

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



## Key Messages

- Low resilience, declining productivity, and loss of assets in the Sahel region are creating a “hunger-poverty trap.”
- Even the smallest shock can generate a widespread crisis across the drylands, making humanitarian aid essential.
- Agroecological training is helpful for farmer households but is not enough to build resilience across whole communities unless equity is addressed.

## Systematic transformation is essential to tackle inequity and build resilience

In the Sahel, the vast gap in food security between poor and wealthy households shows that economic growth benefits are not reaching the most vulnerable, particularly women and children, within rural communities. There is much evidence indicating that to improve resilience, a progressive transformation of the entire Sahelian farming system to address climate change and land degradation is essential. Low-cost agroecological practices “working with nature” to sustain biodiversity and restore soils are the primary way to bring about this transformation. However, for agroecology to reach its full potential impact to strengthen resilience, it must address inequity issues within rural communities.

This means that agroecological programs must involve specialized activities tailored to the specific needs of the most vulnerable groups and households. Social and governance “safeguarding” is vital to enable whole communities to improve resilience, but also ensure that the needs of everyone – especially vulnerable groups – are taken into account.



## Case Study: Developing the Pro-Equity Resilience of the Sahel Program

Launched in January 2016, the Agroecology Plus Six (AE+6) program is a proof of concept initiative devised to spread agroecological practices by improving equity across the Sahel, specifically in Senegal, Burkino Faso and Mali. Findings indicated that a systematic overhaul of farming systems is essential for resilience, including for vulnerable groups.

By ensuring the full involvement of most impoverished and vulnerable households in all stages of the process – from design to implementation and assessment – the program garnered significant economic benefits for these households. For instance, warrantage and capital obtained from women’s saving and credit groups helped them avoid exploitative interest rates from local money lenders, reducing the need to sell agricultural produce, animals, and other assets at low prices to meet food requirements.

The program started to reverse inequitable practices through positive discrimination in support of women and vulnerable households. In this way, the benefits of agroecology were spread across different wealth categories, enabling poorer households to benefit from program support.

A resurgence in community solidarity was also reported by all AE+6 network teams, with the integration of equity within the program, helping to strengthen community mechanisms and boost solidarity. For example, teams reported greater community awareness of social and gender equity issues, plus an acceptance to take steps to address them.

## Sahel: Key Figures in 2019

- 30.1 million – the number of people facing food insecurity
- 12 million – the estimated number of farmers facing an acute food and nutrition crisis
- \$1.90 – the amount an increasing number of farming households are surviving on per day



Photo: Agrecol Afrique.

## Tailored resilience initiatives are vital to meet the complex needs of rural communities

Vulnerability looks different across all rural communities. Agroecological resilience-building initiatives must take these variations and dynamics into account, to identify which households are the most susceptible to food and nutrition insecurity. In turn, the support provided must be tailored to meet the specific livelihood needs of different categories of households, but in particular, those of the most vulnerable.

Evidence shows that failing to address this inequity issue within agricultural improvement programs can deepen the marginalization of the most vulnerable in rural communities, including women and resource-poor farmers. This is mainly because more affluent, literate, and connected households can benefit more easily from typical non-participatory, socially non-differentiated, and gender-blind programs, which widens the resilience gap even more.

## Inclusion and participation are crucial to tackling sensitive equity issues

Crises affecting climate, water, soil, and food in the Sahel region have led to a breakdown in community solidarity, further justifying the need to tackle equity issues. Yet, as agricultural development programs both affect and are affected by complex community dynamics, individual sensitivities must be taken into account. As external agents operating within the relatively neutral field of agroecology, non-governmental and civil society organizations are generally better placed to promote pro-equity interventions.

Incorporating community participation from the outset is essential. Considering dynamics and raising awareness in a culturally sensitive manner is essential to shifting perspectives surrounding often controversial equity redress activities. Ultimately, this inclusive approach helps community leaders to accept the necessity of tailoring support to benefit the most vulnerable.

## Recommendations

- **National governments** should use a participatory approach to define a pro-equity focused national agricultural policy, creating a coordinated strategy to enable municipal councils to lead resilience-strengthening agricultural development plans.
- **Local governments** need to improve their understanding of inequality and inequity within relevant sector programs, incorporating these considerations into local development plans. Local organizations must be empowered to become the driving forces behind equity-focused agroecological development.
- **Farmer organizations** should arrange visits and demonstrations to show how to implement successful pro-equity agroecology programs. Working alongside local governments, local civil society organizations must prioritize the inclusion of more vulnerable households within agricultural programs.
- The **non-governmental sector** must raise awareness of inequality and inequity within its organizations, encouraging participation, positive representation, and decentralization of training programs to achieve the broadest reach possible among marginalized groups.
- **Strategic partners** should engage with relevant national government agency donors, NGOs, and private sector stakeholders, to design a comprehensive strategy for introducing equity-oriented content into national and local development planning – particularly as part of the AGIR process.

*A practical experience in applying these recommendations is fully described in the associated [Case Study: Integrating equity into agroecology to improve the resilience of dryland communities in the Sahel](#). This case study is accessible on the Groundswell International website at ([click here](#)).*

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October 2019 – Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

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### Acknowledgements

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