



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



## **POLICY NOTE**

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### **Cover photo**

*The Gayéri local council voting in favor of the amendment of their local development plan (Burkina Faso).*

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

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## Key messages

- An estimated 12 million small-scale farmers living in the ecologically fragile, risk prone drylands of the Sahel are in a crisis. They have become chronically vulnerable to food and nutrition insecurity, because of land degradation, declining soil fertility and climate change.
- A growing percentage of dryland farm households have become ultra-poor, living on less than 0.50 USD a day. They suffer from hunger, not only in bad but also in good rainfall years. They are forced to adopt negative coping mechanisms, including taking exploitative loans, selling their animals, eating their seeds stocks, and reducing the number of daily meals.
- Many dry land farm families are caught in a vicious downward spiral of declining productivity, and loss of assets. They end up in a “hunger –debt trap” characterized by a severe “resilience deficit”. They are so vulnerable that even the mildest shock generates a widespread crisis across the Sahel requiring humanitarian aid.
- Without external assistance to strengthen the resilience, sustainability and productivity of their farming systems, more and more dryland farmers will suffer from this “resilience deficit” and fall into the hunger-debt trap.
- The Agroecology+6 (AE+6) program was developed as a “proof of concept” action research initiative in three sites in the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal) to show that “agroecology” can be the essential foundation on which to base effective resilience activities. However, to be effective, equity, women’s empowerment, and nutrition must be fully integrated into the agroecology approach for resilience, and major social mobilization is required to scale it out rapidly.
- The AE+6 initiative **found that strengthening local governance at the community and municipal council levels is essential to develop, locally adapt, sustain and scale out an effective approach to resilience** based on transforming the farming system through agroecology.
- At a programmatic level, the AE+6 experience indicated that a combination of strategies can contribute to improved local governance and social structures for resilience, progressively enabling dryland farmers to improve soil fertility, adapt to climate change and reverse land degradation.
- Decentralized structures of local governance, including those at the village level, must play a key role in facilitating a sequential, integrated, multi-actor and cross-sectoral process to strengthen the resilience of the farming systems and rural livelihoods. Municipal government structures are likely to build resilience into their plans once elected leaders:
  - i. become aware of the importance of the resilience concept
  - ii. take ownership of the process
  - iii. adopt an inclusive approach
  - iv. receive training on the issue of resilience and planning
  - v. explicitly integrate resilience-related outcomes into their operational plans, and
  - vi. share and disseminate experiences and lessons learnt

- Resilience processes at village level can become effective once:
  - i. all members in the community understand the issues involved and agree to become active participants in processes
  - ii. municipal government staff start playing a more active governance role in village life
  - iii. representative, credible and active committees are formed
  - iv. village members take actively part in resilience activities that respect their local values, and show positive impacts
  - v. personal agency and sharing are encouraged and recognized
- The main challenges to overcome for integration of resilience into local governance plans, priorities and budgets include:
  - i. the lack of awareness of and commitment to resilience
  - ii. the prevailing conventional vision of development focused mostly on infrastructure
  - iii. inadequate local technical expertise to assess the root causes of chronic vulnerability
  - iv. low institutional capacity to facilitate an inclusive, participatory planning process
  - v. low institutional capacity to coordinate a multi-actor, cross sectoral approach for resilience
  - vi. inadequate funding to apply resilience focused activities that are integrated into revised municipal plans and budgets
- The AE+6 initiative indicated that sustaining an effective process to progressively strengthen resilience requires harnessing and improving local capabilities (rather than trying to briefly supplement them by “doing” activities for community or municipal structures).
- A final key lesson is that while the resilience approach must address the general needs of farm communities, it is essential for local governance to focus like a laser on tailoring support to the special needs of the most vulnerable to escape the hunger debt trap, using participatory, inclusive approaches, awareness raising and support tailored to specific needs.



## To the attention of decision makers

Detailed recommendations tailored for different categories of decision makers (national government, local municipal councils and technical services, farmer organizations, non-governmental organizations, technical and financial partners) are outlined in detail below. What follows are “overarching” policy recommendations:

### Actors operating at the National Level

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

### Actors working at the decentralized local level

5. Create awareness and deepened understanding of the concept of resilience and the root causes of chronic vulnerability in their agroecological zones.
6. Amend and improve the procedures in the development of municipal development plans and budgets to be resilience oriented, and better tailored to the needs of the most vulnerable groups.
7. Increase incentives aimed at promoting the adoption of agro-ecological farming practices throughout local governance structures, in order to transform local farming systems and rural livelihoods.
8. Systematically integrate the key issues of equity (reaching the poorest and most vulnerable households and groups), women’s empowerment (access to productive resources, including credit, and voice in decision making); and nutrition (dietary diversity) into the agroecology approach.
9. Strengthen local institutional capacity to lead and manage an initiative to strengthen local resilience based on the foundation of agroecology, through the training of technical staff.
10. Support the establishment of institutional arrangements to foster a multi-actor, coordinated approach for effective implementation of resilience measures.

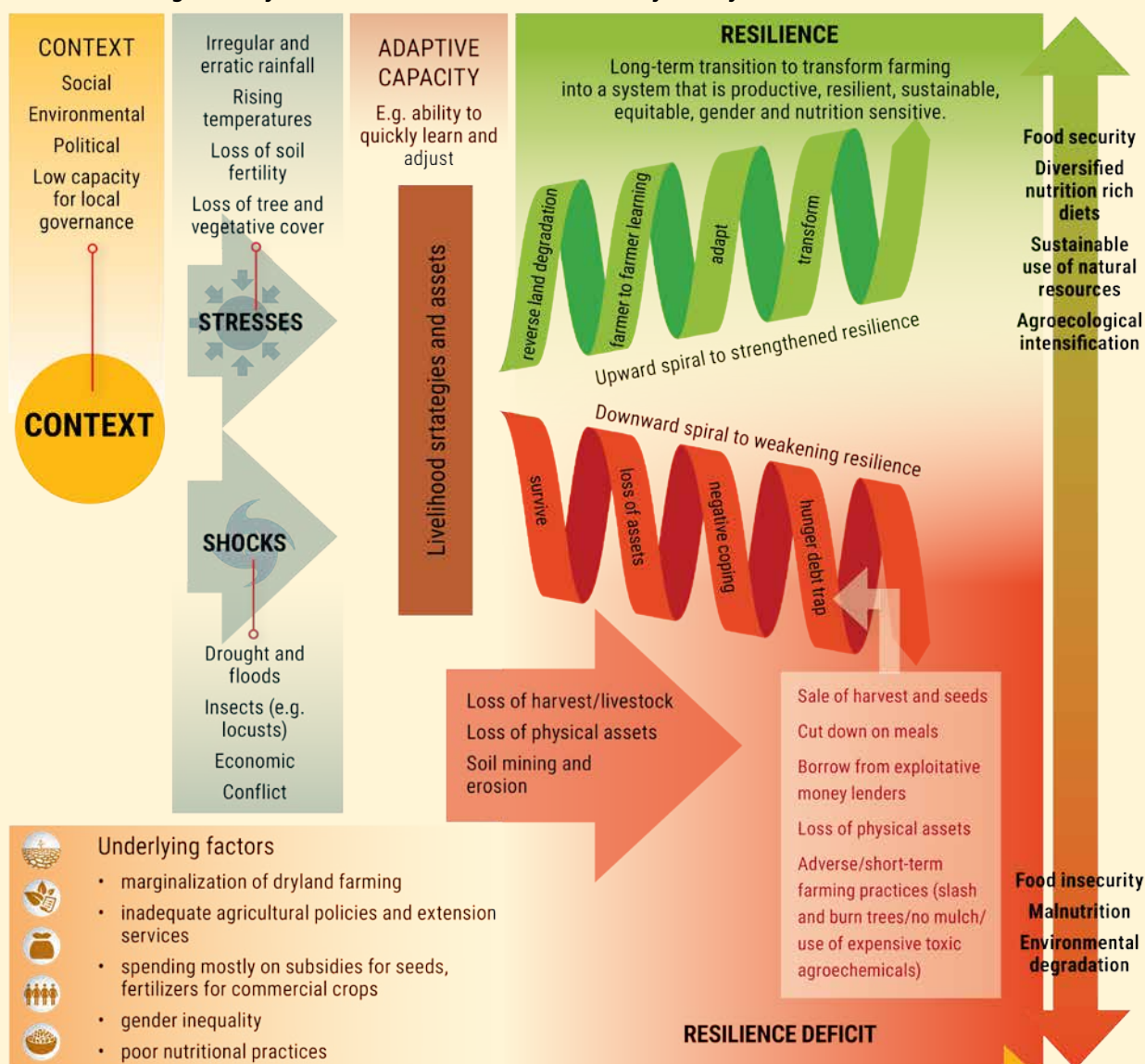


# Why build the capacity of local governance structures to improve local resilience?

## Recurrent crises in the Sahel and populations suffering from a resilience deficit

Dryland farm families in the Sahel are in a growing food and nutrition insecurity crisis because of land degradation, loss of soil fertility, decreased tree cover, water stress, and the effects of climate change.<sup>1</sup> Overcoming the resulting “resilience deficit” requires a highly context specific response, adapted to local needs and an effective level of social mobilization and local leadership. Community based organizations, traditional leaders, elected municipal governments, and local technical services are uniquely placed to provide the leadership and coordination for an effective resilience strategy tailored to local conditions and opportunities.

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



Source: Adapted from Frankenberger et al 2012, as cited in USAID<sup>2</sup>



## What are the challenges to building resilience at the local government level?

An assessment of local government planning documents in the three Sahelian countries where AE+6 intervened indicated little or no activity to address the resilience deficit of communities. Often, local governance actors had a narrow vision of their mandates. Most elected councilors conceived their role primarily to build physical infrastructure. They largely neglected activities for livelihood promotion and risk reduction. When the chronic crisis became more acute, local councils were resigned to signaling national government for emergency food relief.

Local governance structures were also heavily constrained by inadequate local technical expertise, limited financial capacity, and a poor record of sustaining participation in planning processes.

At the village level, socio-economic disparities, the special needs of women farmers, and the root causes of malnutrition tended to be overlooked when implementing livelihood activities. Many development initiatives did not reach the poorest groups, often resulting in further marginalizing of those most vulnerable.

## Local governments are locked in the “Green Revolution” national policy orientation

National governments in the Sahel tend to be locked into “Green Revolution thinking” in which modernization is highly oriented to high use of agrochemicals, hybrid seeds, commercial crops, mechanization, and large-scale irrigation. In Senegal for instance, the national soil institute [*Institut National de Pédologie* (INP)], which is responsible for dealing with soil degradation, advocates only conventional methods using chemical fertilizer and is silent on agro-ecological approaches.

Most national governments provide a high level of subsidies to agro chemicals (pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers) particularly for export crops such as cotton and peanuts. Very little of the national agricultural budget is spent on proven agroecological practices. In the case of Senegal, in 2017 National government announced that it had subsidized chemical fertilizers to the tune of 29 billion francs CFA (=53.4 million US\$).<sup>3</sup> No subsidies and little support was provided to help small scale farmers develop sustainable, low cost agroecological methods to improve soil fertility, including compost, manure, use of cover crops, rotation, and use of indigenous “fertilizer trees” and shrubs such as *Faidherbia Albida* and *piliostigma reticulatum*.

A critical related issue was that farmers often tend to overuse the toxic herbicides and pesticides. In Burkina Faso for instance, research found that the quantity of pesticide applied to a given surface area was higher than the recommended level in 72 percent of cases, while the recommended spray concentration was exceeded 56 percent of the time. Consequently, the water in an estimated 30 percent of the wells in some agricultural areas was unsuitable for drinking. Moreover, the pesticide level in 36 percent of vegetables did not meet international regulatory standards.<sup>4</sup>

## Local governance actors: who are they and what is their mandate?

### Who are the local governance actors best suited to promote resilience?

Initiatives to strengthen local resilience need to focus on decentralized, locally elected municipal councils known in West Africa as “territorial collectivities”. But these are not the only actors who need to support resilience work at the local level. It is also critical to harness leadership at the village level.

In villages, traditional and religious leaders are key to community mobilization of people and local resources. Much needs to be done to bolster organizational capacities at the village level. For example, the establishment of representative agro-ecological committees at the village level can serve as an organizational mechanism to plan, implement, and oversee community based programs to scale out agro-ecological practices to all neighborhoods, and to neighboring villages.



## What is the mandate of the locally elected towards their constituencies?

Local governance agents must review their mandate for the well being of their constituencies in the face of increased vulnerability. This requires that they ensure that local resources and programs are well managed, but also address equity (so that the most vulnerable also benefit). They need to lead in efforts to ensure that the most vulnerable households can more easily absorb shocks (i.e. related to shocks such as drought) and stresses (such as land degradation) without losing their assets and falling into the hunger-debt trap.

To this end, they must forge an alternative path for agricultural development, based on agroecology, that leads to progressive intensification of low cost ecological processes to sustain and regenerate soils, water, trees and the land.

This entails opting out of the conventional pathway characterized by a high dependency on expensive, risky agrochemicals, monoculture, and on humanitarian assistance when the rains are erratic or fail.

Resilience building in the drylands is a long-term process. It requires a coherent, progressive transition towards a transformed farming system. It seeks out and builds on inherent synergies between innovations. Conventional agricultural interventions at the local level, on the other hand, is often short term, focused on increased yields only, ignores soil health and the effects of climate change. Moreover the conventional approach also promotes monoculture, rather than diversifying food production to reduce risk. Finally, it generally fails to address equity, nutrition, and women's empowerment, all of which are essential for strengthening resilience.



## Key levers of success for building the capacity of local governance actors to integrate resilience

The experience of the AE+6 initiative led by Groundswell International network of partners indicates that the following factors in strengthening local governance (both at the municipal council and village level) are essential for strengthening resilience in the drylands of the Sahel.

### What is agroecology?

Agroecology is an approach to farming that mimics the functioning of local ecosystems,<sup>5</sup> allowing for "food production that makes the best use of nature's goods and services while not damaging these resources."<sup>6</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>7</sup> Agroecological farming systems are "developed on the basis of farmers' knowledge and experimentation"<sup>8</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.



### **Key success factor # 1: elected and village-based leadership are aware of the importance of resilience**

Ensure that members of municipal council and village-based leadership have a common understanding of what resilience is and what it entails. This leads local leaders to review their mandates in support of promoting sustainable rural livelihoods, beyond infrastructural development.

### **Key success factor # 2: elected and village-based leadership take ownership of the process**

Ensure an inclusive participatory approach to the design of resilience activities.

Secure the commitment and active involvement of local leadership for every step.

In particular, engage elected leaders and their technical teams in the participatory diagnosis of current municipal plans from a resilience lens, based on a diagnosis of the root causes of chronic vulnerability. Facilitate a public commitment by local leaders to resilience. Enable them to make use of new skills and knowledge to revise their municipal plans and budgets.

### **Key success factor # 3: elected and village-based leadership adopt an inclusive approach**

Focus awareness-raising to help leaders change their perspective on local development priorities. Encourage them to see such plans as strategic, visionary, development documents.

Develop participatory exercises to foster this paradigm shift from a narrow approach concerned mostly about infrastructure development towards an approach that gives greater priority to resilience.

Take steps to ensure resources are allocated to improve the resilience of households, particularly the most vulnerable.

Seek out synergies between innovations. Foster multi-actor, and inter-sectoral cooperation.

At the village level, engage in a parallel process with communities. In each community, obtain free prior informed consent (FPIC) that the most vulnerable groups will receive priority in resilience-oriented activities.

### **Key success factor # 4: representative, credible and active organizational structures are formed at the community level**

Establish representative community based agro-ecological committees (AECs). Build their capacity to undertake planning and monitoring of initiatives to promote (and advocate) adoption of agroecological innovations. Engage them also in overseeing and guiding equity, nutrition and women's empowerment activities.

### **Key success factor # 5: Training elected and village-based leadership**

Train municipal councilors and village-based leaders in the skills required to identify activities and innovations that are low cost, feasible, and high impact for strengthening resilience.

Engage them in learning from the lessons emerging from the action research work underway in selected pilot villages through field visits and "caravans".

Facilitate a collective process to integrate highly promising resilience activities into local development plans. Enable municipal officials to learn how to adequately budget for effective implementation of these activities.

### **Key success factor # 6: elected leaders integrate resilience-related outcomes into their operational plans; villages define resilience activities aligned to these**

Enable decentralized local government structures to integrate resilience into local planning by embedding proven

strategies and activities into five-year community development plans. If this is not feasible within the existing planning cycle, seek to append the resilience activities to the existing plan and obtain a commitment to include them in the next planning cycle.

Encourage using the increase in the number of budgeted resilience oriented activities within the local development plan as a key indicator to assess change. A second indicator would be the formal approval of this plan by a resolution of the municipal council.

Communicate these revised resilience focused plans to the communities.

Enable the AECs align their own activities, and those of their affiliated groupings, with the municipal plan, particularly for scaling out agreed agroecological innovations in their villages.

### **Key success factor # 7: village members actively take part in resilience activities that respect their local values and show positive impacts**

Link agroecology-based resilience strategies to indigenous cultural values and local knowledge systems. Support the testing, adaptation and assessment of resilience innovations in communities within a learning process.

Showcase the results to show what can be achieved. Use the empirical knowledge gained by the village farmers themselves to convince local municipalities to include provisions for such initiative in local planning. Generate local enthusiasm through success. Take steps to scale out the most promising innovations.

### **Key success factor # 8: elected and village-based leadership share and disseminate experiences and lessons learnt**

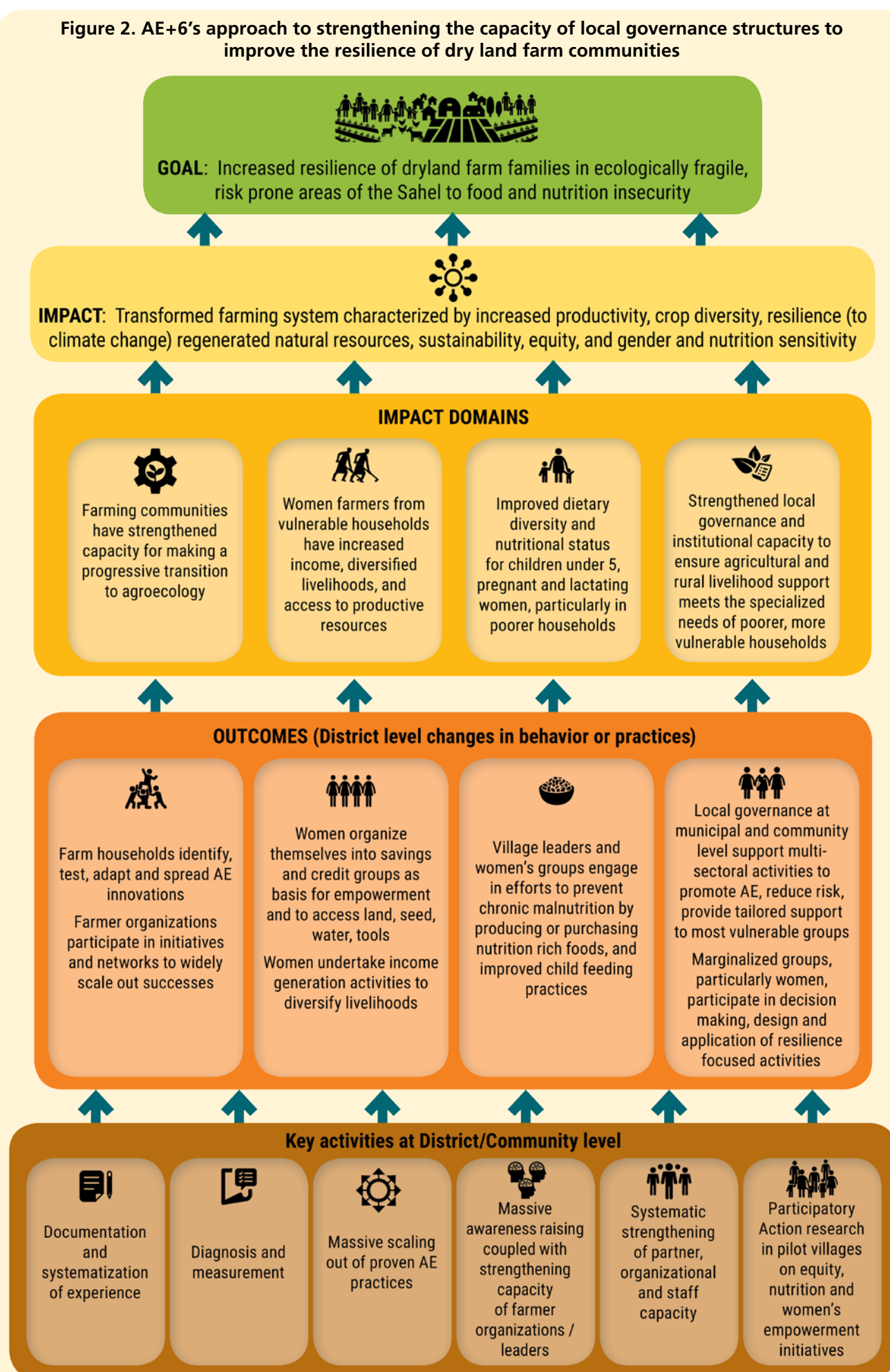
Combine the piloting of more complex resilience activities in selected more dynamic villages, while scaling out the simpler “first wave” of agroecological innovations across many neighboring villages.

When the more complex activities have been tested and proven, foster a “second wave” of scaling out new resilience-oriented activities a variety of media, including community radio broadcasts, short documentary films with the testimonies of local farmers, staging of theatre plays, field visits, and itinerant caravans to share and disseminate experiences and lessons learnt. As much as possible, provide opportunities to key leaders to learn about and witness directly the successes and challenges to undertaking rural resilience strategies.

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

- leveraging of government mechanisms such as decentralisation, representative democracy, and inclusive policies
- getting elected officials to understand their role in supporting their constituents’ long-term resilience
- getting elected officials to scrutinize policies to see to what extent they address the core issues of resilience and reducing vulnerability
- putting sustainable institutional frameworks into place to manage processes, as in the agro-ecological committees working at village level
- applying the principles of action research, which implies observing, experimenting, adapting and sharing – evidenced by caravans, field trips, and farmer champions
- reaching the most vulnerable households
- ensuring women are not only considered but acknowledged and drawn into the decision-making process
- laying down the foundation for the regeneration and re-greening of the natural resources based on agroecology

**Figure 2. AE+6's approach to strengthening the capacity of local governance structures to improve the resilience of dry land farm communities**





## Key recommendations

For programs and investments in the agricultural sector to genuinely contribute to the improving the self-reliance of local populations, strengthen the capacity of local governance actors to revise their mandates by integrating resilience in their local planning.

Foster the adoption of an alternative pathway for agricultural development, based on agroecology at the national and local governance levels.

Integrate the lessons of the AE+6 initiative into the national “AGIR” (Global Alliance for Resilience Initiatives)<sup>9</sup> platform priorities and road-map.

Decision makers and other key stakeholders involved in agricultural programs and rural development in general should adopt the following recommendations to strengthen local governance for resilience:



### National Government

**R1. Define, in a bottom-up and participative manner, a national agricultural policy that actively promotes agroecological practices as the foundation for resilience in the drylands.**

This policy should:

- explicitly incorporate agro-ecology as a means to harness the farming potential whilst regenerating depleted resources (soils, water, tree cover)
- allocate budgetary resources to subsidize natural and organic fertilizers (including fertilizing/nitrogen fixing tree species) and pest control, ensuring the most vulnerable populations are also beneficiaries
- set up research projects within national research institutes focusing on the development and dissemination of natural bio-pesticides
- include agro-ecology training modules in the training of agricultural extension technicians, so that local farmers keen to adopt agro-ecology can receive well-informed and practical support from extension services
- help existing staff of agricultural extension services to work with communities to recruit and train an extensive network of village based agroecology farmer promoters

**R2. Decrease and gradually phase out subsidies to agro-chemical inputs.**

**R3. Secure support from the donor community and the national “AGIR” (Global Alliance for Resilience Initiatives) fully integrate a gender and nutrition sensitive agroecology approach as the foundation for resilience sensitive local development plans in the drylands.**

- include a role for Farmer Organizations and NGOs specialized in agroecology and community level mobilization and training
- engage the full participation of the national equivalents of the Ministries of Local Government
- include a diagnosis of damaged agro-ecosystems (loss of top soil, loss of cover, depleted water resources) at the municipal levels to guide the process of resilience analysis and to prioritize appropriate agro-ecological innovations

**R4. Redesign the financing of municipal development plans and activities so that the resilience related elements have the resources required for implementation.**



## Local Government

### **R5. Create awareness and capacity on the issue of resilience.**

- provide comprehensive orientation on resilience, participatory planning, assessment of the underlying causes of vulnerability, the effects of climate change and environmental degradation on the farming system and livelihoods to all municipal councilors, technical services staff and members of village development committees (*Comité Villageois de Développement, CVD*)
- create a network to facilitate regular information flow on resilience and adaptation options across all municipalities in a selected agroecological area

### **R6. Amend and improve local development planning procedures to integrate a resilience perspective.**

- adjust local development plans preparation procedures and methods to mandate integration strengthened resilience and adaptation capacity as a priority theme
- include an assessment of the main underlying causes of vulnerability to food and nutrition insecurity, including the impact of land degradation and climate change on rural livelihoods along with recommendations on specific adaptation strategies
- include specific objectives aimed at reducing food insecurity, improved natural resource management and the disaster risk reduction essentially through agro-ecology, in the five-year communal plans and budget cycles. Such tangible initiatives should include:
  - measures to contain soil erosion and regenerate soils
  - measure to protect water resources
- popularize the local development plans by making it a “living document”
  - actively promote the local development plans by disseminating them to the constituent villages in the local language
- actively monitor and evaluate the implementation of the local development plan

### **R7. Increase incentives aimed at promoting the adoption of agroecological farming practices throughout local governance structures.**

- ensure the most vulnerable populations receive the subsidized natural and organic fertilizers
- set-up agroecological demonstration plots tended by the villagers with the support of local extension services
- embed agroecological principles in the training curriculum of farmer field schools
- create awareness and provide training on agro-ecology to local farmer associations
- support volunteer agroecology farmer promoters to apply agroecological innovations on their own land, and to lead “farmer-to-farmer” learning, and “cascade” training
- develop appropriate, performance based incentives to motivate these volunteer promoters so that they drive wide spread adoption of agroecological innovations in their own (and neighboring) communities

### **R8. Make arrangements for multi-actor, cross-sectoral coordination among all rural development stakeholders working within the municipal territory, in support of resilience measures.**

- support the establishment of village-based representative agro-ecology promotion committees to oversee and coordinate resilience oriented activities
- foster a constructive and on-going cross-sectoral dialogue at the local government level focused on achieving a systems approach to strengthening the resilience of local communities





## Farmer Organizations

### **R9. Advocate for adequate support in the conversion to agro-ecology.**

This could include lobbying for:

- receiving adequate technical support from extension services
- receiving subsidized natural inputs
- receiving subsidies for increasing densities of fertilizing trees on crop land

### **R10. Organize learning visits of the organization members to demonstration plots where agro-ecological innovations are being adopted.**



## Non governmental sector engaged in agriculture

### **R11. Train NGO staff on agro-ecological techniques, including the dimensions of women's empowerment and harnessing agroecology for nutrition.**

### **R12. Include and develop activities aimed at strengthening the planning capacity of local government actors.**

### **R13. In terms of project activities, consider the following:**

- support the establishment of village-based agro-ecological committees
- support the participatory revision of communal development plans to integrate resilience
- design and test village based risk reduction management strategies
- organize knowledge caravans to share experience and do trouble shooting

### **R14. At the operational level, ensure that project activities:**

- capture the baseline within the context of the local municipality in terms of resilience
  - scan existing planning documents to see how resilience- sensitive they are and formulate a baseline diagnosis
  - conduct a participatory appraisal of stakeholders' knowledge and understanding of resilience
- engage the participation of local government stakeholders wherever feasible
- decentralize agroecology training programs within the municipalities to ensure the widest reach
  - i.e. adopt a clustered approach, whereby the fairly densely populated clusters away from the village centre are identified as additional training venues, so that people living in the outlying areas have less of a distance to travel to attend training
- link resilience building initiatives with other existing and relevant support projects



## Strategic partners

### **R15. Organize a dialogue among relevant national government agencies donors, NGOs and private sector stakeholders engaged in the national AGIR platform to fully integrate a gender, nutrition and equity oriented approach to agroecology within national resilience-oriented strategies and priorities.**

### **R16. Provide financial support to municipalities in the drylands to integrate an agroecology-focused approach to resilience into local-level development planning and action.**



## Endnotes

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- 8 De Schutter O (2010) Report submitted by the Special Rapporteur on the right to food. UN General Assembly. Human Rights Council. Sixteenth Session, Agenda item 3 A/HRC/ 16/49.
- 9 Each country in the Sahel has established a national platform for establishing resilience priorities. See [https://www.oecd.org/swac/publications/AGIR%20roadmap\\_EN\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/swac/publications/AGIR%20roadmap_EN_FINAL.pdf)