

Scaling Agroecology in the Sahel

Elements of Good Practice – A Guide for Civil Society



Key Messages

- A growing percentage of the people in the Sahel (West Africa) have become chronically vulnerable to food and nutrition insecurity. Many are falling into a hunger/debt-trap.
- Agroecology is a crucial element to strengthening rural people's resilience, but only when accompanied by strategies to integrate nutrition, rural governance, equity, and women's self-empowerment.
- A process to scale up agroecology requires a carefully managed, sequential strategy, adapted to each specific context.
- Elements of success are a progressive process, integrating social issues, transforming governance, and enabling communities to lead.



Photo supplied by the Center for Indigenous Knowledge and Organizational Development, Ghana



The Sahel is in crisis

Every year, good rains or not, there are over 20 million people (mostly dryland farmers) who are food insecure. Many depend on humanitarian aid to survive.

They are chronically vulnerable to food and nutrition insecurity due to increasing pressure on land, declining soil fertility, misguided agricultural policies, and climate change. A growing percentage of farm families are caught in a 'hunger-debt trap' characterized by falling productivity, loss of assets, and migration. They are so vulnerable that even the smallest of shocks generate a widespread crisis.

The solution of agroecology

Agroecology (box 1) is a multi-functional approach to farming that is productive, economically viable, socially just, resilient to climate change, sustainable, and nutrition-sensitive. **The underlying premise of this briefing is that the progressive, agroecological intensification of farming systems using "nature-based" practices is the essential foundation to overcome chronic vulnerability to hunger.** It is critical to enable small scale farmers to engage in agroecology to adapt to climate change and to reverse land degradation. Not doing so will cause the failure of all other initiatives to strengthen resilience in the Sahel.



Image sourced from the film "The Man who Stopped the Desert" by Mark Dodd
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1694580/>

The need to scale up

For more significant, long-lasting impact, agroecology must be scaled up and out. While this is widely recognized, most efforts to scale up agroecology have not yet reached the necessary breadth and depth. These efforts have not yet achieved a substantial and lasting improvement of the resilience and livelihoods of the most vulnerable people.

There are three critical constraints for scaling agroecology in the Sahel. They are a high level of illiteracy, a lack of awareness about agroecology, and compartmentalized "siloed" institutions that prevent an integrated approach across sectors.

As a result, there is a tendency to focus only on the technical aspects of farming. However, scaling agroecology for greater resilience is not a matter of introducing one or two specific farming practices. Because of the complex and multidimensional crisis in the Sahel, learning how to transform not just the farming system, but also the connected social relations and institutions of a particular territory is essential. **This systems approach combines technical and social aspects. It strengthens synergies and iterations that can gradually enable people to develop self-supporting and more resilient livelihoods.**

Complementary strategies

When promoting agroecology for resilience, many practitioners neglect social issues such as nutrition, the position of women, the needs of the most marginalized households, or the quality of local governance. These aspects are essential for community well-being, addressing rising inequities across the Sahel, and reducing vulnerability. Strengthening these aspects will enhance agroecology and vice versa. Because of these synergies, complementary strategies to address these issues should be part of an integrated approach to promoting agroecology.

This briefing for civil society organizations shares insights on how such an integrated approach to agroecology can be scaled.



Vital strategies for scaling agroecology in the Sahel

Because of its reliance on local knowledge, possibilities, and ecosystems, agroecology is highly context-specific: what works in one territory may not be very useful elsewhere. This implies that there is no predefined formula for scaling agroecology in an integrated manner. The actual combination and sequence of technical and social innovations depend on the availability of local resources, on what the community needs and prioritizes, and on other contextual factors. However, there are several critical interconnected strategies to make the scaling process effective, often taking place in parallel.

Box 1: What is Agroecology?

- Agroecology is a set of farming principles based on the functioning of nature and local conditions.
- It is farming that is productive, economically viable, socially just, resilient to climate change, sustainable, and nutrition-sensitive.
- It is a science, a practice, and also a social movement consisting of many organizations and individuals working towards a sustainable and just future for people and the planet.



STRATEGY 1: FOLLOW A PROGRESSIVE PROCESS

It is not feasible or practical for farmers to adopt many different changes in farming practice all at once. But neither can efforts in agroecology be limited to just a few innovations. The challenge is to find a way to sequence the promotion of new practices, combining short term gains with longer-term wins for optimal effect.

Start as simple as possible. Most farmers start using only a limited number of new practices at the same time. Beginning with the promotion of two or three agroecology practices is the most effective way to lay the basis for the transition. Ideally, these are innovations that already exist in the area. It helps to choose practices that will produce short to medium-term benefits and offer a solution to a real problem that communities perceive they have. For example, if one of these problems is soil degradation, the technique of “rapid composting” can give immediate benefits. Such results will quickly interest more farmers and generate credibility and enthusiasm.

Farmers learning from other farmers is the best way to spread knowledge. Field visits, when farmer leaders observe agroecological practices that have already been proven by other farmers in the respective area, is one method. Another way is when farmers talk directly to other farmers with more experience. Practical “hands-on” training sessions are another. When organizing farmer-to-farmer visits or training, decentralize the sessions, so that the locations can be reached by everyone, particularly women farmers.

When farmers start using the new practices, early success will often motivate them to go a step further towards a transition to a more complex set of agroecological practices. This will involve seeking combinations and synergies between various innovations.

At this point, programs can start to integrate other socially sensitive issues into the promotion of agroecology, including enhancing nutrition, fostering equity, women’s self-empowerment, and improved local governance.



STRATEGY 2: ENSURE EQUITY IN THE SCALING PROCESS

Make specific efforts to **ensure the active participation and leadership of the most vulnerable** families, and in particular, **women** within these, when scaling agroecology for resilience. Often, this requires addressing complex, culturally sensitive issues related to equity and gender.

Giving these vulnerable families a decisive voice in the agroecology scaling strategies is essential to ensure their participation, including in diagnosis, planning, and decision making. This will often require engaging the broader community in a dialogue to develop intentional strategies to include these families, building on local social-cultural values of solidarity and mutual support. Such discussion helps to diffuse jealousy and misunderstanding. It also strengthens community commitment to agroecology.

In this process, specialized support for women is necessary because they play a critical role in agriculture and the family economy. But they are rarely recognized for it. When women have access to land and water, technical knowledge, credit, and decision making, they can be a powerful force for spreading agroecology. Therefore, the existence of active self-organized women's groups (e.g., on issues related to access to land, seeds, water, knowledge, or credit) is a vital factor of success for the scaling process. Through such groups, women can build their knowledge, their financial capacities as well as their technical skills to practice agroecology. In turn, this strengthens women's position. They gain the skills and the confidence to speak up, first among themselves, later within their households, and eventually in mixed audiences at the community level.

Addressing equity also calls for giving attention to ethnic and clan differences within communities. Such differences are often a significant social factor for vulnerability. Finally, promoting greater equity entails deliberately, including the voices of youth.



STRATEGY 3: TRANSFORM GOVERNANCE AND LET COMMUNITIES LEAD

Scaling agroecology is only possible if institutional incentives, norms, resources, policies, and programs are reformed to create a positive enabling environment. Supportive governance at the local and national levels is necessary for good results.

Specifically, effective collaboration between departments responsible for agriculture, agroforestry, livestock, and nutrition is required to address the needs of the most vulnerable groups, empower women, and enhance nutrition. Robust governance is needed at all levels, including at the community level, to foster inter-sectoral collaboration. Working across sectors is particularly relevant for nutrition and health staff on the one hand, and agricultural agents on the other. For an organization focused on agriculture or rural development, this approach to agroecology may require first starting with an intensive orientation on nutrition for the staff of your organization.

At the heart of any strategy to scale up agroecology, is the **agency of village-based organizations and community leaders**. Enhancing local leadership and capacity will



accelerate the progressive integration of more socially sensitive issues into agroecology. Thus, the primary role of local government is to facilitate conditions that allow communities to decide their priorities, select solutions, and take collective action. To achieve this, the staff of government agencies must significantly change the perception of their roles, and the way they work with rural people.

Part of enabling communities to lead the process of scaling agroecology is ensuring they have sufficient capacity and flexibility to adapt, undertake, and manage their strategies. Outside actors (such as NGOs, technical assistance agencies, research groups) can support this process, provided they have productive working relationships with communities. Factors that contribute to good relationships are: specifying the terms of collaboration in a protocol, setting realistic expectations, and being adamant that all stakeholders work in a patient, respectful, and transparent way. This overall approach to governance for scaling calls for measures to overcome administrative obstacles and set realistic expectations.

In short, a successful approach to scaling agroecology obliges local government, municipal councils, local technical agencies, traditional leaders, community organizations, and heads of households to forge a shared understanding of the path ahead and to work together collaboratively.

Managing this process will take thought and care. First of all, it requires developing trust (for example, by enabling quick initial results in farming as described above). Secondly, the quality of the engagement of officials and technicians with communities increases when they have opportunities to visit experimentation plots and talk directly with community members. Thirdly, sufficient time and resources are required to involve other actors in essential aspects of the scaling strategy and get them on the same page. When all actors share the same vision and understanding of agroecology for resilience, scaling out happens much more rapidly.

Eight phases in a process to scale agroecology

The question now is: **How** can these strategies be implemented? Based on decades of experience, we identified eight aspects of an effective process to scale up an integrated approach to agroecology that includes social dimensions.

For NGOs and other institutions seeking to scale agroecology, this overview provides guidance. Applying this framework requires adapting these eight phases to each specific context. The phases may not always be appropriate or follow the order described below in a linear way. Instead, there are likely to be adaptations, iterations, and combinations suited to the particularities of each situation.

PHASE 1: Define the causes of vulnerability.

Use a participatory diagnosis process to define, together with communities, the primary causes of chronic vulnerability. The findings will serve as the basis for developing and implementing agroecological innovations that offer solutions to a collectively defined set of problems.

PHASE 2: Identify 'easy' practices that quickly generate results.

Let communities identify and prioritize a limited number of relatively easy, low-cost, and relevant agroecology innovations. These must address their real problems and generate relatively quick, tangible, and significant benefits. This will foster local enthusiasm, engagement, trust, and credibility. These initial new practices will motivate the subsequent involvement of leaders, communities, and innovators in the longer-term agroecology transition



for resilience. Examples are soil and water conservation, tree-based farming, composting, short cycle seed development, crop rotation, and crop diversification.

PHASE 3: Organize villages within a territory. To 'roll-out' the practices and the learning process within a broader area, use a participatory process to group the various villages within a territory into clusters. Criteria for clustering can include geographic proximity, socio-cultural, or economic measures (ethnicity, language, market linkages).

PHASE 4: Learning visits. Within each village cluster, identify one 'motor village' where farmers have exceptionally high interest, leadership, or willingness to test new ideas. They can select fundamental problems and innovative practices that exist inside or beyond their community. The motor villages can serve as a learning center for the other villages in the cluster. In turn, Influential farmers and leaders in the motor village can visit places where other successful agroecology practices already exist. They may need support to test and adapt these practices on their land. As soon as results become visible, learning visits from other farmers within the motor village can help assess the new practices. Next, leaders of surrounding villages within the cluster can come to visit and learn, which will create further interest in agroecology.

PHASE 5: Farmers training farmers. After establishing interest in this way, the community can build a group of 'volunteer farmer trainers.' Crucial in this strategy is the assumption that farmers learn best from their peers. Farmer trainers will train four or five neighbors how to implement the new agroecology practices. Here too, the core strategy is to organize learning visits to the fields. Decentralizing this process helps everyone interested in participating and learning. To achieve this, ensure that each 'neighborhood' in a village has its own respected and credible farmer trainers. This method will generate a rapid local multiplier effect across the entire village.

PHASE 6: Integrate more complicated practices and social issues. As the initial innovations start spreading in a large

geographical area, the interest and motivation among the communities will swell. The most dynamic of the motor villages should identify, test, and adapt more socially or culturally sensitive changes. Examples are more complex agroecological innovations, but also social changes to address the needs of the most vulnerable households, women's livelihoods, and nutrition issues. Combining strategies, for example, between nutrition, agroecology, and women's empowerment by promoting vegetable gardening and cooking, will optimize potential synergies between them. It will also help to catalyze more rapid and effective scaling of agroecology.

PHASE 7: Strengthen governance. Strengthened governance capacities of local community leaders and community-based structures will enable them to lead, manage, and sustain this process for scaling independently. This requires fostering coordination between sectors, particularly between nutrition/health staff and agricultural staff at all levels, within communities, and across NGOs and governmental institutions.

PHASE 8: Reach out and advocate. Engaging more people to amplify the reach of agroecology can be done in many ways. Some suggestions: Use the media, especially (rural) radio. Deepen the practice of an ever-growing network of farmer trainers. Organize competitions and cultural activities within the area. Engage trusted researchers in the process of scaling agroecology. Build and connect to networks of social actors in support of agroecology, particularly national farmer organizations and rural women's associations, to create a potential for even more extensive scaling. Create momentum and persuade enough actors (i.e., local governments) to shift their ways of working to support agroecology. Take political actors and journalists on learning visits to successful sites. Demonstrate the success of agroecology to local governments to encourage integrating new thinking and policy into development plans and budgets. Encourage communities and municipal councils to exert pressure on the national government (and donors) to create more favorable policies and programs for agroecology.



This publication draws from over 20 years of experience gained by Groundswell International and its partner organizations in West Africa (Association Nourrir sans Détruire or ANSD in Burkina Faso; Sahel Eco in Mali; and Agrecol Afrique in Senegal). The approach described here was first tested in our 'Agroecology Plus Six' program between 2016 and 2017. Groundswell designed the program to learn lessons on how to spread an integrated approach to agroecological intensification across the Sahelian region. The focus was to enable small scale farmers in the drylands to reverse land degradation and adapt to climate change. The results were the strengthened resilience of the social and ecological farming system and starting an escape from the hunger and debt trap.

These lessons, and the approach to scaling agroecology are fully described in the associated Case Study *Scaling agroecology for Resilience: The experience of rural communities in three countries across the Sahel*. This case study is accessible on the Groundswell International website ([click here](#)) and at the Cultivate! Website ([click here](#))

Although emerging from the context of the Sahel, we believe this process and the lessons learned are relevant across most of sub-Saharan Africa.

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Design and layout: Doret Ferreira (Dotted Line Design)

October 2019 – Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

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Acknowledgements

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