



# WOMEN EMPOWERMENT CASE STUDY



**Empowering women in agroecology: an essential component for the resilience of rural communities in the Sahel**





# **Empowering women in agroecology: an essential component for the resilience of rural communities in the Sahel**

**The experience of the Groundswell West Africa  
network regional Agroecology Plus Six program**

**A regional initiative undertaken by the Groundswell West Africa network**

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### **Cover Photo**

*The secretary and treasurer of a solidarity calabash count the anonymous contributions in the village of Keur Djiby (Senegal).*

*Credit: Agrecol Afrique.*

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## List of acronyms

AE+6	Agroecology Plus Six program
AEC	Agroecological Committee
ANR	Assisted Natural Regeneration
CPA	Committee for the Promotion of Agroecology
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EPC	<i>Épargne Pour le Changement</i>
FAO	United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization
GII	UNDP Gender Inequality Index
GLRD	Gender and Land Rights Database
GRP	Global Resilience Partnership
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
IGA	Income Generating Activity
NGO	Non Government Organization
NTFPs	Non Timber Forest Product
SIDA	Swedish International Development Agency
UNDP	United Nations Development Plan
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WEAI	Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index

# Executive Summary

- This case study reports on the process and findings of the Groundswell West Africa network's Agroecology Plus Six (AE+6) program in the Sahel. Operating in three program areas in Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal, the AE+6 program aimed to strengthen the resilience of dry land farming systems, primarily by enabling farm families to counter land degradation and the effects of climate change.
- The results of the AE+6 initiative showed the impact on resilience of a program focusing on large-scale promotion of agroecological practices can be significantly augmented **when it systematically integrates strategies for the empowerment of women in agriculture, and complementary activities to strengthen their livelihoods.**
- This reflects a core premise in the conception of the AE+6 program; the transformation of the farming system for resilience requires far more than adoption of improved agroecological practices. It must go hand in hand with transforming the "socio-ecological system" through "social innovations" for changing how communities manage and allocate productive resources.
- At the crux of the issue is that women, who have critical responsibilities in agriculture and for **ensuring food security and good nutrition** within their households, generally have very limited access to productive resources (land, water, animals, seeds, credit) as well as a limited role in decision making within households and in the community.
- To optimize the potential role of women in strengthening household resilience, the AE+6 initiative was designed to overcome gender barriers preventing women from accessing opportunities to more effectively build food secure and resilient livelihoods.
- Key strategies included:
  - i. empowering women economically through the promotion of credit and savings groups; this not only provided women with vitally needed access to credit, but bolstered their leadership, solidarity, self-confidence and influence in decision making
  - ii. helping women gain secure access to land, water, seeds and animals
  - iii. ensuring women obtained tailored, gender specific technical advice and support for adoption of improved agroecological practices
  - iv. using the integration of nutrition (perceived as in the women's domain) into agroecology as a practical entry point for a gender sensitive resilience program
  - v. generating synergies between women's empowerment, savings and credit, adoption of agroecological methods, nutrition education, and promotion of dietary diversity
- AE+6 activities to enable women's empowerment succeeded, in a short time, to generate significant initial results in support of resilience including; access to land and water; access to credit; greater social cohesion between women and between men and women, increased recognition of women's value as farmers, women starting to exert greater leadership and influence in decision making within their communities.
- The AE+6 action research initiative provided a "proof of concept" of how **to foster women's empowerment in agroecology**, and confirmed other evidence that this pathway plays a vital role in strengthening the resilience of rural communities in the Sahel.<sup>1</sup>

- The experience of the AE+6 teams in Senegal, Mali and Burkina unequivocally indicated that to significantly strengthen resilience in the drylands of the Sahel, and overcome growing food insecurity, all programs, including transforming farming systems through agroecology, must be purposively designed to empower women, and alleviate the **triple burden that they carry** (reproductive, productive and social).
- To achieve this requires addressing gender issues in local communities in a socio-culturally sensitive but robust way, so as to **progressively counterbalance gender inequity** and help women become the primary actors of strengthening their own resilience and that of their households. This means **major adjustments** in the existing approaches that are often non-participatory, socially non-differentiated and gender-blind.
- This AE+6 case study shows that in a relatively short time, well designed gender-oriented activities within a wider agroecology program can generate significant initial results in enabling women to be recognized and to improve their social status, identifying and mitigating inimical social and cultural norms, improving social cohesion among women, and helping women to empower themselves as productive actors and decision makers.
- With appropriate training and support as farmers, women can significantly improve their potential as **producers**, become important **agents of change** for transforming the farming system through agroecology, contribute to reversing land degradation, diversify household diets for better nutrition, and improve food security.

# Introduction

## The resilience crisis in the Sahel

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. Traditional farming practices can no longer sustain livelihoods. Gender inequality, poor nutritional practices, and inadequate technical and social services exacerbate the problem.

A growing percentage of dryland farm households have become ultra-poor, living on less than 0.50 USD a day. They suffer from hunger, not only in bad but also in good rainfall years. To survive, 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. These desperate responses further increase the vulnerability of these populations so that even the mildest shock generates a widespread crisis across the Sahel requiring humanitarian aid.<sup>2</sup>

Weak governance, marginalization, non-inclusive development policies, inappropriate technical advice, and the inability of small-scale farmers to influence policies and government institutions to better address their priority needs are underlying drivers of this growing crisis. This complex web of problem is captured in figure 1.

For these reasons 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–debt trap” characterized by a severe **resilience deficit**. Without external assistance to strengthen the resilience, sustainability and productivity of their farming systems, more and more dryland farmers, particularly women, will fall into this hunger-debt trap.

The Agroecology+6 (AE+6) program was developed by Groundswell International’s West African network to address this resilience deficit. It was conceived as a “proof of concept” action research initiative undertaken over 18 months in 3 sites in the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal). The overarching premise of this initiative was to provide evidence that applying “agroecology” to transform the farming system can, and indeed must be the essential foundation on which effective resilience activities in dryland areas must be based.

The underlying rationale for this premise is that agroecology is best suited to transform existing farming practices and to strengthen the absorptive and adaptive capacities of rural communities in face of on-going stresses and recurrent shocks. Once this foundation of intensified agroecological farming is mostly in place, it serves as the basis on which to integrate complementary resilience activities in equity, women’s empowerment, and nutrition, tailored to the needs of the most vulnerable groups.

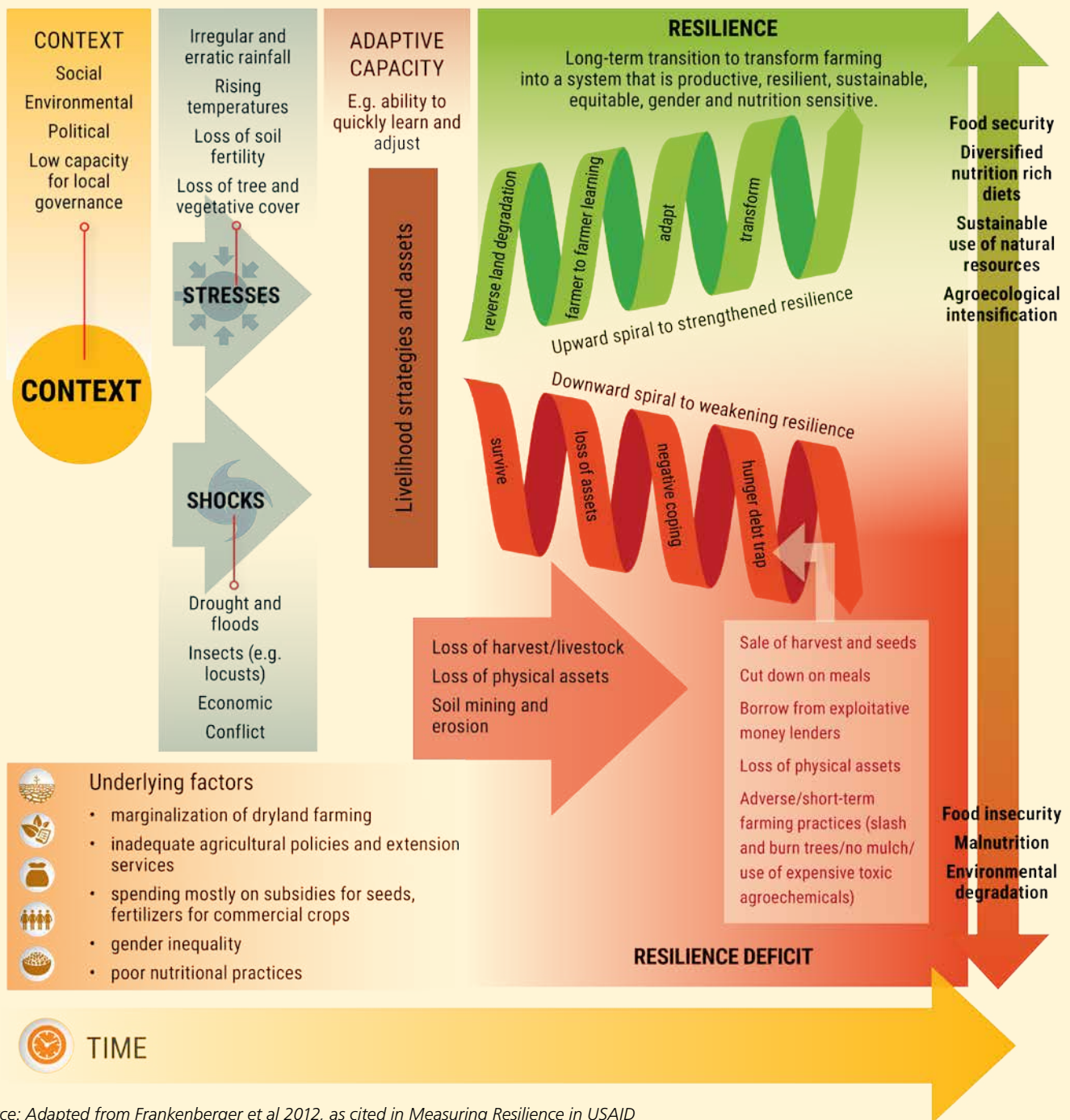
The case study documents the experiences of Groundswell West Africa’s three NGO network members in integrating strategies to foster women’s empowerment, within agroecology, and more generally for strengthened women’s livelihoods. It systematizes principles and best practices derived from these empirical experiences that rise above different institutional and policy contexts.

The case study, conducted in three regions, rural Mali, Burkina Faso and Mali, asked the question: how can women’s empowerment positively influence the ability of rural households and communities to strengthen the resilience of the farming system and related livelihoods to reverse land degradation, overcome the hunger/debt trap, and adapt to a changing climate?



*Without external assistance to strengthen the resilience, sustainability and productivity of their farming systems, more and more dryland farmers, particularly women, will fall into this hunger-debt trap.*

Figure 1: Dynamics of Resilience and Vulnerability for dryland farmers in the Sahel



Source: Adapted from Frankenberger et al 2012, as cited in *Measuring Resilience in USAID*  
[http://fsnnetwork.org/sites/default/files/resilience\\_measurement\\_in\\_usaid.pdf](http://fsnnetwork.org/sites/default/files/resilience_measurement_in_usaid.pdf)

## Women's disempowerment in agriculture

To be effective in strengthening resilience, the approach to agroecology must give particular attention, and tailor specialized support to foster the empowerment of women. This is rarely done in conventional agricultural development.

Women carry, comparatively to men, a **much greater burden of agricultural and domestic tasks**. This work by women does not translate in their recognition as important economic agents within urban or rural communities.

However, the shift from conventional to agroecological methods of farming is not necessarily more inherently favorable to overcoming the key socio-cultural constraints to women's empowerment: limited access to productive resources (land, water, animals, seeds and credit); limited voice in decision making within the household about production and about how income should be spent. Women generally exert little control of how they can allocate their time. Within communities, many women do not have a strong leadership role within the community or contribute to village level decisions.

In short, **agroecology, as a set of improved practices to make farming productive, resilient and sustainable, is not a panacea to overcome these gender related social issues.**

There is much yet for **practitioners of agroecology to learn about how to include a women's empowerment dimension in their work**. To overcome the resilience deficit, it is essential that specialized support activities enable women, particularly those in vulnerable households, to overcome these constraints, and develop sustainable more resilient livelihoods.

Groundswell and its regional partners designed the agroecological support interventions of AE+6 to learn how to foster the social and governance changes needed to enable women's empowerment, in parallel with the process of the wider application of agroecological knowledge by the community to transform farming systems.

One of the overarching lessons from this case study is that activities to improve the resilience requires more than promotion of improved technical practices. It must systematically strengthen organizational capacities, leadership of both men and women, and facilitate social processes to change gender relations in a way that empowers women to improve their livelihoods.

### Purpose of the case study

This case study documents the action research process used to develop mechanisms through which actors involved in the promotion of ecological systems can better integrate gender and equity considerations in their programmatic interventions to effectively strengthen local resilience.

This case study is meant to be relevant to a range of actors - particularly national governments, technical and financial donors, international development agencies, and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) working at national level. The key lessons are about how to foster a transition to agroecological farming that takes into account and genuinely empowers the most vulnerable – especially women- within the ecologically fragile, drought prone areas of the Sahel.

The findings indicate how AE+6 activities aiming at supporting women's empowerment within agroecology should think of these not just as a technical but also as a social process, working in synergy. This case study not only spells out the series of actions that were implemented (and how they were implemented) to promote women's empowerment within local communities, but also unpacks how the collective action of a community sharing a similar objective contributed to gender change.

This case study is one of a series of six closely related studies documenting the main finding and lessons of the integrated AE+6 for resilience approach.

**Box 1****What is agroecology?**

Agroecology is an approach to farming that mimics the functioning of local ecosystems,<sup>13</sup> allowing for “food production that makes the best use of nature’s goods and services while not damaging these resources.”<sup>14</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>15</sup> Agroecological farming systems are “developed on the basis of farmers’ knowledge and experimentation”<sup>16</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.

**The AE+6 program**

The AE+6 program was conceived as a “proof of concept” initiative to spread agroecological practices across the Sahelian region as the foundation for strengthening resilience.

The impact of conventional high external-input agricultural technologies, based largely on agrochemicals, monoculture of certified seeds, mechanization, growth corridors and large-scale irrigation schemes favored by the Green Revolution approach, has tended to ignore the needs of dryland farmers (including women) to adapt to land degradation and climate change.

This productivist approach underlying the push for a “modern agriculture” has been strongly decried by many actors globally,<sup>3,4</sup> across Africa,<sup>5,6</sup> and in the region.<sup>7</sup> One example is the statement of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), in 2008 which described this model as “largely dependent on natural resources and poorly paid labor, (that had) become unviable”.<sup>8</sup> The industrial model indeed fails to address critical issues of dependence to importation of food to feed the Sahel<sup>9</sup> and the critical need to adapt to a changing climate. Recent research conducted in the Sub-Saharan African region has extensively documented how the push for high, agrochemical-based input farming methods had disrupted subsistence practices, exacerbated poverty, corroded local systems of knowledge, trade and labor and curtailed land tenure security and autonomy.<sup>10</sup>

Groundswell network partners in the region bear testimony of how an over-reliance on “modern” farming practices has led to the loss of agro-biodiversity, loss of agricultural knowledge and the related culinary knowledge, and environmental degradation (notably soil erosion and degradation and pollution through the bio-accumulation of harmful agro-chemicals in soils and water bodies).<sup>11 12</sup>

The AE+6 program was officially launched in January 2016. Field operations began in April 2016 and lasted until September 2017. The Global Resilience Partnership (GRP), an initiative conceived by USAID, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) provided financial support. Groundswell International through its West Africa network of Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) partners, assumed the regional coordination of the project.

The underlying premise of AE+6 is that the progressive agroecological intensification of farming systems is the essential foundation of any effective approach to resilience in the drylands. This is because the underlying causes of growing chronic vulnerability include declining soil fertility, degradation of natural resources (trees, water, pasture, vegetative cover), and climate change (erratic rainfall, rising temperatures, and periodic drought).

Without enabling small-scale farmers to adapt to climate change and transforming their farming system to reverse land degradation, all other initiatives to strengthen resilience cannot succeed.

A second assumption of the AE+6 approach was that while beneficial, such measures would not adequately address resilience. Agroecology, as promoted by AE+6, is therefore not only about substituting agricultural practices but reconfiguring the food system as a whole, so that these (re)find a social, economic and ecological balance<sup>17</sup>. Complementary measures, therefore, are required to meet the specialized needs of the most vulnerable groups (women, children, and poorer households).

This requires integrating effective social and governance mechanisms to address gender inequality, poor nutritional practices, and inadequate community capacities for adaptation to stresses and shocks that increase their vulnerability to food and nutrition insecurity. A review of the evidence shows that measures focusing on increasing agricultural yields often neglect the specific needs of women and resource-poor farm households through non-inclusive, socially non-differentiated and gender-blind activities.

Consequently, the AE+6 regional team led by Groundswell developed complementary resilience strategies that build on the foundation of agroecology. These form the bedrock of the AE+6 resilience framework. It entails a series of progressive, layered and multi-sectoral interventions that primarily address “livelihood promotion” and “risk reduction” dimensions, as well gender, equity, nutrition.

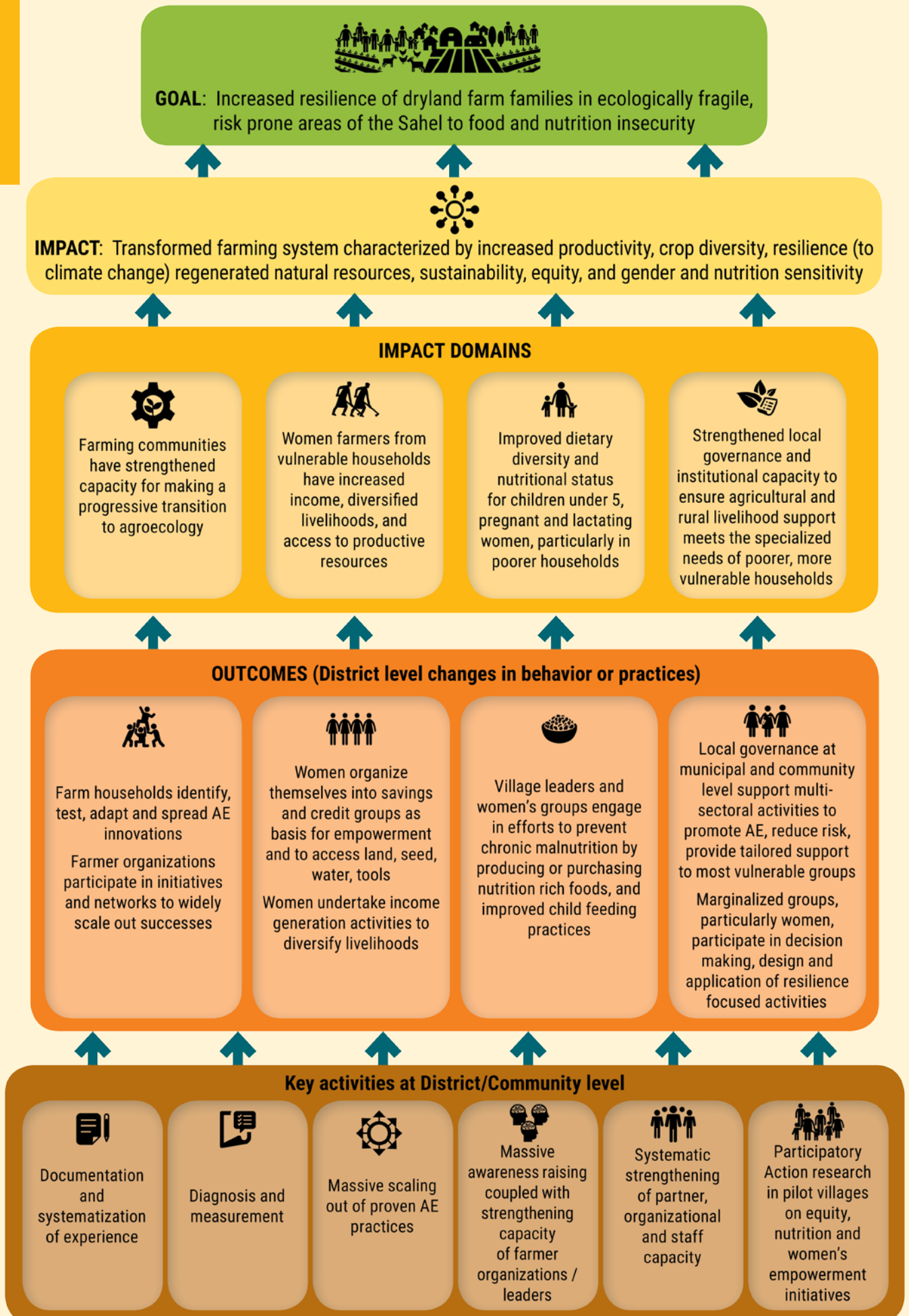
Each of the six dimensions of the AE+6 program, particularly the improved agroecological practices, had been undertaken before. What was different and innovative about the AE+6 approach was that it aimed at:

1. exploring how to integrate nutrition, equity, women’s empowerment progressively into the overall strategy of agroecology for resilience, so as to optimize potential synergies
2. learning how rapidly to scale out (spread) the overall process at low cost in order potentially to cover hundreds of villages in a short time
3. learning how to sustain the AE+6 resilience process by strengthening local governance at community and municipal levels

The AE+6 resilience team employed a comparative analysis across three Sahelian countries; Burkina Faso (Eastern Region), Mali (Tominian *Cercle* of Ségou) and Senegal (Kaffrine Region) to determine the contextual factors supporting and constraining the results. Groundswell West Africa network of NGO partners tested this approach in their own countries. These were Association Nourrir sans Détruire (“Association for Feeding without Destroying”) in Burkina Faso, Sahel Eco in Mali and Agrecol Afrique in Senegal (see the annexure for detailed information about these three partner NGOs). Most of the strategies of AE+6 were new to each of Groundswell’s West Africa network NGO partners.

Because AE+6 for resilience initiative covered a short implementation period (18 months), the research findings documented in this case study captures only an initial snapshot of lessons learned and emerging good practices.

Figure 2: Overall AE+6 program architecture



# 1. Rationale for integrating women's empowerment in agroecology

## 1.1 Strong gender disparities in Africa

The most vulnerable people within farming communities in the Sahel are women and girls. No resilience initiative can be effective without providing specialized support tailored to the specific social and livelihood needs of women.

This is because of the deep-rooted social and cultural norms within the patriarchal culture that assign women restricted access to productive resources, and limit their influence in decision-making at the household and community levels.<sup>18</sup> Pervasive gender inequality is also perpetuated through reduced access to basic services (i.e., health, education, credit, and technical advice) and early or forced marriage for girls.

Burkina Faso, for example ranks 146th out of 159 countries in the 2015 UNDP Gender Inequality Index (GII)<sup>19</sup>. Senegal is ranked 120th. Mali is ranked 156th.<sup>20</sup> The effects of increased chronic vulnerability in the Sahel have added to the work burden of women and girls, preventing them from using their specific skills and knowledge, and decreased their capacity to adapt their livelihoods. This reduces their resilience and widens the level of inequality between genders.

Within agriculture, women face particular challenges in accessing productive resources (land, water, credit) and benefiting from technical advisory services.<sup>21</sup> Negative coping mechanisms often include migration of boys and men to earn money, placing more responsibility on women in the household within farming and to provide food.

The empowerment of women in agriculture is not only a social justice imperative. The role of women in agriculture (and their related rural livelihoods) has a wider ripple effect on food and nutrition security, and resilience as a whole. There is much evidence indicating that strengthening women's empowerment in agriculture contributes to increased food production and income. This generates greater benefits for the household as a whole, than if it were the men who obtained these gains.<sup>22</sup>

## 1.2 Causes of gender disparities in Africa

The core factors contributing to this gender disparity (and also to the poor performance of the agricultural sector) include:

- i. women's limited access to productive land (and water); and other productive assets (tools, seeds inputs)
- ii. a low level of influence in household decisions
- iii. a limited say in how household income should be allocated
- iv. restricted scope to take on leadership positions within communities
- v. a heavier work load than men, because of their triple role (production, reproduction and domestic tasks), which leaves little time to improve their socio-economic circumstances.

In West Africa, women usually represent less than 5% of land-owners.<sup>23</sup> The important role played by women within smallholder farming systems is insufficiently considered within rural development. Often women are not aware of their legal rights to land tenure. These are obscured by the pervasive persistence of customary traditions.

However in some countries, things are also slowly starting to shift, as in the case of Mali, where significant progress was recently made on the issue of land rights for women (Box 2).

In Sahelian countries, access to credit is challenging for men in marginal dry land communities. For women, it is even more challenging. Recognizing that in traditional African households, women have little say in how household income is allocated, and how they are not given a financial compensation despite working on the main family fields, Tsuamba Bourgou, the Executive Director of ANSD observes that women are “*twice as much penalized, and therefore twice as much vulnerable*”.<sup>25,26</sup>

## Box 2.

### Land tenure reforms underway in the Sahel region

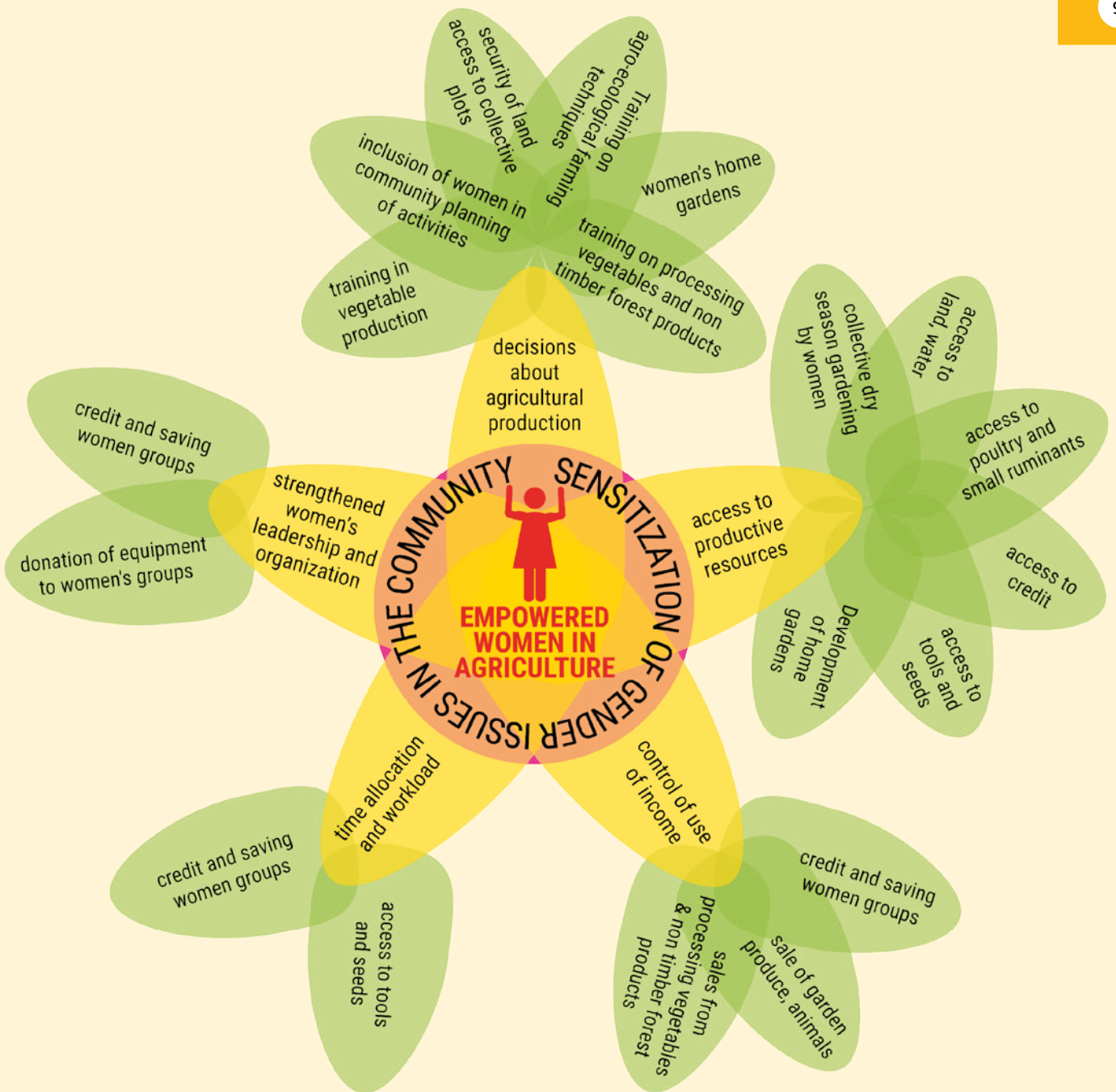
Policy reform processes aiming to protect rural space have been underway in some Sahelian countries, such as Mali. Under the impulse of several farming organizations and social movements, Malian deputies have unanimously voted for the new Land tenure Act (*Loi Foncière Agricole* – LFA in French) in March 2017. This new legislation was driven by the Malian Minister for Agriculture. It introduces new measures aimed at recognizing and protecting customary rights of local communities, whilst taking into account the rights of women and vulnerable individuals in decision-making<sup>24</sup>. The challenge now is ensuring its practical application throughout the country.

## 1.3 Potential pitfalls of women’s empowerment in agriculture

Measures to foster women’s empowerment to engage in agriculture or other productive activities can easily lead to increasing even more their already heavy workloads, including domestic work, agricultural work and childcare, which are commonly referred to as women’s triple work burden (reproductive, productive and social sphere duties).<sup>27</sup>

For this reason, it is essential to directly address gender relations and the division of resources and responsibilities within the household. The key principle is “do-no-harm”. As noted by Peter Gubbels, the team leader of AE+6, this is a significant challenge. It requires balancing providing women with greater economic opportunities while carefully monitoring that women don’t become even more overburdened, or that childcare is compromised. Gubbels notes that although the AE+6 initiative introduced a tool to assess this within women’s empowerment, this is one aspect of the program that has not yet been adequately assessed.<sup>28</sup>

Figure 3. The spheres of women disempowerment in agriculture and how these can be overcome.



Source: Groundswell International, based on the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) (see below).



## 2. Strategies and projects implemented in the countries

To overcome gender barriers preventing women from resources and opportunities to build food secure and resilient livelihoods, the AE+6 team used a combination of strategies. These were conceived to address the root causes of women's marginalization in the agricultural sector. They included:

- i. reviving traditional solidarity mechanisms to strengthen the resilience of the most vulnerable households, targeting the women in these households
- ii. supporting women's organization and leadership through the creation of savings and credit groups
- iii. providing specialized material assistance to women from the poorest households including poultry, or rotating animal loans (based on the traditional practice of *habbanaye*); seeds, or monthly stipends of cash
- iv. supporting women to obtain secure access productive assets (land)
- v. providing specialized technical training to women farmers for dry season gardening, or women's crops
- vi. using improved nutrition as a practical enabling entry point for gender-sensitive resilience programming

AE+6 team members with experience in gender provided backstopping to the field teams to undertake sensitive community discussions of gender issues related to resilience activities. Local gender specialists also provided support not just for technical aspects, but for internal organizational and staff development to overcome weaknesses in conducting gender-sensitive activities for resilience.

### 2.1 Measuring the empowerment of women in agriculture through the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI)

Groundswell helped the AE+6 country teams learn a tool called the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI).<sup>29</sup> Many organizations in the international community developed this methodology to measure the empowerment, agency and inclusion of women in the agriculture sector.

The WEAI tracks women's engagement in agriculture in five areas:

- i. decisions about agricultural production
- ii. access to and decision-making power about productive resources
- iii. control of use of income
- iv. leadership in the community
- v. time allocation/work load

A value-adding feature of this composite index tool is that it also measures women's empowerment relative to men within their households. This sub-index, called the Gender Parity Index (GPI), provides a more robust understanding of gender dynamics within households and communities, by reflecting the percentage of women who are empowered or whose achievements are at least as high as the men in their households.<sup>30</sup>

Recent analytical work conducted in the A+6 countries in the Sahel revealed a tremendous gender gap. In 2016, an IFPRI researcher collected data on empowerment, using the WEAI tool, in 500 households in

the Tahoua region of Niger. The data revealed that women are significantly less empowered than men in leadership, group membership, ability to speak in public, access to and decision-making power about productive resources. The research also established a correlation between the empowered households and higher productivity.<sup>31</sup>

The AE+ 6 teams made use of the WEA but the program time frame of 18 months did not allow for a detailed analysis of the data “before and after” the women’s empowerment oriented activities. Gender change takes time and persistence. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the IFPRI findings are similar in all three program areas of the AE+6 countries. A low level of women’s empowerment in the agriculture sector prevails.

However, this picture needs careful nuance because in almost all villages, there are, for a number of reasons, women headed households. In such households, women typically have a higher score of empowerment, because the responsibility of the household relies mostly on them. In contrast, women in so-called “dual households”, where a primary male is the head of household, typically have much lower empowerment scores.<sup>32</sup>

AE+6 country teams have stated their keenness to keep using the WEIA tool as a means to identify key areas in which women’s empowerment needs to be strengthened and to track progress over time. The five parameters of the WEA’s composite index are all aspects that the AE+6 teams sought to improve, through a variety of activities.

## 2.2 Awareness raising and training on the issue of gender equity

### Training on gender equity

Groundswell project partners organized awareness and training sessions on gender issues in their respective countries. ANSD for example ran two such 2-day sessions in the municipalities of Bilanga and Gayéri (reaching a total of 60 people). Various interactive exercises progressively awakened participants to the deeply entrenched gender disparities prevailing in their communities with regards to domestic and agricultural work.

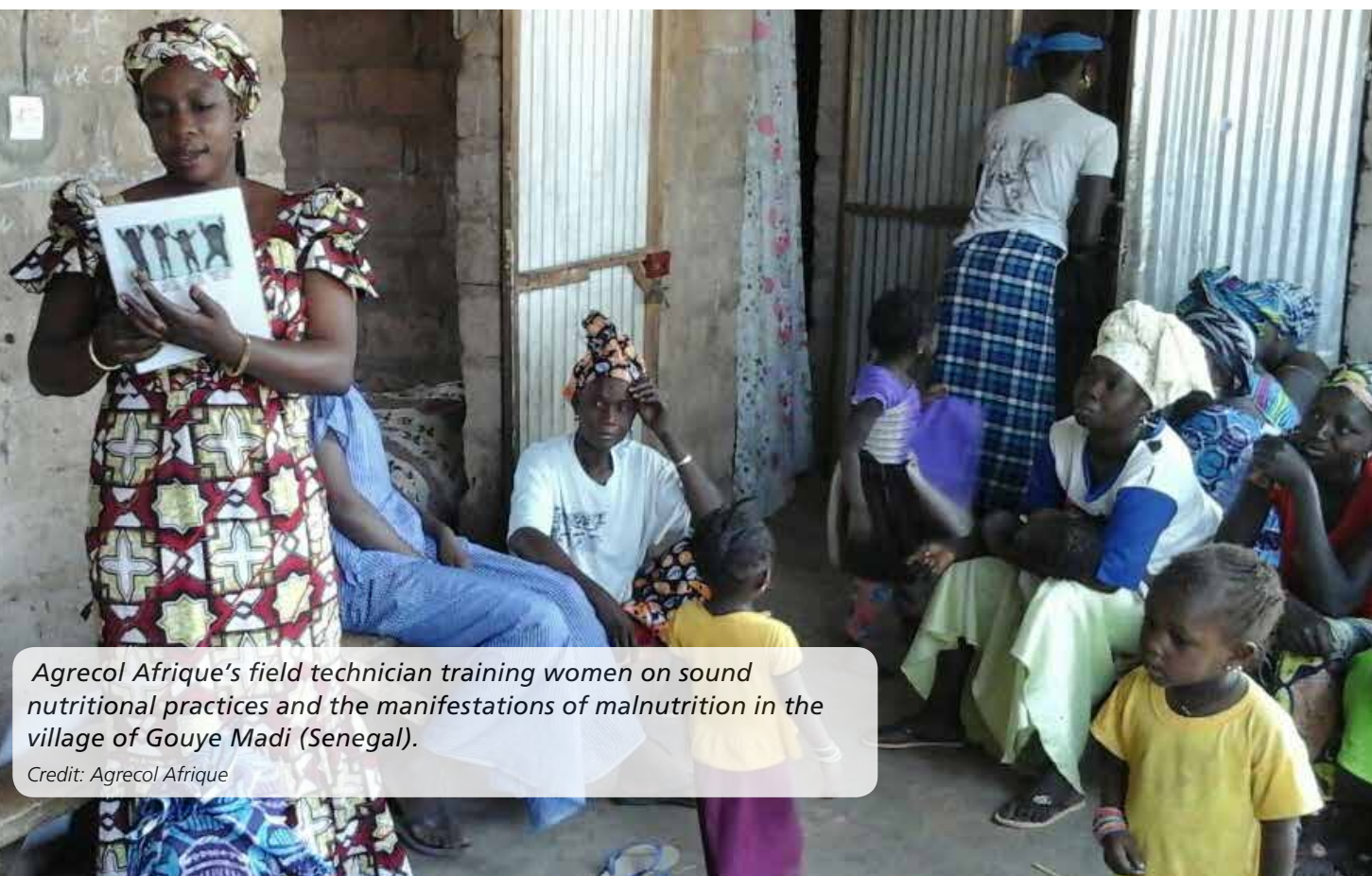
A very compelling snapshot captured from one of the sessions in Bilanga in Burkina Faso by ANSD illustrates this point. Participants were asked to enumerate their domestic and agricultural chores throughout the day. Participants often confused routine activities with chores (these are crossed out). What remains in the true work done by men and women in general. We see how men tend to perceive a lot of their activities as chores whereas they aren’t, and that women do far more than men on these fronts.

The training was concluded by a series of actions that could be taken at household level to ensure that women are better-considered and empowered with respect to decision-making and the control of resources. The groups in the various communities also identified specific household or agricultural chores that could be carried out by the men.

**Table 1. Gendered household and agricultural chores and duties in Bilanga (Burkina Faso)**

Men's duties and chores	Women's duties and chores
4h: Waking up	3h: Waking up
Prayer	Crushing mil
Checking on every family member	Prayer
5h: going to the field	Preparing the meal
Work in the field (4h)	Fetching water
9h: lunch break	Sweeping the yard
back to work	Waking up the children
12h: bringing the animals to the grazing field	Washing the children
16: back to the field	Checking on every family member
Work in the field (1h30)	Leading the animals to their grazing and tethering them there
17h30: leaving the field	Going to work in the peanut field
18h: Have a shower	Preparing the meal
20h: Having supper	9h: Brining the meal to the field
Going to bed	14h: Going to work in the peanut field
	17h: going back home to cook the evening meal
	Washing the children
	Have a shower
	20h: Having supper
	22h: Going to bed

Source: Adapted from ANSD. 2017. Rapport des deux sessions de formation sur le genre à Bilanga et à Gayéri (p.9)



*Agrecol Afrique's field technician training women on sound nutritional practices and the manifestations of malnutrition in the village of Gouye Madi (Senegal).*  
Credit: Agrecol Afrique

## Nutrition as a practical enabling entry point for gender-sensitive resilience programming

The AE+6 teams learned that a nutrition lens (i.e. asking who is most at risk of malnutrition and why) leads to activities such as helping women grow vegetables, or ensuring women's availability for child care, and facilitates the sensitive topic of gender division of labor and resources.

Through nutrition, AE+6 teams initiated a dialogue within the community about power relations, leading to an increase in women's access to productive resources, and consideration of measures to reduce their work load. It was easier to address this sensitive cultural issue based on a commonly agreed agenda of how to improve nutrition that enabled confronting gender inequality indirectly.

## 2.3 Empowering women economically and organizationally

### The creation of savings and credit groups

AE+6 program teams helped establish women's saving and credit groups in all three countries. This involved organizing women's groups, composed of 12 to 25 members, who met as a group on a weekly basis. The AE+6 teams gave this initiative a different name in different countries. In Burkina Faso and Mali, the teams referred to the program as *épargne pour le changement* (EPC) (saving for change); in Senegal, Agrecol Afrique called the women's groups "solidarity calabashes".

The basic operations are very similar. The main difference is that in the case of EPC, the weekly amount contributed by the women is set and known by all, whereas in the case of calabashes, the opening of the calabash is veiled so that the amount contributed by women is not known. If a woman doesn't have money to contribute, she can just drop her hand in and out of the calabash, with no-one knowing how much she contributed, if any money at all.

Through the capital accumulated through savings, individual women members needing credit can take out loans to start income generating activities. In the villages in Mali supported by Sahel Eco for instance, women contributed 100 Franc CFA (\$0.20 USD) per week. The loan provided to a single woman at a given time ranges from 5,000 to 30,000 Francs CFA (9 to 54 dollars USD). These amounts represent significant sums for rural women in the Sahel. The local income generating activities undertaken by women with their loans included selling cereal crops, hand-made pancakes or condiments on the local or neighboring markets, as well as buying, fattening and selling small livestock. But women members also used the funds given on credit to address health needs of their children, including purchasing more diversified and nutrient dense food.

Women members are managing their saving and credit group initiative to be adapted to the farming cycle. At the beginning of the rainy season, women groups suspend their savings activities. In some villages, women leave the village to go to distant fields to do planting. Other women groups split up their savings collected up to that point to purchase inputs required for planting (seed, labor, animals).

These contextual factors vary across countries. In some villages, where women farmers travel far to reach their fields, and stay in small huts for many weeks during the rainy season, their savings and credit activity only runs for six months of the year. In other villages, where women remain in their normal homes during the rainy season, savings and credit continues for 12 months.

*"This initiative goes far beyond saving and credit. It has much wider effects touching on many aspects of women's empowerment of women in agriculture, including strengthening self confidence, women's solidarity, increased negotiation power as a group, increased income, and a stronger voice in decision-making".*

Peter Gubbels, AE+6 team leader



*Women from a solidarity calabash in the village of Tibga (Burkina Faso) counting their proceeds.*

*Credit: ANSD Credit: ANSD*



*A solidarity calabash group in the village of Keur Djiby (Senegal) with the bulk soap powder it has just purchased from their common savings.*

*Credit: Agrecol Afrique*



Women from a credit and saving group in the Diora village (Gayéri municipality, Burkina Faso) who have learnt how to make soap from NTFPs.

Credit: ANSD

The strategic intent of these groupings is to bring about deep changes in the accumulation, the ownership and the control of productive resources. Importantly, these savings groups protect women from having to rely on local money lenders, who in Mali often apply high interest rates in contrast to the recommended rate of 4-5% in the EPCs established through Sahel Eco<sup>33</sup>.

### Supporting women with processing produce for self consumption and direct sale

Part of the income generating activities targeted by Sahel Eco to benefit women, were the value chains of indigenous tree products (sheanut and *nééré*, or locust bean tree pods). Shea can be processed as butter. *Néré* pods produce a highly nutritious and locally sought after condiment called *Sumbala*.<sup>34</sup> Sahel Eco supported to women from vulnerable households in each of their eight action research pilot villages (organized into groups of 25 women) with learning how to process these tree products. Soap can be made from Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs). Each women's group received basic equipment required to reduce the labor involved in processing, and to enable them to continue this income generating activity without Sahel Eco's support.

Learning to process these tree products had direct nutritional benefits for the women's households, as these can be consumed directly, but the sale of these products also provided income.

## 2.4 Supporting women with accessing land

Land constitutes, together with water, the most critical productive resource for farming communities. However, in the Sahel, land is often not securely available to women and the land they do access is often marginal land, a direct result of gender-specific social norms.<sup>35</sup> This is a core factor contributing to reducing the performance

of the agricultural sector. A 2010 meta study looking at the productivity of men versus that of women in Africa revealed an average yield gap of 25 percent. It also found this gap got wider where women controlled less land.<sup>36</sup>

The Gender and Land Rights Database (GLRD), launched by FAO in 2010, highlights the major political, legal and cultural factors that limit women's land rights. In Senegal for instance, despite the 2001 constitutional reform aimed at granting men and women equal land rights, the reality remains that traditional land is most often managed according to customary law, which rarely recognizes women rights to land tenure. In Senegal, women are the official holders of only 26% of land title deeds.<sup>37</sup>

Throughout the Sahel, community-owned land traditionally favors male farmers. Men do "give" land to women (often their wives) to farm, but there is the constant risk that men will take back this land if women have made productive investments to improve it. Women grow crops in fields apart from the main family fields (managed by the male head of household).

Women also grow different crops, which often have a more important nutritional value than the staple crops grown in the family fields. This important role played by women within smallholder farming systems in the Sahel is mostly neglected in agricultural development programs. Women are often not aware of their legal rights to land tenure, as these are often obscured by the dominance of customary land rights.

*"AE+6's social 'innovation,' consisted of organizing women in groups and supporting a process of community-sanctioned and public donation of this land, so that it would remain in their hands for the long term, ideally in perpetuity".*

Peter Gubbels, AE+6 team leader.

To address this issue, the AE+6 teams in each of the three countries decided not to undertake the long term, very challenging effort required to help women obtain **land ownership**. Instead they decided to tackle enabling women to obtain **secure access** to land. To accomplish this, the AE+6 teams engaged communities in a dialogue to determine not only how interested women could gain access to land for farming, but once received, how to ensure this land would not be taken away from them as they improved it.

The AE+6 teams found that this public dialogue, which highlighted the issues, the benefits to women, but also the wider benefits to the women's households and for the entire community, worked as a strategy to morally and customarily bind all stakeholders, including the male landowners, to the agreement.

ANSD in Burkina provided an example of how this was done. ANSD made agreements with communities to assist women's groups to obtain a water source (either a wide diameter well or a borehole), on condition that women would gain secure access to the land around the water source (to be used for dry season gardening) for as long as they continued to farm it. As a first step with the communities, ANSD assisted women in locating land sites suitable for a water source. Once the water point was located, ANSD helped the women's group make a formal request to the landowner of that site to delimit the portion of land he was definitely willing to cede to the women's group. ANSD's next step was to call upon the village traditional authorities to facilitate and provide public (customary) sanction for the transfer of the land to the women. The final step was to formalize this transfer with a written record (a "*convention locale*") that was co-signed by the local municipality.

**Box 3****Women and rights in Burkina Faso**

In Burkina Faso, the “*Tengsoaba*” (the chief), who acts as an intermediary between the ancestors and the living, manages traditional land areas and land rights.<sup>38</sup> Even though the entire clan or family is given ownership and usufruct of the ancestors’ land, women remain excluded from owning any land.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, customary law precludes women and the youth from managing land; land can arbitrarily be taken from them. It is only through their relationships with men that women are granted limited access to land; i.e., through their husband or male relatives.<sup>40</sup> As a result, women often tend to farm small parcels of land, which are often degraded. These marginal plots can be taken away from a women farmer at any time.<sup>41</sup> All married men are customarily obliged to give their wife a piece of land to farm if she makes a request; any farm produce cultivated on this land belongs to her (even though women most often use this production towards helping her husband meet the needs of the household). She is also entitled to a portion of the crops harvested on the family plot owned by the husband, as compensation for her work in sowing and harvesting. However, as the main provider of the household, the male head of household makes all the farming decisions.<sup>42</sup>

Agrecol in Senegal followed a similar process and actively lobbied the mayor and elected local government councilors. Based on this new awareness on the issue of women accessing land, mayors indicated that they would systematically sign off on any request for land to be ceded to women. As part of their advocacy, Agrecol strongly encouraged the mayors to favor land closer to water points so as to make field work of watering less tiring to women. This advocacy work was undertaken jointly with the female farmer leaders to the municipality.

**2.5 Empowering women as farmers****Home gardens and collective plots**

Directly linked to enabling secure land access for women were AE+6’s support for the development of collective dry season garden plots. These took the form of either individual plots within a collective field for dry season gardening or small home gardens in the rainy season. In each country program site, AE+6 teams identified the poorest (most vulnerable) households in the pilot villages. They then provided specialized support to women in those households to undertake farming activities, with a **focus on women’s preferred crops**. AE+6 helped with provision of tools, seeds and providing women farmers training in agroecological practices, how to compost so that they would have greater chances of increasing their yields on their rain-fed plots.

Women members often invested loans obtained from their saving and credit groups in these farming sites. Most women used the produce harvested for household consumption and sold any excess on the market to earn income. In Senegal, women supported by Agrecol Afrique were highly enthusiastic about how such small plots have made a great difference in their livelihoods. In the 2017 production season, many of them managed to get through the lean season for the first time without getting into debt.

In Mali, Sahel Eco favored the promotion of home gardens. Sahel Eco’s experience was that small home gardens (usually not much bigger than 10m<sup>2</sup>) often were better-tended and more productive than bigger (and often





*Woman harvesting leafy vegetables in the collective plot in the village Piguimbondin (Burkina Faso).*

*Credit: ANSD*

more remote) plots in collective fields. Sahel Eco's support to women consisted of training to improve their composting techniques, and provision of vegetable seed varieties not locally available.

Conversely, Agrecol Afrique's experience has been that larger collective fields better suit the needs of women farmers. Not only have these "*périmètres maraîchers*" proven to be highly productive, but they have also strengthened solidarity between women members of different social status. By fostering technical learning between women members, Agrecol Afrique also slowly reduced the "paternalist" influence of field technicians. As women's skills improved, they began to learn more and more from one another.

### Donation of equipment and farming inputs

Groundswell's network partners identified women from poorer households and provided subsidized inputs to enable them to farm more easily and improve their yields but also process non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and commercial crops. Each of the AE+6 teams subsidized farming tools and inputs to different degrees. The farming tools and inputs donated by Sahel eco to women for instance included:

- caldron with lid of a capacity of 30 kg
- 100 liter capacity plastic basin with lid
- 30 l capacity plastic basin
- aluminum basin
- aluminum ladle
- watering cans
- rakes
- improved seeds
- cuttings of orange fleshed sweet potato



*A woman in her home garden (Mali).*

*Credit: Sahel Eco*



*Women tending a collective plot (Senegal).*

*Credit: Agrecol Afrique*

### Aviculture and fattening of small ruminants

Support to aviculture and fattening of small ruminants formed an important part of the income generating activities supported by the AE+6 country teams. Sahel Eco in particular focused on these animal rearing activities, which entailed training women on how to feed and care for the animals, grants of breeding pairs and help in erecting animal shelters.

### Rotation-based gift of livestock

This strategy, based on the local tradition known as “*habbanaye*”, takes its roots among *Peul* herders, who, if ever confronted with the severe loss of their animals because of drought or disease, would obtain loans, in the form of female pregnant animals, to re-build their herds and livelihoods. Through AE+6, this traditional solidarity mechanism was adapted to provide the poorest households the opportunity to increase its assets. This was done by providing a grant of pregnant sheep or goats, or by provision of poultry.

In Burkina Faso, the long-term vision of this approach is that in a few years time, all women in the villages would own at least some animals<sup>43</sup>. This strategy involved the intentional and systematic identification of eligible women in the most vulnerable households. The aim was to reverse the trend whereby only the more affluent households are able get loans to buy animals, something the poorer families cannot do as they do not have collateral. The *habbanaye* approach is described in detail in the equity case study. By targeting specifically women from the most vulnerable households, this activity addressed both women’s empowerment and equity issues, within an agroecology approach for strengthening resilience.

## 3. Challenges

The challenges that the AE+6 teams encountered during implementation are captured below.

### 3.1 The need to tread cautiously with gender issues

There is often a misperception that by tackling gender inequality, projects should work only with women. The AE+6 teams were well aware to avoid the simplistic assumption that men need not be included in a women’s empowerment strategy. In this respect, AE+6 teams were careful to also engage with men where possible, and to include them in all awareness raising activities.

Another challenge addressed by the AE+6 program was how to avoid the risk of lumping all women “into the same basket”. The situation of women varies, depending on households. Highly differentiated levels of (dis)empowerment of women are a reality in rural communities. Research on the topic (such as data revealed by the WEAI) shows that women are much less empowered in “dual households” where a primary male is also present, compared to women-headed households. The latter are often households in which the husband has passed away and where women have sole decisional powers<sup>44</sup>.

The AE+6 country teams kept these importance nuances in mind when engaging with communities to develop specific activities for integrating women’s empowerment into agroecology.

### 3.2 Cultural challenges

In the context of the Sahel region, AE+6 teams found that overcoming the obstacles to women’s empowerment requires tact, caution and strategic diplomacy, respecting traditional mindsets even while changing attitudes. This was most important when AE+6 raised the issue of secure access to land, in a context where men strongly adhere to the custom of land belonging only to them. If not approached well, this issue could easily become a source of misunderstanding and tension.

Awareness-raising proved key to overcome such issues. In the aforementioned gender training session run by ANSD, trainers extracted from participants a snapshot describing who owns or controls specific resources. It is rendered in table 2 below.

**Table 2: Gendered ownership and control of resources**

Resources/wealth	Who do they belong to or who controls them	
	Women	Men
Cultivable land		X
Agricultural equipment		X
Animals		X
The field and the harvest		X
The main house		X
The household income		X
Means of transport (motorbike etc.)		X
The children		X

Source: Adapted from ANSD. 2017. *Rapport des deux sessions de formation sur le genre à Bilanga et à Gayéri (p12)*

This table aptly represents the deeply rooted patriarchal system prevailing in the focus countries of AE+6.

### 3.3 Illiteracy

A high level of female illiteracy was a key challenge to the running of group savings and credit schemes. One remedial action consisted of systemically asking members to memorize the amount that was contributed to the scheme at each session, and then asking members to repeat this amount at the opening of the following section. In instances where some women members could write, they would be requested to record transactions in a book. Failing this, some women's groups called upon a man to attend their meetings to write down the requisite bookkeeping information.

### 3.4 Preventing an increase in the workload of women

AE+6 teams placed a strong emphasis on empowering women as farmers. Although the AE+6 made efforts to monitor the effects on women's workloads, and catalyze dialogue within the community for adjusting gender division of labor, there is a possibility that women's workloads may have increased. The AE+6 teams plan to assess this and explore remedial action based on the WEIA tool, in a hoped for next phase of this initiative.

### 3.5 Challenges specific to project implementation

#### Short project time frames

All AE+6 teams indicated that the challenge of facilitating and supporting women's empowerment in rural communities for resilience requires a long term time frame to ensure that positive changes in gender relations, shifts in women's status are sustained. In this regard, the main constraint was the short 18-month duration of the AE+6 implementation phase. Sahel Eco in Mal, for instance, lamented that it did not have enough time to instigate more steps to secure land tenure for groups of women. Despite the positive initial results obtained in all 3 countries, all partners indicated that a long-term process is required to consolidate gains, improve practices and knowledge, so that changes in behaviors and initial impacts can be deepened and sustained.

## Challenges with exploiting the WEAI

The WEIA was essentially used as a diagnostic and awareness-raising tool to identify priority areas for women's empowerment. Unfortunately, because of major delays in obtaining funding, there was not sufficient time for training staff in their use of WEIA before the rainy season to establish a baseline. Hence it was not possible to assess the initial effects of AE+6 comparing "before" and "after" the interventions.

Another challenge was that the AE+6 teams lacked the requisite resources and skills to tabulate, synthesize and analyze the WEIA. In retrospect, this intended capacity building of the AE+6 partner teams was overly ambitious, when considering the introduction of several other tools, in addition to WEIA, to assess food insecurity, resilience and dietary diversity. Despite this, for the first time all AE+6 partners have learned how to systematically assess women's empowerment. All intend applying the WEAI again after some time has elapsed to assess the impact of their on-going activities on women's empowerment.

## Securing land tenure for women

Some of the AE+6 country teams were constrained by the national political context in undertaking work to help women gain secure access to land. In Burkina Faso, with the upheaval following the popular uprising that overthrew President Compaoré, it was very difficult to address land issues. In the context of the resulting transition government, the work of elected municipal councils was suspended. It was not possible to initiate land tenure related transaction under these conditions. Instead ANSD opted to reinforce the support given to women on land that had already been secured.

A secondary challenge arose for Sahel Eco in some villages in Mali because of the reluctance of landowners to allow women to grow trees on crop land through "Farmer managed natural regeneration". The traditional mindset in the Sahel is that agricultural land must be devoid for trees. Sahel Eco did not have the time to fully tackle this issue.

Similarly, Agrecol in Senegal also flagged that the size of land usually granted to women were very small and often located far from water points, which made their viability questionable.

## Rotation-based gift of animals

Challenges regarding livestock keeping (rotation-based gift of animals) are discussed in the equity case study.

## Women credit and savings groups

The implementation of women savings and credit groups, beyond being slowed down by illiteracy issues, has not encountered any specific challenge. Indeed, this initiative proved wildly popular with women. In Burkina, women spontaneously formed their own credit and savings groups without help or guidance of ANSD.

In Senegal, Agrecol identified one issue with their specific system. At one point, it was decided to prescribe a certain weekly amount to be contributed by each of the women members. According to Agrecol, failing to adhere to the voluntary and anonymous contributions originally used for calabash savings may have excluded some of the most vulnerable women. It also could have compromised the solidarity dimension of calabashes. This is an aspect that, according to him, needs review in the future.<sup>45</sup>

## Farming activities

The main factors hindering the optimal functioning of home and collective dry season communal gardens were the small size of the plots allocated and the limited access to water.

## 4. Results and impacts of these interventions

As noted above, catalyzing lasting change for women's empowerment requires far more time than 18 months that the AE+6 program had available. However, all the AE+6 teams agreed that genuine progress has been achieved.

The generation of baseline and monitoring data collected using the WEAI gave AE+6 teams a deeper understanding of the gender disparities prevailing in their program areas and identified the potential areas to prioritize. Even through the WEAI data was not fully analyzed, it influenced the AE+6 teams design of activities to become more gender-sensitive.

Specifically, the AE+6 partners sought to have an influence on each of the 5 parameters identified by the WEAI empowerment index. Table 3 below gives a snapshot of the program activities that contributed to women's empowerment as per the WEAI sub-index.

**Table 3. How the AE+6 interventions contribute to improving the WEAI.**

WEAI	Interventions/activities	Comment
i) decisions about agricultural production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>training on ecological farming techniques</li> <li>collective plots secured with security of tenure</li> </ul>	The training received by women on their collective or private parcels provided them with skills that allowed them to farm in a more productive manner; as a result they started having on influence over the family plots owned by the husbands and were better empowered as to what and how to produce on their own portions.
ii) access to and decision-making power about productive resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>collective women gardens</li> <li>development of home gardens and collective plots on which they have full decision powers on how to farm</li> <li>subsidization of input &amp; small farming tools following the rainy season</li> </ul>	<p>Women's improved agricultural and nutritional knowledge enabled them to produce the "sauce" to accompany the basic grain staple to be of improved (more nutritious) quality; it also enabled women to generate extra income for the household from the sale of their produce.</p> <p>This greater decision making power is increasingly recognized and valued by men, who see these direct benefits.</p> <p>Through the credit and savings groups, women have the funds required to buy input before the rainy season; added to the subsidy of seeds and small tools, women's productive capacity is increased.</p>
iii) control of use of income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>credit and saving women groups</li> </ul>	<p>Women generate their own income and are as a result financially empowered. Men have become more appreciative of the benefits of empowering women to generate income, because it means their wives can play a greater part in meeting the household financial and food security needs. To some extent, this reduces the burden of men, who are traditionally responsible for fully meeting these household's needs.</p> <p>Women were sensitized on the need to use household income to diversify food for a better nutrition – they are empowered to have a greater say in the household in terms of how to use this income.</p> <p>Lastly, women's groups have provided a key forum to convey important messages to its members, including how to best make use of their savings or loans for farming, and improved nutrition. This has empowered women to make more informed decisions at the household level.</p>

WEAI	Interventions/activities	Comment
iv) leadership in the community	women credit and saving groups	Credit and saving groups are more than just an economic platform; they are also the opportunity for women to share their concerns, ask questions about what people are doing, develop leadership skills, seek advice and generally widen their perspectives.
v) time allocation.	credit and saving women groups	<p>The credit and saving women groups were a catalyst for greater social cohesion. Women members indicate they were now interacting far more with their female peers. This suggests there is also greater solidarity among women.</p> <p>It is early days to ascertain how these support initiatives will be able to free up the time of women; for now they have only been able to purchase or receive small farming tools, but in the next farming season they may be able to purchase farming implements (i.e., a plough and traction animals), which would save them huge amounts of time (Bourgou 2018).</p> <p>This remains the one aspect that AE+6 has not managed to take into consideration adequately.</p>

This table illustrates how AE+6 strategies and activities influenced each of these empowerment parameters. Some of these points are discussed in more detail below. In particular, changes in women's decision-making seemed to have been one of the most significant. Overall, despite the short time frame, support for the empowerment of women has triggered some interesting initial changes in gender dynamics.

## 4.1 Empowerment in decision making

Credit and saving women groups brought important changes within the social fabric of villages. They have created fertile ground for the leadership capacity of women to develop. During the training in establishing savings and credit groups, women were given guidance but free rein to determine their internal rules. It was up to them to decide on how often money contributions should be made, whether those should be set amounts, and if so, what this amount would be.

It was also up to them to decide the criteria on which to grant loans, the repayment period and the interest rate applicable, if any. Some of the AE+6 country teams were surprised by the way in which groups of women took ownership of the concept and refined it to a very sophisticated level. For instance in the village of Bibgou (Burkina Faso), women decided that the weekly amounts to be contributed by members should amount to 275 FCFA (0.44 dollars US), an amount which included 250 FCFA (0.40 dollars US) to cover loans for income generating activities, and 25 FCFA (0.04 dollars US) towards a social solidarity fund. In this way, women managed to reconcile their desire to access « commercial » loans as well as saving for their social needs (unexpected funerals, and health expenses).<sup>46</sup>

Women's decision-making power was also reinforced because of the training they received on agroecological ways of farming. On the collectively farmed plots, the women had full decision-making ability to adapt and apply these new methods as they pleased. AE+6 teams observed how women genuinely enjoyed having full discretion over how to farm their newly acquired plots. At times, the women purposefully got men involved. They would for instance give them a few rows to farm on their collective plot, in return for their labor in the field or with assistance with transport.

For the first time, in some of the Burkinabé villages, women were given the power to farm much bigger fields than the small plots traditionally granted to them. According to Tsuamba Bourgou of ANSD, women's

full control of these plots, the growing recognition of men of the benefits gained from their wives obtaining greater agricultural knowledge through training, the more diverse nutritious “sauces” produced for household meals, and the increased income for the households from the sale of women’s production, taken together, has constituted a major cultural shift.<sup>47</sup>

Greater decision powers in farming decisions and at the community level clearly has also increased women’s self-confidence. In Burkina, ANSD has observed how women, in gaining self-confidence have developed great ambitions with what they would like to achieve in future. Some women told ANSD that one day, they expected to be driving an animal-traction plough, and even riding their own bicycles or motorbikes.

Finally, Fatou Batta (Groundswell’s co-team leader of AE+6) observed how women group members have increased dignity. They no longer shy away from attending public gatherings. This also marks a significant change in cultural practices.<sup>48</sup>

## 4.2 Greater social cohesion among women

In addition to women’s bolstered decision-making power, AE+6 activities have also fostered greater social cohesion and solidarity between women within the community. Women report that they in most instances didn’t use to know many other women and kept to their circles. Through the saving and credit groups, they have got to know more women, socialize more, and have developed tight bonds.

In some villages where ANSD operates, some women have opted to contribute to the saving scheme through a different mechanism; they volunteer time to help another woman with her field work, for which she would be paid (for instance 1,000 FCFA or \$1.80 in USD). This amount would then be allocated to the savings and credit scheme.

## 4.3 Changes in gender dynamics

These results described above suggest that gender dynamics in the participating villages are starting to undergo significant changes. Women are managing, through their economic empowerment, to strengthen their autonomy relative to their usual dependence on their husbands. They are better able to cover some of their needs out from their own initiatives.<sup>49</sup>

Sahel Eco has underlined how the women involved in the weekly savings groups, who use to struggle to speak clearly in front of the men, were managing to express themselves with more confidence. Men are starting to witness how the women’s increased agricultural knowledge and increased income are benefitting their households. This is starting to change women’s status; husbands seem to be giving women a greater say in household decisions.

As Bourgou says: “the more the man sees what you contribute to the household, the more you are consulted, the more decision power you have”.

## 4.4 Greater farming outcome

All AE+6 teams have reported that the farmers’ yields, including for women farmers, have increased compared to before adopting agroecological innovations. For instance in Burkina Faso, even vulnerable households who started adopting agroecological practices led to doubling of their yields.<sup>50</sup> There is a subtle correlation between women’s empowerment and increased women farmer productivity<sup>51</sup> – but this is manifest not just in terms of increased food production and income, but also in terms of a diversified and more nutritious diet.

AE+6’s experience confirmed the results of research showing that women’s empowerment often positively affects productivity. A women’s membership in a producer organization gives her access to information, allowing her to use her labor and resources much more efficiently.<sup>52</sup>



## 4.5 Snapshot of achievements favoring the empowerment of women across the three AE+6 countries

### ANSD

- established 36 saving and credit groups (with a total of 760 members) across 8 action research villages in the municipal territories of Gayéri and Bilanga. These groups managed to saved close to 5 million Francs CFA (about 8,862 US dollars) in total and 260 loans were granted to women
- enabled 423 women (organized in groups) to receive support with securing land tenure, accessing water, ecological training and receiving farm tools
- provided women from 100 poor households with grants of animals (small ruminants and poultry) as part of the *habbanaye* system (see below)
- a total of 20 collective gardens benefitting women were established across Gayéri and Bilanga (10 in each municipality), totaling a surface area of 7.05 hectares

### Sahel Eco

- 354 women were organized in 12 credit and saving groups; these groups raised 518 400 Francs CFA (about 917 US dollars) over a 4 month period. The groups allocated almost this entire amount as loans to their members for income generative activities
- provided 42 women (out of total of 45 beneficiaries) with start-up capital to purchase animals for rearing
- enabled women to establish 56 home gardens to diversity household food and generate income
- provided 40 women (out of total of 200) with improved seed
- trained 76 women (out of 850 beneficiaries) in agroforestry (farmer managed natural regeneration) techniques

### Agrecol Afrique

- organized 478 women were organized across 21 saving and credit solidarity calabashes (as saving and credit groups are locally known in Senegal). A total of
- 2,714, 600 CFA (about 4,810 US dollars) was thus collected among all these groups over the duration of the project
- fostered 39 community initiatives through the savings and interest gained through these solidarity calabashes, used mostly on the bulk purchasing of seeds
- helped women from the Louba village to purchase land to expand the cultivated surface areas. A total of 3,5 hectares were thus secured
- the independence these women displayed astonished the Agrecol AE+6 team, as they also managed to purchase their own seed and plan their production independently
- enabled 362 “solidarity credits” to be loaned to members to help them meet their medical and food needs and to pay for the children’s schooling
- provided 478 women with subsidized faming inputs



## 5. Lessons learned on best practices

The AE+6 experience confirmed the results of other research that women's empowerment plays a vital role in strengthening the resilience of rural communities in the Sahel.<sup>53</sup>

One of the overarching lessons from this case study is that activities to improve the resilience requires more than promotion of improved technical practices. It must systematically strengthen organizational capacities, leadership of both men and women, and facilitate social processes to change gender relations in a way that empowers women to improve their livelihoods.

### 5.1 Getting the theory right: what women's empowerment really means

Practitioners in the agricultural field, including the many actors within the agroecology movement in the Sahel, strive to include women's empowerment within their programs.

Yet there is still much to learn about how to do this effectively. Too often, in the absence of good strategies, a gender sensitive approach to agricultural development is done in a token way, focused mostly on ensuring women's participation in a few activities, while the majority of agricultural training and support tends to be given to the main family farm, i.e., the portion of land that is managed by the men.<sup>54</sup>

Empowering women in agriculture entails means that women **benefit directly** from training and follow up, credit, seeds, and tools, and not only indirectly through their husbands or male relatives. It entails addressing socio-cultural impediments preventing women in having access to productive assets (land, water, and animals). It requires systematically enabling and empowering women farmers to have a voice in decision-making and actors within the food production system.

The AE+6 experience indicates that it is feasible, in a relatively short time, with appropriate strategies, to overcome the formidable challenges to empowering women in agricultural and in their livelihoods, and through them, significantly improving the resilience, food security and nutrition of rural households.

### 5.2 Key success factors for empowerment of women in ecological farming

#### Key success factor #1: Raising awareness on the sensitive issue of gender

Raising the issue of gender relations in the Sahel context can be highly sensitive, especially concerning access to land.

What the AE+6 teams learned is that a strictly "rights based" approach to tackle the gender inequality (i.e., form of rights to be acquired by the women that seems to be to the detriment of men's customary rights) is likely to trigger an adverse reaction from men. It would not be effective to address gender inequality as a "zero sum game" where gains by one gender appear to be at the expense of losses perceived by the other gender.

Instead, the experience of AE+6 is that addressing women's empowerment issue be tackled from the perspective of a community wide program to improve farming and resilience, in which all the social groups in the community benefit, rather than a narrow targeting of a marginalized group (women). It is essential that specialized support and assistance to women be perceived (by men) as having the potential to improve the situation of their households as well as the community as a whole.

Traditionally, it was only the close relatives of the village chiefs (men) and main landowners of a community that would receive training; now communities are aware of the benefits and need for women to be included in acquiring and sharing knowledge, improving their ability to generate income, and contribute to food production.<sup>55</sup>

As noted on the previous page, it is also effective to use improved family nutrition as a strategic entry point for persuading the community to facilitate women's access to land and water for production.

### Key success factor #2: Decentralizing training sessions

Too often training activities tend to focus on a central village and to marginalize the more remote neighborhoods and surrounding villages. Moreover, women have limitations on the time they can travel away from their homes, because of their domestic duties. To address this, ANSD has adopted a highly decentralized cluster approach. The more densely populated clusters away from the central village centre are identified and used as additional training venues. This means that women living in the outlying areas have less distance to travel to attend training and can more easily return to their homes.

### Key success factor #3: Ensuring community participation and ownership from the outset

Adopt a participatory and inclusive approach from the onset. Involve all social grouping of a community in the design of an activities meant to benefit them. Generate a sense of ownership over the program. This is key to long-term sustainability and adoption of the new practices and behaviors. This is especially true when women (often illiterate) are the intended beneficiaries.

### Key success factor #4: Starting with new practices and innovations that are simple

Ensure that the initial innovations introduced to women are simple, provide quick tangible results, and are easy to adopt. The emphasis on initial simplicity helps overcome the issue of wide spread illiteracy in the rural Sahel. Once initial innovations are adopted, and mastered, a progressive introduction of new, more complex practices can be continued.

### Key success factor #5: Ensuring the suitability of innovations introduced for women

Ensure new practices are adaptable and suitable to the needs of the women. In the case of compost making, digging out a large compost pit has merit to prevent evapo-transpiration. However, this technique would be challenging for women to replicate. Such pits have to be structurally stabilized; women don't necessarily have the right tools and resources to do so. A substitute technology, more suited to women's circumstances, would consist of rather promoting compost heaps.

### Key success factor #6: Making provision for the long-term sustainability of interventions focusing on women's empowerment in agriculture

The lessons learnt in terms of sustainability are three-pronged:

- Train local community members to act as relay persons (or volunteer promoters) to further disseminate and spread the innovations learnt. An example comes from Agrecol Afrique in Senegal. They adopted a protocol through which women volunteer promoters (four per village) received training to serve as resource persons to spread ecological practices for dry season gardening. This avoids "knowledge capture" by a restricted number of villagers. ANSD, in Burkina, has also trained "relay women" and entrusted them with training other women "in cascade" on the new practices learnt.
- Strengthen the capacity, leadership and embed newly acquired knowledge into local organizations. Make such organizations responsible for the management of activities. This was illustrated in the case of the *habbanaye*, which was entrusted to local agroecological committees who identified local groups with which to enter into contractual agreements. Identifying and building the capacity of the right individuals to manage such activities helps ensure they are sustained and extended. In this case study, strengthen the leaders of women's savings and credit groups contributed to the sustainability and spread of savings and credit activities designed to empower women and strengthen resilience.

- i. Identify organizations and programs to continue and spread interventions are critical to ensure the momentum created is not lost. Agrecol, for example, identified a strategic partner (*Action de carême Suisse*) to take over the consolidation of solidarity calabashes for a three-year period (December 2017 to Nov 2020).

### 5.3 Lessons learnt from the implementation of the project activities

#### Lessons learnt from measuring women (dis)empowerment through the WEAI

All AE+6 teams agreed that the WEAI complemented their Agroecology “tool kit” and provides relevant information to shape agricultural/afro-ecological activities in order to assess, and track progress and impact in women’s empowerment.

#### Lessons learnt from the savings and credit groups

Women saving and credit groups made the most significant contribution of all the activities designed to support the empowerment of women. Women’s saving and credit groups became so popular that some AE+6 partners could not keep up with growing demand from women in new communities. In some instances, women in neighboring villages established their own credit and savings groups on their own initiative after having observed their benefits. For example, in the Tibga municipality in Burkina Faso, women became impatient and started their own savings and credit group. They asked ANSD staff to come to correct whatever they could be doing wrong.

As noted above, these women’s savings and credit groups also constituted important platforms to raise women’s awareness about other issues during their regular meetings, particularly about nutrition, and strengthen social cohesion. In Mali, some synergies were also developed between these groups and an initiative focusing on sensitizing communities about the issues of religious radicalization and extremism<sup>56</sup> in some villages.

#### Lessons learnt from efforts to secure land tenure

Following are the key lessons the AE+6 teams have learnt in terms of facilitating safe land tenure for women groupings in the Sahel:

- i. Do not initiate work to help women obtain land by focusing on land ownership. In a context of strong cultural traditions, and a patriarchal land tenure regime, focus on securing long-term security of tenure.
- ii. Formalize these long-term land access tenure arrangements through the organization of a through a public event, sanctioned by the village chief and elders, and ensure the entire community witness transaction.
- iii. Where possible, have the agreement be formally recognized by the local municipality.
- iv. The land secured should ideally be in close proximity to water points.

#### Lessons learnt from supporting farming plots and home gardens

Adapt the support for women’s farming to suit the local context, and conditions, in close consultation with the women themselves. The AE+6 country teams embraced the same principles, but their application varied. In Mali, the strategy was to establish home gardens in the rainy season. In Senegal, what worked best was establishing large collective fields around a water source during the dry season. In Burkina Faso, there was a mix of both these strategies.

## Conclusion

The overall aim of the AE+6 initiative led by the Groundswell West Africa network was to develop a “proof of concept” of how to strengthen the resilience of farming systems and livelihoods of small-scale households located in ecologically fragile, drought prone drylands areas in the Sahel.

This particular case study documents how empowering women is paramount to bolster the resilience of rural communities. Through targeted support interventions, women can achieve greater financial autonomy, have a greater say in farming decisions, have greater decisional powers at home and in the community, and ultimately, it is expected, alleviate their work load (if their income streams increase sustainability).

This case study importantly illustrates how the ‘soft’ components of training, i.e. awareness raising, organization and leadership are as equally important as the ‘hard’ support given in terms of providing women farmers with access to farming resources.

Women’s empowerment will not happen unless governance and equity issues within the socioeconomic systems are directly addressed.

Many of the AE+6 program lessons and results have significant policy implications for overcoming the growing crisis of chronic food and nutrition insecurity in the Sahel.

In terms of strengthening women’s empowerment in agriculture, the picture that emerges from this case study is that the following changes seem to be underway:

- A newfound sense of self-confidence and individual worth can be observed among women. This is the result of the inclusive nature of the AE+6 approach, which seeks to engage and support the humblest and often marginalised groups to become part of decision-making.
- Women are not only being recognized and gaining improved social status, but also are starting to be drawn into the decision-making process at the community level.
- Inimical social and cultural norms were identified and assessed, particularly from the lens of equity and resilience relating to those who are vulnerable, and the effects on the environment and the soil.
- The essential nature of the AE+6 activities (essentially action research, as in observe, experiment, collaborate and share) is evidenced by the training of relay women, field trips for mutual learning among women, recognition of champions.

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### Agriculture écologique en Afrique (Agrécol Afrique) - Senegal

Agrécol Afrique is originally an association, founded in Switzerland in 1983. It became a Senegalese NGO in 2002 and has since then continuously been supporting the practice and expansion of organic and ecological agriculture in Senegal and more broadly in West Africa. Its core aim is to help farmers increase agricultural yields in a sustainable manner, so that local populations can overcome the lean season and indebtedness and become actors of environmental conservation, to ensure food security for all. The AE+6 project was implemented in the region of Kaffrine.

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### Association Nourrir Sans Détruire (ANSD)- Burkina Faso

ANSD was founded in 2011 – and legally recognized in 2012- with the mandate to support local rural development. ANSD's goal is to strengthen farmers' capacity and the organizations representing them to become contributors of food security and to fight poverty, while protecting natural resources. ANSD currently works with over 100 communities from 3 municipalities in the Easter region of Burkina Faso.

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### Sahel Eco: Mali

The Sahel Eco association was founded in 2004 with the mission to work with the Malian populations and neighboring countries to improve their livelihoods through better environmental management, based on the principles of good governance. The triptych "ecology, economy and listening" guides Sahel Eco's activities. In Mali, AE+6 was implemented in six communes located in the Tominian Cercle in the Ségou region.

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