agroecological farming systems are “developed on the basis of farmers’ knowledge and experimentation”<sup>11</sup> and link ecology, culture, economics and society to create healthy environments, food production and communities. It is a multi-functional approach to farming that is productive, economically viable, socially just, resilient to climate change, sustainable and nutrition sensitive.



**Figure 2. The AE+6 graduation model: hoisting vulnerable household out of the poverty-hunger trap**



Source: Adapted from University of Greenwich-National Resources Institute (2018).<sup>7</sup>

### Key success factor # 1: Raising awareness to get grassroots buy-in on pro-equity agroecological support

The main factor for integrating equity for Groundswell's network partners engaged in promoting a more productive, sustainable and resilient agriculture through agroecology was ensuring the free, prior and informed buy-in, from the community as a whole, to provide special, tailored support within resilience building interventions to address the needs of resource-poor farmers, particularly women farmers. Through engagement with local leadership (village chiefs, religious leaders, local governance representatives) and then in village assemblies, Groundswell's NGO partner teams ensured that the community as whole agreed that some of their more vulnerable neighbors would receive direct support and mentoring, donated equipment, subsidies, etc., whereas others wouldn't.

In the absence of such an understanding, achieved through extensive communication and engagement, the risk to the program would be that of generating resentment and jealousies, perhaps causing its total failure.



### **Key success factor # 2: Ensuring genuine participation**

Another success factor to be considered by rural development practitioners working in agriculture is to foster active participation, through widespread and inclusive consultation, in the design and planning of their activities. The recipe for success requires enabling and entrusting the community itself with the responsibility of determining who shall benefit from agroecological training, support and related specialized livelihood material assistance. The experience of Groundswell's network partners was that the process of conducting household wealth ranking surveys and ranking them could quite easily be done by knowledgeable 'key informants' within the community, if provided with guidance and support by a skilled facilitator.

### **Key success factor # 3: Supporting participatory processes by which communities can disaggregate households by levels of wealth**

Disaggregating<sup>12</sup> households by their level of wealth was key to developing tailored support and assistance to meet the specific needs of more vulnerable households. Asset-based approaches that categorized households by access to key resources such as land, labor and animals, and their food security status, proved an effective method to identify the poorest households, and perhaps the chronically poor.<sup>13</sup>

Understanding the dynamics of how more and more households slide down the spiral into the hunger-debt trap, and chronic vulnerability to food and nutrition insecurity, is imperative. This is because the strategic aim of a resilience-focused approach to agroecology is to break the cycle of poverty, and enable such households to develop self-reliance, productive and more diversified rural livelihoods.

This is something a community can be enabled to do through a participatory rural appraisal (PRA) approach. This approach ensures widespread engagement from the stakeholders. It also helps persuade community leaders, who are often involved in this process, to become champions and advocates for equity. At the same time, the PRA approach helps prevent resentment or jealousy other community members may feel when some households obtain additional support, and others not. By taking responsibility for the process, community leaders are often able to assuage any discontentment.

### **Key success factor # 4: Improving local governance and social cohesion through AECs and advocating local governance to support equity**

Agroecology Committees (AECs) can be established as a governance platform for the village not only to promote and spread agroecological practices throughout the community but also with a mandate of designing resilience strategies (in alignment with the municipal development plans).

Community members representing different neighborhoods, clans, groups, livelihood systems and wealth categories are given the opportunity to sit together to discuss the issues of equity and resilience, diagnose the main reasons for chronic vulnerability, and to adapt potential solutions to their local context.

Engaging with the local municipalities and village chiefs to trigger reflection on traditional solidarity mechanisms can also have a positive impact. Local municipal councils can be persuaded to support the most vulnerable households and act as the catalyst of local training and follow up support activities.

### **Key success factor # 5: Promoting equity initiatives focused and gender sensitive resilience activities based on local values for solidarity**

Agroecology-based resilience strategies, based on indigenous value systems that support solidarity and collective action, which are tested and adapted within communities within a learning framework is another success factor. Examples of the design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of these specialized resilience activities, conducted through the lens of equity are provided in table 1 on the next page.<sup>14</sup>

**Table 1. Example of activities that agro-ecological projects can develop with an equity focus**

Example of activity	Vulnerability lens	Nature of support
Setting up women credit and saving group	Exclusive benefit to women	Advisory support with setting up the groups – operational modalities left to the discretion of the group
Establishment of local seed banks	Vulnerable/poor farmers or women only	Donation of seed stocks – mentoring on production of seeds
Donation of improved seeds	Vulnerable/poor farmers only or women only	Donation and mentoring
Rotation-based donation of pregnant livestock,	Vulnerable/poor farmers only or women only	Donation and mentoring
Setting up warrantage (collective grain storage) schemes	The community as a whole – shields from usurers	Donation of building materials to built the store room (in cases where no vacant building is available) + allocation of startup capital

### Key success factor # 6: Sharing and disseminating experiences and lessons learned

Disseminating experiences and lessons learnt can be done through different means and media, including community radio broadcasts or making short documentary films. Traditional ways of reaching remote rural communities may include the staging of theatre plays or the organization of itinerant caravans, where the targeted audience (in this case village-based leadership) has an opportunity to learn about and witness directly the successes and challenges relating to building rural resilience strategies.

### Key success factor # 7: Making provision for the long-term sustainability of interventions

Ensuring local buy-in and genuine participation contributes to sustaining the impact of such initiatives over the long term by embedding resilience-focused activities into the social fabric of community. A key recommendation here is to identify influential individuals within a community who might act as the best “advocates” or champions of equity principles.

#### Empirical evidence shows that the combination of these interventions leads to:

- empowering communities to become the agents of change and social redress within their own communities
- reaching the most vulnerable households enabling them to escape from the hunger-debt trap
- women being acknowledged, given a voice and drawn into the decision-making process
- improving local social processes, resulting in an overall pro-equity social convention
- applying the principles of action research, which entails observing, experimenting, adapting and sharing - evidenced by caravans, field trips, farmer champions, training
- laying down the foundation for regenerative processes based on agroecology at a grassroots level in a manner that genuinely reaches and benefits the livelihoods of the most vulnerable groups



## Key recommendations

Tackling inequity is crucial for programmes and investments in the agricultural sector to improve the resilience of local populations as a whole - including the most vulnerable. Adopting equity as a guiding principle within agroecology brings into focus the need for specific policy changes. It also has important organizational implications for operations of both governmental, civil society organizations and non-governmental agencies engaged in rural development. This is because “positive discrimination” in favor of equity can prove rather sensitive within communities, and requires new sets of skills, and attitudes by technical staff.

For strengthened resilience in the dryland areas of the Sahel, it is essential that decision makers and key actors involved in agricultural programmes and rural development in general take the following recommendations into account:



### National Government

#### **R1. Define, in a bottom-up and participative manner, a pro-equity focused national agricultural policy.**

This policy should include:

- tailor specialized support for the most vulnerable, disadvantaged groups in each community reached
- embed guaranteed government employment programmes focusing on disadvantaged groups in the agricultural sector (i.e., the setting up of agro-ecological fund to support agro-ecological measures could include quotas of employment for targeted groups)

#### **R2. Create and apply a national coordinated strategy, aligned to the national “AGIR” (Global Alliance for Resilience Initiative), to strengthen the institutional capacity of municipal councils to lead an inclusive and participatory, multi-actor process to prepare, implement and assess pro-equity, resilience oriented agricultural development plans and budgets.**

- The strategy should include a role for NGOs and civil society organizations.
- The strategy requires the full participation of the national equivalents of the Ministries of social development.



### Local Government

#### **R3. Incorporate a more systematic understanding of inequality and inequity within the relevant sectors.**

- Create awareness and capacity on the issue of equity through the training of technical staff.
- Provide comprehensive orientation in how to assess the underlying causes of the hunger-debt trap, etc. to all municipal *conseil* members, technical services staff and village development committees (*Comité Villageois de Développement*, CVD).
- Create a network to facilitate regular information flow on equity-focused agricultural development options across all communes in a selected agroecological or municipal area.

#### **R4. Incorporate equity considerations in the elaboration of local development plans.**

- Adjust the procedures and methods for preparing local development plans to mandate the integration of equity considerations.
- Ensure that members of the most vulnerable groups benefit from tailored support activities; monitor and track the degree to which these strengthen or diversify their livelihoods and build up their assets.
- Monitor and evaluate the implementation of resilient oriented local development plans against equity-focused targets and milestones.
- Embed equity in decision-making tools and procedures.

**R5. At the local institutional level, strengthen local organizations that can become the prime drivers of equity focused agro-ecological development.**

- Support the establishment of representative and inclusive village-based coordination platforms (e.g. agro-ecological committees- AECs).
- Foster a constructive and on-going cross-sectoral dialogue and multi-actor coordination at the local government level focused on achieving pro-equity resilience of local communities



## Farmer organizations

**R6. Organize learning visits of the organization to demonstration plots where pro-equity agro-ecology is implemented.**

**R7. Ensure that agricultural development programs undertaken by the Farm Organization benefit marginalized and more vulnerable farm households. Work in coordination with local government.**



## Non governmental sector

**R8. Incorporate a more systematic understanding of inequality and inequity within the organization.**

- Create awareness among NGO staff on the issue of equity and inclusive agro-ecological practices, and how it relates to the NGO mission and mandate.

**R9. In terms of program activities, consider the following:**

- support the establishment of village-based agro-ecological committees as representative and inclusive cross-sectoral coordination structures
- support the participatory revision of communal development plans to integrate equity considerations into local development priorities
- design and test village based equity-focused agro-ecological strategies (as per table 1)
- organize knowledge caravans to share and learn from experiences and do trouble shooting

**R10. At the operational level, ensure that program activities:**

- embed equity in decision-making tools and procedures
- empower targeted communities – through PRAs - to conduct village surveys to disaggregate households by wealth/poverty level so that the most vulnerable households can be identified and specialized support be designed
- establish the baseline situation in terms of the level of wealth/poverty in the community against which progress in enabling chronically vulnerable households to become more self reliant will be measured
- ensure the inclusive participation of the whole community at the preliminary stages of the equity mapping; work with elected/nominated village representatives to do the census
- decentralize training programmes to ensure the widest reach to often marginalized groups
- monitor and document the impact of project activities in the medium and long term



## Strategic partners

**R11. Organize a dialogue among relevant national government agencies donors, NGOs and private sector stakeholders to design a comprehensive strategy for introducing equity-oriented content into national and local-level development planning, particularly as part of the AGIR process.**



## Endnotes

- 1 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). 2018. *Sahel crisis*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.unocha.org/legacy/sahel>
- 2 Gubbels, P. 2014. *Changing Business as Usual: assessing development policy and practice in the Sahel through a resilience lens*, a published report for CARE West Africa
- 3 Gubbels, Peter (2014) *Changing Business as Usual*: ibid
- 4 In the countries where the AE+6 programme was implemented, the afore-mentioned intra-community socio-economic disparities are rife. In the areas of intervention of ANSD in Burkina Faso for instance, people still help each other with activities around the land (someone needing help with weeding his/her field will get support from his/her neighbours for free, and a hungry household will be given food by neighboring households or by relatives. However, as observed by NGOs, as the finances of more and more households come under greater pressure due to shocks and stresses, reducing food security, they may be less inclined to help those in need (Bourgou 2018).
- 5 Bourgou, R. 2018. Pers. Com.
- 6 In addition, the FAO emphasizes improving efficiency in the use of resources; conserving, protecting and enhancing natural ecosystems; enhancing the resilience of people, communities and ecosystems, and promoting good governance of both natural and human systems.
- 7 PowerPoint presentation "Exploring the equity dimensions of Sustainable Agricultural Intensification" (SAIRLA). Webinar held on 21st May 2018, slide 7.
- 8 Third World Network (TWN) and Sociedad Científica Latinoamericana de Agroecología (SOCLA). 2015. *Agroecology: key concepts, principles and practices*. Main learning points from Training courses on Agroecology in Solo, Indonesia and Lusaka, Zambia.
- 9 Groundswell International. N.d. Agroecological farming. [online] Available at: <https://www.groundswellinternational.org/approach/agroecological-farming/>
- 10 Altieri., M. A. 1995. Agroecology: The science of sustainable agriculture. *Agroforestry Systems* 35: 111-115.
- 11 De Schutter O (2010) Report submitted by the Special Rapporteur on the right to food. UN General Assembly. Human Rights Council. Sixteenth Session, Agenda item 3 A/HRC/ 16/49.
- 12 The poverty alleviation sector has developed an analytical grid, according to which poverty can only be understood through the 4 "D's", namely disaggregation of data, an analysis of its duration and dynamics, so that differentiated policy responses can be formulated. (Shepherd, A. 2011. *Tackling chronic poverty: the policy implications of research on chronic poverty and poverty dynamics*. Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC) (2011 :21)
- 13 The chronically poor are defined as people who are "poor over many years, and may pass their poverty on to the next generation." (Shepherd, A. 2011. *Tackling chronic poverty: the policy implications of research on chronic poverty and poverty dynamics*. Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC) (2011:14) The linkages between severe poverty and chronic poverty, and chronic vulnerability are complex.
- 14 See the AE+6 case studies on equity for a detailed description of these activities.