



# Strengthening the resilience of rural communities in the Sahel through agroecological interventions



## Key Messages

- A growing percentage of the Sahelian population has become chronically vulnerable to food and nutritional insecurity.
- A situation of rapid, growing stresses, particularly land degradation and climate change, has affected current farming practices to the point in which they can no longer sustain livelihoods.
- Rural communities in ecologically fragile, risk-prone drylands depend on humanitarian relief, but this is costly, and access can be sporadic.
- Evidence shows that the promotion of agroecological farming can serve as the foundation for sustainable and resilient livelihoods

## An estimated 12 million small-scale farmers living in the drylands of the Sahel are in crisis.

Farmers in the fragile, risk-prone drylands of the Sahel have become ultra-poor, living on about \$1.90 a day. They are chronically vulnerable to food and nutrition insecurity, due to land degradation and climate change. A growing percentage of dryland farm families deal with chronic hunger, which means they get caught in a “hunger-poverty trap” characterized by declining productivity and loss of assets. They are so vulnerable that even the smallest of shocks can generate a widespread crisis across the Sahel.

## Several intertwining issues exacerbate the vulnerability of dryland communities

Strengthening resilience through agroecology means overcoming several challenges. In particular, support must be given to poor and vulnerable households to address rising inequities across the region. Promoting proper nutrition while empowering women strengthens rural communities’ resilience by improving food security and generating more income. A rethinking of local development within local government needs to occur to ensure that local leaders are champions of resilience issues and take ownership of the process.



## Case Study: The Agroecology Plus Six (AE+6) Program in the Sahel

The program, conducted in Senegal, Burkino Faso, and Mali, aims to strengthen the resilience of farm families in risk-prone and fragile dryland regions.

The AE+6 program addresses four key themes: women’s empowerment, promotion of equity, local governance capacity development, and integration of nutrition in agriculture. Each thematic program is linked to agroecology as the foundation to strengthen rural livelihoods by building resilience. In particular, they seek to meet the specific needs of the most vulnerable within these communities.

Strategies vary depending on the country, to ensure they are embedded in local social and cultural dynamics. New farming practices include agroforestry, soil and water conservation, short cycle seeds, rapid compost, establishing seed banks, promoting rotation-based livestock. Related interventions are creating savings and credit groups for women, raising the awareness of local leaders around issues of resilience, and using improved nutrition as an enabling entry point for women empowerment.

A vital lesson of the initiative is that no single intervention can be enough to increase resilience. Interventions only have meaningful results if communities are given ownership of the process from the outset. Rewarding good practices can create momentum and have a “contagious effect” in getting other people to try them.

## What is Agroecology?

- Agroecology is a set of low-cost farming practices that mimic the functioning of local ecosystems by working with, not against nature.
- It makes the best use out of nature's resources without damaging them, reduces risk and dependence on expensive agrochemicals.
- It is farming that is productive, economically viable, socially just, resilient to climate change, sustainable, and nutrition-sensitive.
- It is also a science and a social movement consisting of many organizations and individuals working to establish a sustainable and resilient future for more people.



Photo: Pruning demonstration, supplied by ANSD

## Critical levers of success already exist for strengthening resilience across the Sahel.

### *Integrating equity into agroecology interventions*

Addressing inequity issues within rural communities can close the huge gap in food security between poor and wealthy households. This means implementing effective social and governance strategies to ensure that even the most vulnerable of households are supported.

### *Building the capacity of local governance structures*

Leadership at the village level must be harnessed to support those most vulnerable. Elected leaders and community members must be engaged, from the outset, with the agroecological intervention process. This way, they can build a sense of ownership and are more likely to participate in the programs.

### *Incorporating a nutrition lens into agricultural programs*

Agroecology can address the crisis of malnutrition plaguing the Sahel by integrating nutrition into farming systems. This requires raising awareness on the importance of proper nutrition practices and diverse diets across rural communities while promoting the production and consumption of nutritionally rich crops, including home gardens.

### *Promoting women's empowerment in agriculture*

An agroecological transformation in the Sahel must promote the empowerment of women in building the resilience of communities. This can be done through women's savings and credit groups or supporting women to secure access to land and livestock.

## Key Lessons

- **Engage communities** in the process of the agroecology intervention to deepen their understanding of the causes of vulnerability and ensure programs are designed with local communities and geography in mind.
- **Base interventions on traditional knowledge and local resources** to limit the dependence on external inputs, which are often costly and not easily accessible.
- **Encourage small-scale experimentation** by networks of volunteer farmers in many villages. Once mastered, help them share the results with other households in the broader community who are interested in trying them.
- **Create enthusiasm** around agroecological practices to drive momentum and add credibility to the process.
- **Strike the right balance** between immediate and long-term benefits to ensure longer-term agroecological practices can continue to generate interest.
- **Engage with local actors** to ensure the design of programs consider broader social and economic concerns

*A practical experience in applying these recommendations is fully described in the associated [Case Study: Agroecology as the foundation of resilience in the Sahel](#). This case study is accessible on the [Groundswell International website](#). ([click here](#))*

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