

Knowledge Share Fair in Niger, a new sharing experience

The FAO Knowledge Management and Gender programme (see box page 4) organised a Knowledge Share Fair in Niamey, Niger from 15 to 17 June. This new knowledge sharing experience was highly rated by the 250 participants who came from the whole region to attend the three day event.

Why a fair?

The concept of a fair, as opposed to a conference or seminar, already indicates something innovative. A knowledge share fair is a perfect **meeting place** that aims to introduce a new, participatory type of social gathering and serve as a forum where planned sessions would alternate with informal exchanges. It is called knowledge share fair because it is a place where anyone can come to share experiences, knowledge and lessons learned while implementing projects and activities.

By organising the Knowledge Share Fair in Niamey, the various parties involved in FAO's Knowledge Management and Gender (KMG) programme proposed a new way of exchanging knowledge on technical topics using a **participatory approach**. The aim of the fair was not only to boost the profile of the KMG programme, but also to initiate a process of exchanges of experience, knowledge and networking on topics of common interest to partners in West Africa.

What themes were covered at the fair?

The topics addressed were: good agricultural practices and innovations; information and communication in rural areas; agro-inputs management.

Good agricultural practices and innovations included various training and extension methods (Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools, advice on family farming, farmer field schools and demonstration fields), micro-gardens, integrated crop management, organic vegetable farming, women's access to land, and urban and peri-urban agriculture.

Information and communication in rural areas covered such issues as the capitalisation of experiences, communicating gender for development, community listeners' clubs, information and communication systems via text messaging, exchange visits, management of Web content, the use of horticultural databases, and linking literacy centres to rural radio stations.

Agro-inputs management focused on the funding of agro-inputs (warrantage, seasonal credits), the management of grouped purchases (seeds and fertiliser), access and distri-



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bution (agro-input shops, supply centres), and the strengthening of the seed sector (for market garden produce and other crops).

Who attended the fair?

The event was attended by a range of people and organisations selected for their potential contribution to the exchanges, for the benefit they might derive from the presentations and for their interest in the programme's mission. Accordingly, producers' organisations mixed with NGOs and development projects, organisations interested in the topics covered by the KMG programme, technical services and UN agencies, students and researchers from universities or specialised agricultural training centres, and representatives of financial and technical partners and of FAO.

What are the methods and tools of knowledge sharing?

Knowledge sharing entails **more than just 'sharing'**. It implies 'working together' and 'helping one another', whilst at the same time drawing on creativity, collaboration and participation. There are numerous methods, tools and approaches for turning tacit knowledge into explicit know-how. Each session was facilitated using a specific knowledge-sharing method or tool. This methodology enabled the participants to discover what can be done, in a

participatory way, to share experiences without resorting to PowerPoint presentations.

The participants discovered **new methods for sharing knowledge**, such as:

- the *maquis mondial* (a French-language and African version of the 'world café');
- the *carroussel*, a variant of the *maquis mondial*;
- peer assist;
- chat shows;
- proverbs;
- the tree of knowledge;
- exchange visits;
- presentations with debates;
- and many more...

For more information on such tools, see the website www.kstoolkit.org (in English, with some documents also in French and Spanish).

In addition to serving a purpose, knowledge sharing can also be fun! The fair proved to be an informative, innovative and inspiring experience.

The sessions were between 75 and 90 minutes long and started with a presentation on the topic and on the methodology used. At the end, participants had some time to reflect and summarise in writing what seemed important to remember and what they were 'taking away'

with them. They were also asked to indicate burning questions that they would like to see answered during the Knowledge Share Fair.

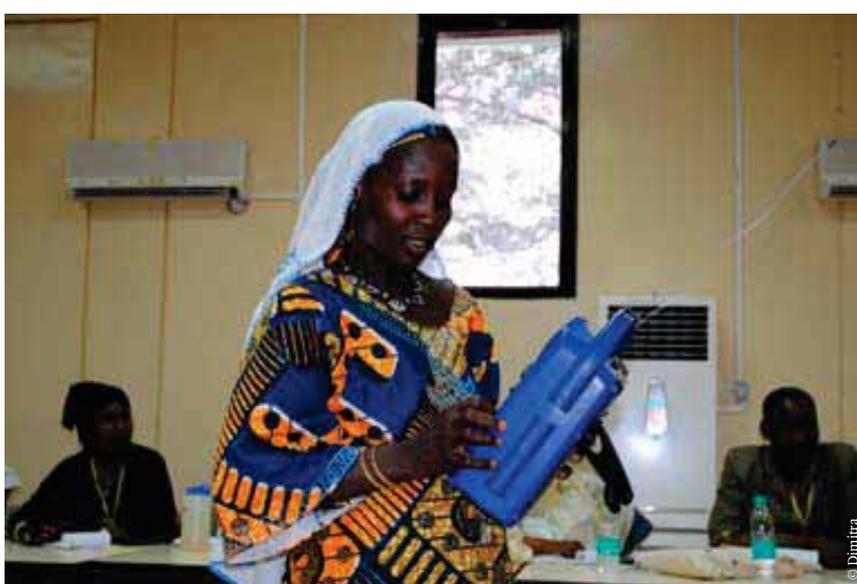
The formats of the various sessions differed:

- plenary sessions to open and close each day;
- workshop-debates on specific themes, bringing together experiences of the programme partners, and prepared and hosted with one or more guests;
- roundtable discussions and demonstrations to question, discuss and debate a particular experience, activity or practice presented by an organisation;
- video documentary screenings by individuals or organisations followed by a discussion;
- a half-day field visit near Niamey, to meet those involved in an experience that had been presented at one of the sessions of the Fair.

The fair was well documented throughout, with journalists producing numerous audio, video and photographic reports and interviews.

The participation of rural women

A dozen women from different rural areas of Niger were invited by Dimitra and its partner ONG VIE to take part in the Knowledge Share Fair. Some came with their baby on their back and for many this was their first time in Niamey, the capital. They were very proud to present their listeners' clubs and



explain how their lives had been changed by them. The majority of these women had never owned or even listened to a radio before. The world has opened up for them, and with the addition of solar mobile telephones they consider that they have taken a giant leap in terms of participation in community life and that their status has improved.

Despite their inexperience, they surprised all the participants at the Fair by their work and development strategies. Following the success of their first presentation, they held an additional session to explain how each group has organised its community listeners' club – in line with their specific needs and desires, how they work better both among themselves and with men, how much their self-confidence has grown and how they visualize the future.

A real success

The Knowledge Share Fair attracted almost 250 participants (33% of whom were women), mainly from Niger (74%) and neighbouring Burkina Faso (17%), from West Africa (Senegal, Benin, Togo, Mali, Chad) and Europe. Numerous exchanges between participants were facilitated over the three days in 18 workshops and roundtables, six film screenings followed by discussions and three demonstrations (one on micro-gardens and two on the Hortivar database). Networking was facilitated throughout the entire Knowledge Share Fair by the 30 stands set up in a convivial open space where numerous materials were available for the participants (documents, brochures, publications, CD-ROMs and agricultural produce).

During the Knowledge Share Fair, an interactive website was launched where many participants registered to keep in touch with one another after the event. Minutes of the sessions, notes, files and articles written specially for the fair plus other documents collected by the organisers to support the topics covered are being processed and put online. A CD-ROM compiling all materials is being produced and will be distributed to all the participants. It will also be used to promote the programme's activities.

The Knowledge Management and Gender programme



Systematic gender mainstreaming and maximally capitalising on progress made in projects and programmes motivated the creation of the FAO-Belgium partnership's "KMG programme" (www.connaissances-genre.net). The three-year programme (running from 2008 to 2011) comprises Dimitra; Hortivar; the Capitalisation of Good Practices in Support of Agricultural Production and Food Security project; and the Rural Finance Learning Centre (RFLC).

Dimitra (www.fao.org/dimitra) and the Capitalisation of Good Practices in Support of Agricultural Production and Food Security project (www.capitalisation-bp.net) (see Newsletter 17) represent the methodological branch, applying a participatory approach with a view to fostering better knowledge

sharing and systematic gender mainstreaming through better management of information and communication. Hortivar (www.fao.org/hortivar) for horticultural practices (see Newsletter 15) and the Rural Finance Learning Centre (www.ruralfinance.org) with war-rantage (see Newsletter 16), constitute the technical branch.

The aims of the KMG programme are to:

- make knowledge dissemination more efficient;
- promote knowledge sharing;
- promote and disseminate good practices, especially with respect to supporting food security and the empowerment of rural populations;
- facilitate collaboration and synergies between as many development actors as possible.

✿ The Knowledge Share Fair's websites

Official website:

www.sharefair.net/share-fair-niamey

Interactive website:

www.foireauxsavoirs.net

Warrantage and grouped orders for inputs

At the Niamey Knowledge Share Fair, several workshops covered warrantage and the supply of agricultural inputs, two subjects of interest to the partners of the Capitalisation of Good Practices in Support of Agricultural Production and Food Security project, the producers' organisations in particular.

Warrantage (also known as inventory credit) has been recognised as a credit system and a powerful tool for guaranteeing food security. The technique was initiated in Niger by the FAO's Inputs Project in 1999 and since then has gradually spread to neighbouring countries as well.

The marked growth in warranted loan volumes in Niger confirms that there is keen interest in the system, with warranted loans worth 2.2 billion CFA francs granted by the banks over 10 years. This has generated revenue totalling 660 million CFA francs for farmers (a 30% increase) and 220 million CFA francs for the banking system (through a 10% interest rate).

From the experience gained in Niger and with the support of partners like the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), warrantage has spread to other countries in the region. The FAO's Capitalisation Project is now endeavouring to promote the good practices that help to make it equally accessible to all, especially the most deprived. After all, if warrantage develops unchecked in Niger, it is at risk of becoming a free market economy banking product which benefits the rich rather than the poor.

A workshop held at the Knowledge Share Fair in Niamey last June gave participants the

opportunity to exchange opinions on various interesting experiences in the field of warrantage, and ways of sustainably promoting it for men as well as for women and for vulnerable population groups. The participants approved current initiatives with micro-financing associations in Burkina Faso and Niger for monitoring warrantage, exchanging good practices and setting up a "warrantage network".

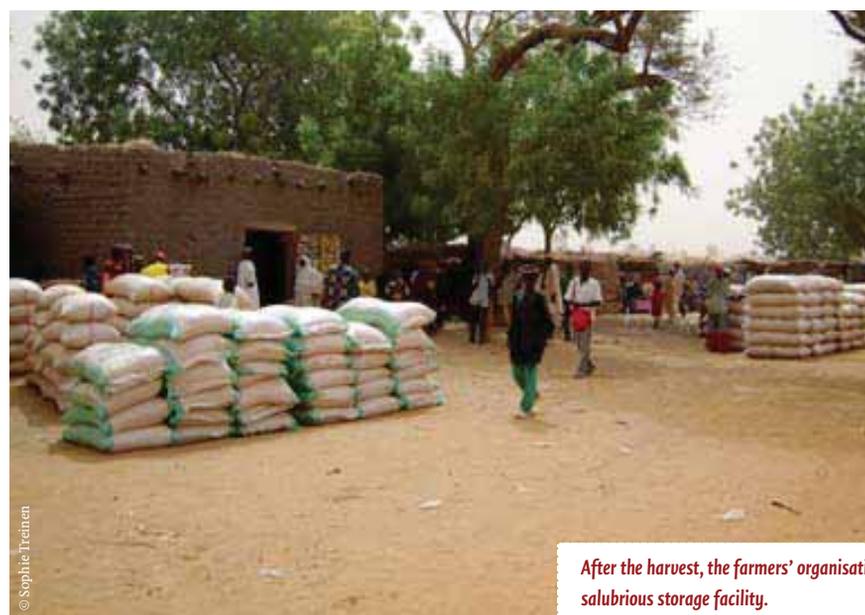
The issue of agro-inputs procurement provoked a heated debate. The initiatives of farmers' organisations in this field were discussed, in particular with regard to grouped orders, which allow better quality and better prices as well as better control of the supply dates and the types of inputs required. The Federation of market gardeners in Niger gave a presentation on its experience with grouped orders for seed potatoes, placed using a documentary credit (CREDOC), thus demonstrating that federations can order directly from the international market. A CREDOC is a guarantee from a buyer's bank to a supplier's bank vouching that the inputs will be paid upon delivery.

There was also lengthy discussion on the lack of coordination between the inputs supplied by States (from donations) and the private initiatives of farmers' organisations in Niger

and private suppliers in Burkina Faso, and the contradictions this situation presents. Initiatives are underway in each country to try and harmonise the two channels of supply. The participants applauded the idea of parties in both countries maintaining contact so that any headway made by one could be of benefit to all. The idea of an information exchange network also gained ground.

How warrantage works

Small producers tend to sell their crops cheaply at harvest time (November) to meet their immediate needs. However, prices for the same crops rise by more than 56% during the ensuing lean season (August). As a solution to this problem, the FAO's Inputs Project in Niger introduced warrantage. In November/December, just after the harvest, the farmers' organisations stock their members' agricultural produce in a safe, salubrious storage facility. The bank, usually a rural finance institution (RFI), then verifies the quantity and quality of the stored crops. The warehouse is secured with two padlocks, one for the bank and one for the farmers' organisation. The bank then provides a credit equivalent to 80% of the crop's harvest time value. This credit is extended to each member pro rata of their contribution to the overall stock. With the credit, the producers undertake an income-generating activity (IGA), such as livestock fattening, market gardening, processing or marketing. In May, with the earnings from their IGA, each member pays back the loan to their farmers' organisation, which reimburses the bank, which in turn releases the stock by returning its key. The members thus win twofold: the stock has increased in value and their IGA has provided earnings. It is estimated that this system boosts their revenue by 30%.



After the harvest, the farmers' organisations stock their members' agricultural produce in a safe, salubrious storage facility.

Micro-gardens at the Knowledge Share Fair in Niamey

At the Knowledge Share Fair, four training sessions on micro-gardening involving theory and practical work were held for around 25 participants per session, most of them women. This interactive training gave the participants a chance to discover first hand the benefits of micro-gardens. Many of them hoped to be able to immediately set up their own micro-garden at home.

After each session, the participants shared their views and made the following list of advantages. Micro-gardens:

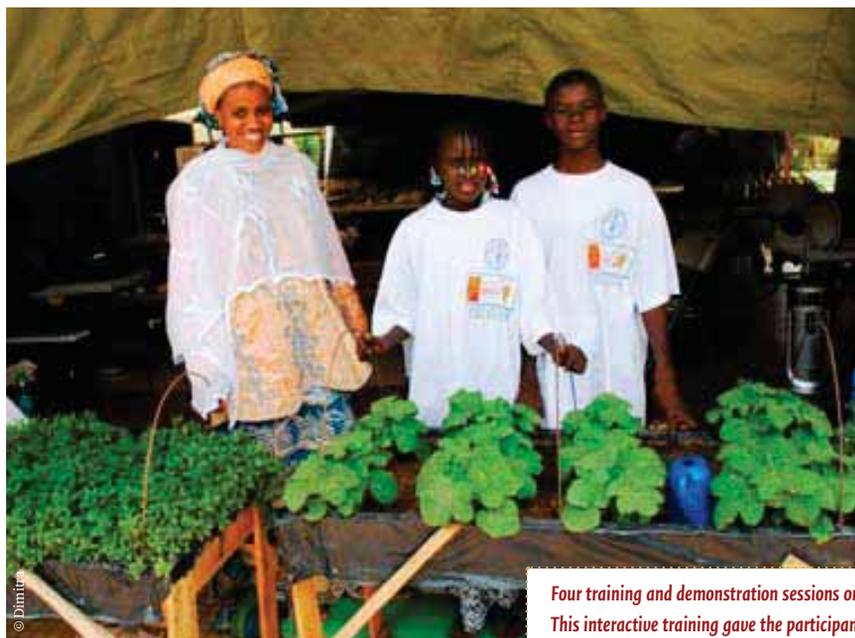
- are small, they do not take up much space;
 - are easy to set up (a table-garden made from salvaged wooden slats);
 - can be set up in a vast range of containers (including used car or lorry tyres, old basins, buckets of various sizes or other recipients);
 - provide the home with an impressive range of fresh, clean vegetables, herbs and spices for cooking;
 - require little physical effort;
 - can be cultivated by anyone: men, women, young people, children, the elderly, the disabled or convalescents;
 - do not require extensive watering and therefore require little time and effort of drawing and transporting water;
 - do not require weeding;
 - are easy to protect from rodents and insects, including slugs;
 - can easily be moved to shelter from bad weather.
- Other advantages mentioned were:
- excess water is recovered after watering, so not a drop goes to waste;
 - very little substrate is used, thus saving on soil and compost;
 - there is no need to use costly mineral fertiliser, which is often not readily available anyway. By contrast, household waste turned into homemade compost can be used;
 - there is no need to buy special tools to cultivate or maintain a micro-garden. Everything can be done by hand or by using improvised tools (such as a wooden hoe);
 - micro-gardens are ideal places to grow seedlings at home – where it is easier to take care of them – before transplantation into the field;
 - the produce grown in micro-gardens is healthy because no pesticides are used;
 - one knows how the produce has been grown and where it comes from, so there is no reason to doubt its quality or safety;
 - micro-gardens allow children to learn gardening at home and how to recognise the different plants;
 - micro-gardens can be built using locally sourced materials and supplies (old wooden slats, peanut shells, rice husks, dung, household waste, and so on);
 - you can work standing upright; almost no bending is required;
 - the technology used is not subject to any commercial restrictions. It is simple and can easily be replicated;
 - often, women do not have access to land, but they can grow produce around the house;
 - fields are often a long way from home. Having a micro-garden close by makes it easier to tend the garden and also take care of other household duties;
 - leaving the house, especially unaccompanied, can sometimes be dangerous. Having a micro-garden at home is a more convenient option;
 - micro-gardens eliminate post-harvest losses: you can pick what you need each day;
 - micro-gardens help to keep the house tidy because household waste is recycled into compost which is then put back into the micro-garden as an organic fertiliser.

To maintain the momentum generated by these training and demonstration sessions, the plan is to set up one or more training and demonstration centres where men and women, young and old alike, can come to learn about micro-gardening.

Furthermore, in order to enable them to immediately put the acquired knowledge into practice, a micro-garden kit (“Kit MJD”) should be distributed to trainees. These kits could also be sold at agro-input shops or at other places where agro-inputs are sold or distributed in order to make micro-gardens accessible to the public at large. At the same time, an effort should be made to set up and run a monitoring and advice system based on the Farmer Field School method and using the means of communication set up by the Capitalisation project and by the Dimitra network.

✿ **For more information, contact:**

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Four training and demonstration sessions on micro-gardening were held at the Knowledge Share Fair. This interactive training gave the participants a chance to discover first hand the benefits of micro-gardens.