



Promoting women's empowerment in agriculture to improve the resilience of rural communities in the Sahel



POLICY NOTE

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empowerment
in agriculture
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the Sahel**



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Cover photo

Women from a savings and credit group in the Tibga municipality (Burkina Faso) and their proceeds.

Credit: Association Nourrir sans Détruire (ANSO)

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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 US dollars 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–poverty 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.
- 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.
- The key message of this policy note is that the foundation for all successful resilience activities in the dryland areas of the Sahel must be based on a progressive transformation of the farming system through agroecological intensification that fully anchors women's empowerment at the core of agroecological interventions in order to redress gender unbalances.
- To avoid the risk of further marginalizing women through non-participatory and gender-blind activities, agroecological activities under the auspices of AE+6 were purposefully designed to **overcome gender barriers preventing women from not only accessing opportunities and productive resources, but also from fulfilling their unacknowledged and latent potential to become important actors of change for resilience within their communities**.
- Strengthening women's organization, leadership and capacities means that the knowledge base of the community and therefore its resilience to food and nutrition insecurity can be greatly enhanced. Research has positively established that **increasing women's empowerment in agriculture will ultimately generate benefits in terms of increased food production**. If women are given the assets to produce (land, water, tools, inputs), they will become more significant contributors to building food secure and resilient communities.
- 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, reverse land degradation, diversify household diets for better nutrition.

- A combination of strategies can contribute to unleash women's true potential as farmers. These include:
 - i. reviving traditional mechanisms to strengthen the resilience of the most vulnerable, through the creation of savings and credit groups, as well as promoting rotation-based gifts of animals (*habbanaye*)
 - ii. providing support to women to help them access productive assets (land, water, seeds and credit)
 - iii. providing specialized support to improve their farming knowledge, focused on women's crops and thus empower them as farmers
 - iv. using nutrition as a practical enabling entry point for gender-sensitive resilience programming
- At a policy level, decision makers can bring about changes and redress gender disparities by designing and operationalizing appropriate enabling policies and programs to ensure women's security of land tenure and a more systematic representation, support and training of women in agriculture.



To the attention of decision makers and key stakeholders

Actors working at the national policy level can:

1. Help government officials and extension officers learn the fundamentals of women's empowerment and why the role of women in agriculture should be supported.
2. Define an agricultural policy framework that brings about deep changes to provide women with access, ownership and control of productive resources (land, water, seeds, animals, credit, training).
3. Create a specific category in the national budget for agricultural development that clearly identifies all the specific budget line items in support of activities for women's empowerment in agriculture.
4. Increase specialized support and incentives aimed at promoting the adoption of specialized agro-ecological farming practices, tailored to the specific needs of women.
5. Define an agricultural policy framework that adopts a nutrition lens to ensure the sound integration of agricultural and nutrition activities, as a key component of women's empowerment in agriculture.
6. Include specific objectives and the performance indicators aimed at increasing the representation of women in the extension staff and leadership within the ministry of agriculture in support of women's empowerment in agriculture agenda and activities.

Actors working at the decentralized rural municipal level can:

1. Help local government officials and extension officers learn about the fundamentals of women's empowerment and why the role of women in agriculture should be supported.
2. Include specific objectives and the performance indicators aimed at increasing the representation of women both as extension officers and in agricultural projects designed and implemented in local development plans.
3. Create a specific category in rural municipal budgets for agricultural development that clearly identifies all the specific budget line items in support of activities for women's empowerment in agriculture.
4. Support women to obtain rights to secure land tenure.
5. Increase support and incentives aimed at promoting the adoption of agro-ecological farming practices among women.

Why empower women in agriculture?

Traditionally **women in the Sahel are expected to play an important role in ensuring the strength and resilience in the household.** Men are seen as the main decision maker about farming and main providers of basic grains for their households as well as producers of cash crops. Women are responsible for the ingredients and condiments needed to prepare sauces, and for vegetables in local dishes. Therefore women have a major role in ensuring dietary diversity. However, women also do a significant part of the farm work, particularly sowing, harvesting, and winnowing, in addition to having their own fields and specialized crops. Paradoxically, **women are often denied the critical resources needed to fulfill this role of providers.**

In the Sahel access, control and ownership of land largely remain the turf of men. Most women in Africa can only access land through their relationship with a male family member. In customary law, women can't inherit land. They need to move to their husband's village where a small portion of land might be given to them.¹ Their usufruct

of land is never secure as their tenure rights are forfeited if the relationship ends.² Even where land reform policies address gender equality (as in the case of Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal), these are not applied in rural areas where customary law prevails.³ And often, even if women are given land, it is often a small and marginal plot.⁴

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

- i. women's limited access to productive land (and water); and other productive assets (implements, inputs)
- ii. little say in household decisions
- iii. not much influence over the allocation of household income
- iv. limited scope to take on leadership positions within communities
- v. overwhelming farming and domestic work to complete, which leaves them little time to improve their socio-economic circumstances

The AE+6 practitioner teams have observed that many conventional agricultural programmes only provide **token provisions in support of women's empowerment**. The support provided is often limited to technical training. It does not address the socio-cultural impediments preventing women from accessing productive assets, and having a greater voice in decision-making at the household and community level.

Even in the context of agroecological projects, practitioners from NGOs or Farmers Organizations tend to only involve women through the work on the main (man-owned) farm fields. **Most do not address of the critical issues for women's empowerment, particularly providing greater access to land, water, seeds, animals, credit and training; enabling greater decision making and discretion** by women on how to use farming assets and inputs.

How is agroecology conducive for addressing women's empowerment in agriculture?

The empowerment of women in agriculture is not only a moral or rights based imperative. It is an essential component to strengthen household and community level resilience to food and nutrition insecurity. The ramification of giving increased recognition to the role of women in agriculture can have a wide a ripple effect for nutrition, strengthened rural livelihoods. Research has positively established that increasing women's empowerment in agriculture will ultimately generate benefits in terms of increased food production.⁵

What is agroecology?

Agroecology is an approach to farming that mimics the functioning of local ecosystems,⁶ allowing for "food production that makes the best use of nature's goods and services while not damaging these resources."⁷ 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".⁸ Agroecological farming systems are "developed on the basis of farmers' knowledge and experimentation"⁹ 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.



A correlation exists between the use of agro-chemical inputs and gender. As the customary owners of land, men are the main recipients of state-subsidized chemical inputs. This means that they are more prone to farm conventionally on the main fields of their households. Most women farmers in the Sahel cannot afford the cost of external inputs (pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers) or take the risk of going into debt. Because the plots given to women by their husbands are generally degraded and marginal land, the **best recourse for them is to adopt practices that substitute ecological processes rather than external inputs to build soil fertility**. More so than men, women's limited land rights and financial resources, and women's interest in better nutrition for the family, make agroecological ways of farming an appropriate option for them.

Key levers of success for empowering women in agriculture

Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI)

The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI)¹⁰, a tool developed to measure the empowerment, agency and inclusion of women in the agriculture sector, can be very useful to assess the baseline problem and to measure an agricultural development intervention's impact in a given community. 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 and organization in the community
- v. time allocation and work load

It also measures women's empowerment relative to men within their households. AE+6's experience has shown that the WEAI is a valuable instrument to be added to agro-ecological practitioners' toolkit to measure the impact of their interventions in terms of women's empowerment in agriculture.

Women's credit and saving groups

Women's credit and saving schemes are highly valued by rural women and have been described as life changing. Women meet on a weekly basis to make contributions to a common savings pot. The amount saved each week depending on the context, is either a given amount set by the members or kept voluntary and anonymous.

The sums collected are then lent to members wishing to invest in income generating activities, or used as common investment fund to support collectively farmed land.

The potential of such schemes are multi-faceted: they contribute to building women's financial independence as well as their leadership skills, while at the same time, the regular meetings serve as an effective platform to convey and share important educational messages to many women within communities.

AE+6's experience has been that women's savings and credit strengthens the self-confidence, leadership, skills, social cohesion, solidarity and organizational capacities of their women members. This in turn enables women to contribute to their household's resilience; to absorb and adapt to external shocks and to strengthen the food and nutrition security of their households.

Figure 1. The spheres of women disempowerment in agriculture and how these can be overcome



Source: Groundswell International, based on the WEA

Supporting women with accessing land

Agroecology practitioners can play a part in helping women secure land tenure rights by organizing public and consensual transactions of land between a willing land owner and an organized group of women. This public transaction, sanctioned by the traditional leaders, with public recognition in front of a community assembly, and approved by the municipal council, was found to be an innovative way to enable secure access of land to women, binding all stakeholders to this long-term transaction.



Rotation-based gift of livestock

Through this mechanism, poor rural women are given the opportunity to increase their assets by obtaining poultry or pregnant livestock (sheep or goats), without having to get into debt with local money lenders that charge high interest rates. The first offspring of the donated animals is then allocated to another woman, so that access to women within the community of small-scale livestock slowly expands. Livestock, if well managed are a source of income, a source of manure for farming and also serve as an essential savings buffer for women in times of hardship.

Empowering women as farmers: home gardens and collective plots

Another method of empowering women is to provide specialized training in agroecological practices and material support for women farmers, targeting women's crops. It is easier to run this training through organized women's groups who meet regularly. Training is most effective when given on common market garden plots or women's collective fields. Often women need material assistance such as seeds, or small subsidies to purchase small farming tools and implements. The most skilled women farmers are able to provide support, technical advice on agroecological practices such as composting, mulch, rotation, bio-pesticides, and encourage fellow women members.

Nutrition as an enabling entry point for gender-sensitive resilience programming

AE+6's experience has shown that adopting a nutrition lens to programming further reinforces women's empowerment as producers and informed decision makers. This is because women often have a key role in ensuring good nutrition for their households. Nutrition education encourages women to grow a greater diversity of crops and vegetables, both for sale and for home consumption. It often also leads to the revitalization of traditional culinary knowledge on the preparation of local dishes using neglected (but often more nutritious) local foods.

The focus on nutrition can help increase women's access to productive resources and can persuade men about the need to reduce women's workload, because of the recognition of women's role in providing nutritious sauces and vegetables, without having to address these directly.

Finally, through this approach, women can become the articulation point between nutrition and agriculture, two sectors that are often divorced in conventional approaches.

Empirical evidence shows that the combination of these interventions for women's empowerment leads to:

- greater farming outcome (support to women farmers significantly increases their yields and overall production)
- changes in gender dynamics, as men directly witness the benefits of women's empowerment (more diverse and nutritious food for the household)
- empowering women in decision making (at the household and community levels), which in turn leads to greater self confidence as well as regaining a sense of dignity
- greater social cohesion among women



Key recommendations

To significantly strengthen the resilience of farm households in the drylands of the Sahel, agricultural programs must invest significantly in the empowerment of women in agriculture. This involves systematic targeting of women farmers, not only with technical advice on proven agroecological practices but also on strategies to strengthen women's leadership, organization, access to productive resources (land) and in decision making processes and structures.

To achieve this, it is essential that decision makers and other key stakeholders involved in agricultural development programs take the following recommendations into account:



National Government

R1. Train government officials and extension officers on the fundamentals of women's empowerment and why the role of women in agriculture should be supported.

R2. Define an agricultural policy framework that brings about deep changes in providing women with access, ownership and control of productive resources (land, water, seeds, animals, credit, training).

- Ensure the active participation of women in the formulation of policies and programs.
- Support the implementation of reforms which recognize women land tenure rights that overcome customary traditions which marginalize women.
- Ensure that women do not only access land through male relatives.
- Support interventions favoring women's access to security of tenure.

R3. Define an agricultural policy framework that adopts a nutrition lens to ensure the sound integration of agricultural and nutrition activities (see policy note on nutrition).

R4. Include specific objectives and the performance indicators aimed at increasing the representation of women and their direct benefits in policy frameworks.

R5. Increase specialized support and incentives aimed at promoting the adoption of specialized agro-ecological farming practices, tailored to the specific needs of women.

- Shift government subsidies away from agro-chemical inputs in order to provide greater subsidies to organic inputs as well as farming implements with specific quotas for women beneficiaries.



Local Government

R6. Train local government officials and extension officers on the fundamentals of women's empowerment and why the role of women in agriculture should be supported.

R7. Include specific objectives and the performance indicators aimed at increasing the representation of women both as extension officers and in agricultural projects designed and implemented in local development plans.

R8. Support the securing of land tenure rights to women.

- Set targets in local development plans in the number of hectares that should be cultivated by women groups.
- Support efforts to ensure women's access to security of tenure by underwriting land transfers to women collectives.
 - Efforts should rather be focused on securing long-term security of tenure.
 - Formalizing these long-term tenure arrangements can be done through the organization of a through a public event, making the community a witness of the transaction.



- Document and monitor compliance with definitive transfer of land.

R9. Increase support and incentives aimed at promoting the adoption of agro-ecological farming practices among women.

- Provide support and training on agro-ecological practices to women farmers and organized women's collectives engaged in market gardening or farming.
 - Set-up agro-ecological demonstration plots tended by women with the support of government agricultural research stations.
 - Decentralize training programmes to foster greater participation of women who are not able to leave their homes for extended periods.
 - Ensure that the practices shared are adaptable and suitable to the specific needs of women, who have less access to resources and to labor.
 - To overcome the issue of illiteracy, innovations introduced at the scale of the village need to be simple and easy to adopt and replicate.
- Make budget provision for a number of boreholes or wide diameter wells to be dug (and maintained) for dry season gardens managed by women's collectives.



Farmer organisations

R10. Set targets to include a fair representation of women members in the farmer organisation as well as specialized support of the specific needs of women farmers.

R11. Organize learning visits of the organisation to plots collectively tended by women.



Non governmental sector

R12. Train NGO staff on the fundamentals of women's empowerment, including the use of the WEAI.

R13. Embed women's empowerment in agriculture in the vision and mission statement and strategies of your organization.

- Include specific objectives and key performance indicators aimed at increasing the number of women directly benefiting in programming.
 - Set targets to increase the recruitment of women agricultural extension staff.
 - Monitor the percentage of the agricultural development budget that directly benefits women farmers.
 - Set targets/quotas for the number of women-focused agricultural development activities and material assistance that relate directly to their specific needs and interests.
 - Monitor whether this targets have been reached and assess reasons why women may not be attending or benefiting from activities tailored to their needs.
 - Facilitate processes to enable women to gain secure access to land and water.

R14. In terms of project activities, consider the following:

- include activities focusing on nutrition with project activities – these can include:
 - awareness raising on nutrition, especially targeting pregnant and breast feeding women and children under 5
 - identifying and teaching how to farm indigenous but also non-indigenous crops that have high nutrition properties (moringa, baobab shrubs in home gardens etc.)
 - culinary lessons showing how to prepare these crops
- women's credit and saving groups

- rotation-based gift of livestock
 - use endemic species
 - provide additional support and training for tending and housing for this livestock)
- support women with secure access to land
 - act as a broker between willing land owners and women groups to ensure definitive transfers and ensure local governance structure to underwrite the local agreement
- support the establishment of women's collective plots and home gardens
 - use these plots as the training site to teach agro-ecological innovations
 - organize learning visits of the organisation to plots collectively tended by women

R15. At the operational level, ensure that project activities:

- Capture the baseline of the gender disparities through the WEIA.
- Carefully monitor the “do no harm” principle by ensuring that women's work loads are not significantly increased, and that child care is negatively affected.
- Ensure the genuine participation of women at all stages.
 - From the onset, project activities are designed in a participatory manner and include women.
 - Women participate in the implementation and assessment of the activities.
- Strengthen the capacity of women to manage their own resilience oriented activities.
 - E.g., enable women's credit and saving groups to decide on their own how often they meet, which amounts are to be contributed and the conditions for granting loans).
 - E.g., enable women to decide on their own how rows in communal garden will be allocated and whether men are allowed to farm in this communal garden.
- Decentralize training programs to ensure the widest outreach to interested women.
 - 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 the women living in the outlying areas have less of a distance to travel to attend training.
- Set up a sustainability and scaling up strategy to ensure the lasting impact of interventions and their wider dissemination.
 - Train women as relays/trainers to further disseminate knowledge and innovations.
 - Ensure women are represented in the establishment of village-based agro-ecological committees.
- Measure and monitor the impact of activities by running the WEIA after some after completion of activities (with a gap period).
- Link women's empowerment initiatives with other existing and relevant support projects (e.g. linking women saving groups with micro-credit schemes).



Strategic partners

R16. Focus financial and implementation support to projects that include targets, milestones and key performance indicators for women's empowerment.

R17. Encourage linking women's empowerment initiatives with other existing and relevant support projects (e.g. linking women saving groups with micro-credit schemes).



Endnotes

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