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.

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.
POLICY BRIEF: Resilience

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.

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.

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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