



Strengthening the capacity of local governance structures to improve the resilience of dryland farming communities in the Sahel



Key Messages

- Agroecology is an essential foundation for bolstering resilience among dryland farming communities, but alone it is not enough.
- Strengthening local governance at the community and municipal levels is crucial to developing an inclusive approach to resilience through agroecological farming.
- Equity, women's empowerment, and nutrition must also be fully integrated into agroecology programs.

Actively involve elected leaders and community members from the outset

The first step is to help village leaders become aware of the importance of resilience and take ownership of the progressive process to transform their farming system. This is achieved by testing and promoting low-cost agroecological practices to reverse land degradation and adapt to climate change. If conducted through a participatory approach and if it produces initial tangible results, municipal government structures are more likely to build resilience into their broader plans and budgets. Resilience processes at the village level can also be better optimized when all members of the community understand the issues involved and willingly become active participants.

For this inclusive approach to work, municipal councils must undertake a more resilience oriented governing role in their districts. At the community governance level, village leaders should establish credible, representative committees to lead and implement resilience activities. These activities must be designed to meet the priority needs of all members, including women and vulnerable households. With their agency valued, their knowledge and capabilities harnessed, and local values respected, village members can engage in resilience activities that achieve lasting results.



Case Study: Strengthening Local Governance in the Sahel

Launched in January 2016, the Agroecology Plus Six (AE+6) intervention was devised to spread agroecological practices across Senegal, Mali, and Burkino Faso. The intervention teams implemented a dual strategy in each of the three countries to address both municipal council and village-level governance.

Teams helped local government personnel to deepen their understanding of resilience as a critical factor within governance, social systems, and agriculture. They arranged for municipal officials and technical staff to learn first-hand how village leaders and organizations were applying agroecological principles and innovations to improve production, adapt to climate change, restore soil fertility, and regenerate natural resources. Through rural radio, caravans, workshops, and competitions, the team persuaded local government leaders to consider agroecology as an alternative to conventional methods of agricultural development.

This dual strategy to engage with the two levels of local governance (municipal administrative and village structures) empowered village-based leaders and organizations to become primary actors to lead field-based resilience activities. For instance, in Senegal, volunteer farmer trainers in each village adopted a "cascade" approach to sharing new skills, whereby they trained a tiered network of volunteer promoters. This enabled the adoption of agroecological practices to spread rapidly.

Subsidy Support for Agroecology

National governments in the Sahel tend to be locked into Green Revolution thinking, in which modernization is centered around a high use of agrochemicals, hybrid seeds, commercial crops, mechanization, and large-scale irrigation. Governments also give subsidies for agrochemicals. Very little of the national agriculture budget in Sahelian countries, therefore, is spent on agroecological practices. This is related to the critical issue of farmers overusing herbicides and pesticides, which can lead to water pollution, food contamination, and increases risk in the face of climate change.



Photo: Association Nourrir sans Détruire (ANSDD).

Leadership must be harnessed at the village level to support the most vulnerable

Currently, most local governance actors are undertaking little activity to address the resilience deficit of Sahelian communities. This is primarily due to a lack of local technical expertise, limited financial capacity, and a poor record of facilitating participation. Moreover, at the village level, the root causes of malnutrition and the particular needs of women are often overlooked.

Resilience initiatives must be designed to address the overall food and nutrition security needs of farming communities. However, it is vital that local governance also focuses on the specific requirements of the most vulnerable to help them escape the hunger-debt trap. Inclusive approaches that raise awareness and provide tailored support are essential for poorer farming households so that they can participate in and benefit from resilience-strengthening activities.

Conventional agricultural interventions are ill suited for resilience

In the face of increased vulnerability, local government agents need to address issues causing inequity within their constituencies. They must lead efforts to ensure that vulnerable households can absorb shocks and stresses, without losing their assets and falling into the hunger-debt trap. Conventional agriculture, characterized by high dependency on costly agrochemicals and monocultures, is not well suited for overcoming land degradation and climate change, the main causes of food insecurity.

An alternative path for agricultural development must, therefore, be forged by low-cost agroecological practices that work with nature to sustain biodiversity and soil health. The transformation of the entire farm systems in this way is a long-term process, which requires opting out of the conventional pathway. Agroecological programs aim to diversify food production as well as reduce risk, address equity, nutrition, and women's empowerment – all of which are key to strengthening resilience.

Recommendations

- **National governments** need to define an agricultural policy that actively promotes agroecological practices as the foundation for resilience development plans, securing support from the donor community and the national AGIR priorities to ensure full integration.
- **Local governments** should raise awareness around the issue of resilience and improve local development planning procedures to incorporate this perspective. They also need to increase incentives to promote agroecological farming practices throughout local governance structures.
- **Farmer organizations** should lobby for adequate support in converting to agroecology and arrange learning visits for organization members, so they can experience first-hand, "farmer to farmer," how agroecological innovations are being adopted in practice.
- The **non-governmental sector** must train NGO staff on agroecological techniques, including the dimensions of nutrition and women's empowerment. They should also develop activities to strengthen the planning and budgeting capacity of local government actors for resilience.
- **Strategic partners** need to engage with relevant national government agency donors, NGOs, and private sector stakeholders involved in the national AGIR platform, so a gender, nutrition, and equity-oriented approach to agroecology can be integrated into national strategies and governance.

A practical experience in applying these recommendations is fully described in the associated [Case Study: Resilience of dryland farmers in the Sahel: reliant on sound and effective local governance systems](#). This case study is accessible on the Groundswell International website at ([click here](#))

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Design and layout: *Dotted Line Design*
October 2019 – Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

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Acknowledgements

This publication was made possible by the support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Global Resilience Partnership (GRP), and Marchmont Communications. The contents are the responsibility of Groundswell International and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders.