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Project for the promotion of the use of agricultural inputs by producer organisations


FAO-NIGER

Adamou Mahamane is a journalist. After numerous positions in the media, he decided to orient his professional activities towards communication for development. He was recruited as communication expert by UNDP for a rural development project in Mayahi. After that, he worked as communication expert for the Keita Integrated Project of the Italian Development Cooperation, where he set up a community radio station. He also was National Coordinator of the project “Relaunch of rural radio in Niger”, financed by FAO and UNICEF.

At present, he is communication expert for the project “Promotion of the use of agricultural inputs by producer organisations” (known as Inputs Project), a partner project of Dimitra. His work consists of providing farmers’ organisations with information at the technical (e.g. the reasonable and rational use of inputs), economic (e.g. the availability of inputs, their quality, price, etc.) and financial (e.g. the availability of credit, interest rates, etc) levels, through information and communication activities (production of films, radio programmes, technical information cards, etc).

Inputs Project

“Promotion of the use of agricultural inputs by producer organisations”



1. Introduction

In Niger, the majority of poor people live in rural areas, and their livelihoods depend on their access to land and other natural resources. But as in many countries in the world, there is gender inequality as regards land access, and this has many effects, especially for women.

Studies have shown that in Niger and almost everywhere in West Africa, gender inequality in land access is very costly indeed, both for individuals (especially women) and society as a whole. According to the World Bank, “gender inequality is an obstacle to the promotion of human rights, poverty reduction, economic growth and sustainable development”.¹ Yet everyone must be involved in meeting objectives for sustainable development – both men and women must be able to take part effectively and fairly in the different stages of creating and redistributing wealth. In Niger, the first stage is access to land, since despite the irregularity of rainfall in the country, most people depend on agriculture for a living and land is the main source of income and food security for the majority of rural households.

Within the framework of this workshop, our contribution will focus on the effects of gender inequalities in land access and rural women’s access to credit in Niger.

2. Social and cultural background determining social relations between men and women in the household and in society

Niger’s society is characterised by its rich cultural diversity, a result of the presence of various different ethnic groups (10) throughout the country. In most communities, society is traditionally organised along patriarchal lines. “Despite the diversity of their beliefs and practices,” the different ethnic groups “have the same ideas on the respective roles of men and women”.²

In all ethnic groups, relationships between men and women are based on inequality between the man, who is the head of the household, and the woman, who is a wife and mother. Generally speaking, in most of Niger’s social systems, family life is governed by a culture in which women are subordinate and men are dominant.

3. Land access

The main way of achieving direct access to land is by acquisition or inheritance, both of which are normally reserved for men. Both men and women may gain indirect access to land ownership by renting or borrowing land (from husbands or other family members). In the past, the availability of cultivable land and the fact that most agricultural activity focused on food production made it easier to gain access to land. However, this is no longer the case now that there is a “crisis for agricultural and environmental systems due to the rapidly rising population and the continued use of unsuitable production systems, which calls into question current land management methods”.³

We should also note that when land is being distributed, whether it was obtained through inheritance, borrowing or renting, women are allocated the least significant plots of land. Their plots are small and the soil is of poor quality, so it is impossible for women’s agricultural activities to be productive or give good yields. And since women’s access to this land is not guaranteed, they avoid making investments to conserve their land and boost its fertility, even if they can afford to do so, because they know that the landowners could expropriate them at any time.

But why has land access been made so difficult for women? Women’s difficulties in accessing land and, by extension, the income it brings, have their origin in the traditional view of social roles, which reflects the position of men and women in the family and in the community. In our society, the main role of women is reproduction, which cov-



ers activities that are not paid because they are considered to be ‘natural’: giving birth, doing housework, taking care of the children, looking after their health and education, and so on.

Yet no-one today can be unaware of the importance of women’s involvement in agricultural production and the sale of agricultural produce. Unfortunately, when it comes to managing the family production unit, despite the recognition of the fundamental role women play in the day-to-day management of family and agricultural activities and the significant contribution women make to acquiring household goods, women are not guaranteed the right to access or control production resources, the main resource being land.

Women’s lack of access to land and production resources does not only have devastating effects on agricultural development (since we know that women put more effort into agricultural activities than men), it also causes the de facto dependence of women on men and influences their access to complementary resources such as credit.

This is a major obstacle to women being able to develop income-generating activities that, when combined with proper land access, could help them make up for or even overcome the economic and social inequalities that put women at such a disadvantage.

4. Access to credit

In Niger, access to funding in the agricultural sector is also subject to inequality because of the eligibility criteria, which rural women have difficulties meeting. Banks already grant very few loans to rural people, and restrict women’s access to such resources even more.

Women have to overcome several obstacles if they want to take out a loan, including the obligation to present guarantees (title deeds to property in land) or material mortgages, even if they are unable to do so. Moreover, the few loans awarded to women are for low amounts. In spite of this, some women have managed to achieve ‘trader’ status, which gives them a degree of financial autonomy and allows them access to owning production resources, particularly land.⁴

Given the recent food crisis in the world and in Sahelian countries in particular, access to land and funding for agricultural production are strategic needs that men and women must meet in order to increase their production and their income.

We are therefore convinced that giving women access to land could contribute to boosting agricultural production, since it has been observed that women make far more investments when they have rights over the land. We believe that ways and means should be found to allow legal texts on gender equality to be applied (in countries where such laws exist) and that information, communication and advocacy strategies should be developed with a view to “creating an environment that will help women to gain rights relating to land use and improve their access to funding, which will allow them to become more independent”.⁵

However, to create such an environment, a range of activities must be performed to promote change in people’s mentalities, attitudes and practices which will help to eradicate gender inequalities. In this context, we should take note of the recent emergence of a female civil society that is increasingly enterprising in both rural and urban areas of Niger.

In fact, women from both rural and urban areas, with support from the state, NGOs, the international community and various other organisations, are gradually forming more and more groups, unions and federations. They are not only aiming to gain economic independence and emancipation, they are also looking to obtain rights. These groups are beginning, for example, to demand access to land, basic infrastructure and production equipment, as well as the opportunity to participate in the economy of their country.

Furthermore, thanks to projects launched by the State and some NGOs to stop soil erosion, “women are putting major efforts into techniques that have allowed them to rehabilitate large areas of land, which they now own”.⁶

Other women’s groups, unions and federations, including those receiving support from the Inputs Project (“Promotion of the use of agricultural inputs by producer organisations” – in French known as “Projet Intrants”), a Dimitra partner project implemented by FAO, are beginning to gain access to land and loans. These primarily agricultural organisations are gradually being granted access to community land lent to them by traditional landowners, who are generally less reluctant to award land rights when the land is being allocated to a group. With a view to supporting such organisations, the Inputs Project has developed a system to give members of such structures easier access to credit.

Indeed, the Inputs Project realised that most rural producers in Niger, women in particular, live in poverty and that these women are faced with many problems when trying to obtain loans to fund agricultural production (needs usually expressed by men) and income-generating activities (animal fattening, market gardening, processing agricultural products etc., which are generally performed by women). With this in mind, it found a system linking loans to the sale of agricultural products. This credit system is known as “warrantage”.

✿ *The warrantage credit system*

The warrantage credit system enables the producer organisations (men and/or women) to:

- secure their own loans;
- benefit from increasing prices;
- acquire inputs or carry out income-generating activities without having to adapt the household’s small budget;
- develop the use of inputs to ensure better productivity.

The warrantage credit system works as follows: at harvest time (November for rain-fed crops), when the markets are flooded and prices are at their lowest, producer organisations (POs) deposit part of their harvest in a safe, secure warehouse and use it as collateral rather than selling it for a low price on the market. First of all, the produce is inspected by the warehouse’s banker (usually a microfinance institution), who checks the quality and quantity of the goods. The produce is then locked away in a warehouse secured by two padlocks – one for the PO and one for the bank, meaning that neither party can remove the goods without the other. The PO is awarded a loan corresponding to 80% of the produce’s lowest value.

Four to six months later, the loan can be repaid with the profits earned from an income-generating activity. Following repayment, the microfinance institution frees up the produce being used as collateral, which, in the meantime, has increased in value. With this system, the producers win on two fronts. Experiences of the warrantage credit system in Niger indicate that the value of the produce used as collateral generally increases by 30 to 40% (depending on the goods and varying from one year to the next). The idea has spread to several other West African countries, where it is applied by farmers’ organisations representing both men and women.

In Niger, this system of flexible credit based on depositing agricultural produce as collateral has allowed several women farmers' organisations to access funds enabling them to perform income-generating activities. Some of them have even been able to buy the land they work, to the great satisfaction of their members and their communities. The women's unions that are partners of the Inputs Project, including those from Torodi, Saboudey Carré and Kollo, now have their own land. They carry out agricultural production activities, notably growing seeds that they sell to institutions supporting agricultural development, such as FAO.

As far as working the land is concerned, the Inputs Project is supporting organisations through agricultural information and dissemination activities through in 'farmer

field schools', a suitable framework for teaching producers about new technologies.

5. What information and communication strategies should be implemented to promote women's access to land and credit?

Guaranteeing women access to land, coupled with access to credit and technical support, is the best way for poor families to contribute to national development and benefit from it.

In Sahelian countries such as Niger, everyone must be convinced that food security is difficult to achieve without the involvement of women, and rural women in particular, as their social and economic role and traditional expertise in agriculture no longer need to be proven.



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One of the best ways to promote women's involvement is to guarantee women's ownership rights over the land (where they do not already have such rights) by putting through legal reforms or applying legal texts pertaining to the matter (if there are any). An information and communication strategy should then be developed along the following lines:

- Campaign to raise visibility and promote rural women's involvement in their communities and at national level;
- Information, awareness-raising and advocacy campaign targeting different stakeholders in society (especially traditional chiefs, religious leaders and male heads of households) and promoting women's access to land;
- Broadcasts (particularly by community radio stations), supported by traditional and religious authorities, on aspects of traditional and religious law that are favourable to women;
- Projects to inform women of their rights, the existence of credit facilities and how to access such facilities;

- Literacy programmes for women to ensure that they have easier access to information and that they understand the information.

6. Recommendations

We recommend that the authorities of Niger:

- Accelerate the process of adopting the national gender policy.

We recommend that Dimitra:

- Build on and disseminate good practices and experiences as regards information and communication on rural women's access to land and credit;
- Improve existing strategies and develop new ones to encourage and communicate with traditional leaders and political decision-makers on subjects related to women's access to land and credit;
- Build women's capacities through literacy projects.

1. World Bank, 1999, 2001.
2. Republic of Niger, Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Protection of Children, National Gender Policy, October 2007.
3. *Accès des femmes à la terre et à la technologie en République de Guinée* (Women's access to land and technology in the Republic of Guinea), Ms. Diallo Ousmane Korke, Economic Commission for Africa (ECA).
4. Republic of Niger, Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Protection of Children, National Gender Policy, October 2007.
5. International Federation of Agricultural Producers, *Give credit to rural women*.
6. Mahalmoudou Hamadou, expert in natural resource management/land and pastoralism – CILSS Executive Secretariat, Ouagadougou.