



Promoting the economic empowerment of rural women for improved food security and nutrition in the Niger

Improving resilience through knowledge sharing and the provision of productive assets in Dosso and Maradi regions

Context

In the Niger, rural women are at the forefront of agricultural production, processing, distribution and the sale of food and food products, as well as at the core of household feeding. Nevertheless, they have restricted access to productive resources such as land, agricultural inputs, finance, credit, extension services and technology, and this limits their agricultural outputs. They also have minimal participation in decision-making platforms at all levels. Furthermore, the burden of unpaid care work limits their ability to optimize on and off farm employment and market opportunities. The global COVID-19 pandemic together with recent economic and financial crises have led to high energy and food prices, thus further amplifying the challenges that rural women face.

It is estimated that farms managed by women produce 19 percent less per hectare than farms managed by men. Key factors that contribute to this productivity gap include: differences in access to and use of fertilizer by male and female farmers, limited access to productive land by women compared with men, and disparities in access to agricultural extension services between men and women (Prosper and Kevin, 2015).

This good practice focuses on the project *Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women* aimed at securing rural women’s livelihoods and rights in the Dosso and Maradi regions of the Niger. This project was implemented between April 2015 and June 2021 by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in collaboration with the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), and the World Food Programme (WFP). The project was aligned with government policies and strategies addressing nutrition, gender and food systems, including the five year action plan (2018–2022) for implementation of the national strategy for the economic empowerment of women in the Niger as well as the common convergence approach of the 3N initiative “Nigeriens Nourishing Nigeriens”.

Key facts



Geographical coverage

Dosso and Maradi region of the Niger



United Nations. 2018. *Map of the Niger*. Cited 11 May 2023. un.org/geospatial/content/niger



Target beneficiaries

- Nearly 17 500 direct beneficiaries (more than 90 percent were women and girls).
- Almost 29 000 community members involved as indirect beneficiaries (more than 66 percent were women and girls).



Gender

The project promoted a transformative agenda around the economic empowerment of rural women, aimed at increasing their access to productive resources and improving their knowledge and skills, while encouraging their participation in decision-making spheres.



Food system components

- Food supply chains (production, handling and storage)
- Food environment (trade and marketing)
- Consumer behaviour and diets

Nutrition-sensitive community-based approaches in the Niger

The project was implemented using integrated approaches and community-based platforms – particularly Farmer Field Schools (FFS), Dimitra Clubs and local radio stations – which facilitate the empowerment and capacity building of rural women in vulnerable situations, as well as their access to and control of productive resources. These platforms were used to facilitate diversified food production, storage, trade and

consumption, including through community food and nutrition education sessions and knowledge sharing, community cooking demonstrations, local food processing training, the provision of diverse productive assets and labour-saving technologies, as well as food sales to school canteens. Tailored support to women's groups, including in terms of income, knowledge and practices, was a strong focus throughout.

Farmer Field School

A FFS is a participatory education approach that brings together a group of small-scale food producers to solve production problems through sustainable agriculture. This approach offers space for hands-on group learning, enhancing skills for observation and critical analysis and improved decision-making by local communities.

Dimitra Clubs

FAO Dimitra Clubs are groups of women, men and young people – mixed or not – who work together to bring about changes in their communities. They meet regularly to discuss the challenges they face in their daily lives, make decisions and take action to resolve their problems. The clubs advocate inclusion of marginalized or under recognized groups, such as women, to ensure that they are heard and have access to the necessary resources.





Methodological approach

UN Rome-based agencies (FAO, IFAD and WFP) joined forces with UN Women to plan and implement nutrition-sensitive activities promoting the economic empowerment of women in the Niger.

The project area and targeted villages were selected through a participatory process. The decision-making, planning, implementation and supervision processes were jointly executed by the four agencies:

- FAO led the implementation of the Dimitra Clubs, FFS, food and nutrition education, and steered the efforts to strengthen the governance of rural institutions.
- IFAD provided access to small livestock and agricultural inputs, as well as local food processing machinery.
- UN Women supported the implementation of multifunctional platforms, strengthening women's leadership at community level and participation in local institutions, and their access to resources.
- WFP led the school-based activities, which included school canteens and improving access to markets for agricultural production.

Food system elements

Food supply chains: production, handling and storage

The project supported diversified crop production (groundnut, cowpea, sesame, millet) and small livestock production (mainly goats) through:

- provision of two female goats and one male goat for each targeted household;
- provision of improved seeds and pastoral kits (which included small ruminants and livestock feed);
- training in livestock management, health care and animal feeding, food storage and conservation;
- capacity development in agricultural production techniques through the FFS approach (knowledge multiplied at community level via the Dimitra Clubs, reaching thousands of indirect beneficiaries);
- provision of equipment for different project beneficiary groups: food processing equipment for selected microenterprises; labour-saving equipment, including multifunctional platforms (diesel engines for powering machinery such as shellers, milling machines), donkey and cattle carts, kits for processing agricultural products, standpipes and pulleys installed on community wells;
- provision of motor pumps to support watering of community market garden sites;
- construction of a cereal storage warehouse for the women's union

- GAFEMMES of Guidan Wari (rural municipality of Guidan Amoumoune); and
- creation of the Saidu Goulla feed bank to store local inputs used for livestock feeding.

FAO also supported the setting up of a livestock feed bank in one of the rural communities. This improved the storage of local inputs, including cowpea pods, peanut hulls and millet bran. The communities were able to prepare their own livestock feed, thereby reducing the cost of livestock production and enhancing sustainability.

Food environment: trade and marketing

FAO supported the food environment by facilitating access to markets for women and men through partnership with WFP's school feeding programmes and training women and producer organizations in organizational capacities and rural entrepreneurship.

Activities included:

- support to formalization of the producer organizations for better market access;
- strengthening of village savings and loan associations to increase access to finances in the form of loans;
- local purchases of items to supply school canteens;
- training to improve entrepreneurial skills of rural women; and
- creation of community-social enterprises led by young women through the Dimitra Clubs.

Consumer behaviour and improved diets

FAO, IFAD, UN Women and WFP promoted capacity development interventions on nutrition and healthy diets through training of trainers offered to 120 Dimitra Clubs, several school management committees, school canteens and four community radio stations.





Steps followed in the implementation of food and nutrition training

1. Identification of training needs and themes

They were identified through the nutrition knowledge attitude and practice (KAP) baseline survey that was conducted at the beginning of the project. The nutrition training focused on nine priority themes:

- definition of key concepts (nutrition, malnutrition, food security etc.);
- breastfeeding and infant and young child feeding;
- malnutrition, including signs, causes, consequences and local solutions;
- budgeting and family food;
- water, sanitation and hygiene;
- household and individual dietary diversity;
- nutrition in FFS;
- recipes and cooking of local foods; and
- social and behaviour change communication.

2. Revision of nutrition training materials

FAO supported the update of the nutrition content (previously formulated in 2015), including an addition of new themes.

3. Training of Dimitra Club leaders

A total of 60 Dimitra Club leaders (about two per club) were trained in nutrition education and a total of 10 supervisors, overseeing several Dimitra Clubs, were trained through interactive learning methodologies. Thereafter, each Dimitra Club leader was provided with teaching aids to facilitate the dissemination of knowledge to other clubs members as well as to the community. A standard nutrition education package was used across different target groups in the two regions. The nutrition process included: a baseline study, training of club leaders, community nutrition awareness sessions, cooking demonstrations using local products, and an endline survey at least six months after awareness-raising sessions. The tools used for the baseline and endline studies were the KAP and Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS). Nutrition training/awareness-raising materials were developed based on the gaps identified by the baseline studies.

4. Supervision of the community nutrition discussions

A total of 15 supervision visits were conducted (three visits per village).

5. Supervision of the cooking demonstration sessions

A total of 15 local recipes were developed and demonstrations undertaken.

6. Retraining of the Dimitra Club leaders and supervision of the community nutrition discussions

A total of five supervisions were undertaken.



Results and impacts

The baseline (2015) and endline (2021) surveys of the project showed many positive impacts.

Food supply chains: production, handling and storage

- There was an average increase in women's rainfed crop production (focused on groundnut, cowpea, sesame, millet), which varied between 9 percent and 53 percent, depending on the crop.
- An average of 86 percent of women producers increased their agricultural production.
- Animal production (focusing mainly on goats) increased by 126 percent among beneficiaries. More than 50 percent of the income raised from selling the livestock was used to meet household food needs.
- The project supported rural women with labour-saving equipment. According to focus group discussions with women beneficiaries, the time spent on water collection reduced. The women were able to use the extra time to fulfil other responsibilities, such as household maintenance, childcare, income-generating activities, home hygiene and attendance at health centres.
- A total of 29 FFS were set up (568 women and 263 men).

Food environment: trade and marketing

- The total income generated by the targeted rural women through the sell of their production to supply school canteens increased eightfold, from USD 83 090 in 2016 to USD 682 171 in 2021.
- The total savings mobilized within the targeted village savings and loan associations increased from CFA Francs 0 to CFA Francs 62 931 000 (USD 126 000).
- At the end of the project, the monetary value of the cereal stock mobilized by women beneficiaries was estimated at CFA Francs 44 170 000 (USD 76 155).

Consumer behaviour and improved diets

- The average household dietary diversity score for all municipalities targeted in the project increased from 3.49 to 4.84 percent – very close to the programme target of 5.
- The existence of latrines in targeted households increased from 19 percent to 39 percent.

- The level of knowledge of beneficiaries on the causes and means of prevention of malnutrition increased significantly, from 59 percent to 87 percent.
- Based on the results of the initial surveys and the endline KAP survey conducted among project beneficiaries in the intervention communes:
 - The rate of exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of a child's life increased from 63 percent to 87 percent.
 - Knowledge of the age for the introduction of complementary foods increased from 80 percent to 91 percent.
 - The percentage of households that consume any type of fruits or vegetables increased from 62 percent to 78 percent.
- Targeted rural women benefited from workload reduction and start-up equipment for income generation. Through an analysis of this assessment, 97 percent of the 184 women interviewed in the endline survey declared that their daily living conditions had improved.

Implications of COVID-19

COVID-19 had a negative impact on the programme, since some of the project targets were delayed, while a few were not achieved. For example, there was no significant reduction in the malnutrition rate in Maradi region, which could be attributed to local work restrictions, food market restrictions and loss of markets, which in turn affected incomes and access to diverse foods. Project implementation was also impacted, as there was less community interaction, with delayed implementation of some activities as a result.

However, the project supported the diversification of income sources for women, helping them to better cope with the impacts of the pandemic. Furthermore, the cereal stocks, grain banks and animal feed bank played a role in cushioning household food and nutrition insecurity during the difficult periods (including during COVID-19). In support of communities, the project bought kits for 20 villages, which comprised masks, cartons of soap and handwashing kits for direct beneficiaries.





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Sustainability

The project undertook the following activities to enhance the sustainability of the gains made:

- support to setting up the Saidu Goulla feed bank, so that the farmers can store local inputs and use them for livestock feeds throughout all seasons;
- the provision of food processing equipment and training to women groups and microenterprises, so that they can process different foods on their own, for consumption and sell;
- capacity development of Dimitra Club leaders and community leaders in food and nutrition, so that they can continue to support their communities independently; and
- support to women in diversifying their sources of income through crop and livestock production and sell, setting up microenterprises, and the preservation of food and feed for later use and sale.

The key challenges experienced included:

- Consequences of weather variability: crop production fluctuated, since the intervention area has experienced irregular rains in the past few years.
- Some regions experienced armed attacks, which caused population displacement.
- A general lack of agricultural statistics platforms at lower administrative levels and community group level made it difficult to quantify the different foods that were processed (e.g. groundnut) with precision. This lack of statistics reflects the urgency and relevance of capacity building in management and balance sheet analysis, i.e. entrepreneurship development.

Replicability and upscaling

The project was implemented in seven countries, namely Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, the Niger and Rwanda. The lessons from different countries could also be explored with a view to upscale the project within the same country and replicated it in other countries.



Key learning

The final project evaluation revealed that several factors contributed to the achievement of good results in the Niger. Lessons learned and good practices include:

- **Nutrition behaviour change:** Changing nutrition behaviour and practices takes time, especially in the case of deeply entrenched food taboos and habits. It is therefore important to consistently promote nutrition knowledge and support behaviour change through different entry points, in order to achieve positive results.
- **Farmer Field Schools:** The FFS proved to be an effective platform that brought farmers together and enabled learning on improved agricultural production to take place, as well as the provision of agricultural inputs and support to farmers throughout the production cycle. In future, farmers need to be followed up consistently, and support could be provided to FFS facilitators to enhance the quality of outputs.
- **Engaging men:** Building and maintaining recognition of women's contribution to nutrition cannot be sustainable without support from the household and community in which women live. When the Dimitra Clubs were used as an entry point at village level, the programme beneficiaries were two-thirds women and one-third men, resulting in access to information and training, decision-making, and thematic discussions on law and gender equality becoming shared resources..
- **Use of Dimitra Clubs in project implementation:** The Dimitra Club approach facilitates the involvement of men and women, including young people, in the decision-making process and community development. Dimitra Clubs facilitated a participatory approach to decision-making and planning, and provided a platform to share knowledge on issues such as nutrition and resilience. They were also effective in promoting collective microenterprises.
- **Promoting multifunctional devices:** Equipment, including shellers, flour machines and telephones, reduced energy and labour for women at household level and enabled them to participate in more income-generating activities.
- **Coordination mechanisms:** Creating a coordination mechanism for information exchange among the four United Nations agencies and implementing partners (local non-governmental organizations), allowed local partners to develop a greater sense of programme ownership, enhancing local take-up. Furthermore, strengthening the engagement of community and administrative leaders helped to reinforce improved food and nutrition behaviour at community level.

Testimonies

Abou Yayaha, a mother of four children, was a beneficiary of the Rural Women's Economic Empowerment (RWEE) joint programme in the Niger. As a co-leader of the Dimitra Clubs communal network of Djirataoua, Abou describes her experience. *"Before the RWEE project, communities believed in a lot of taboos. Women in the villages were not allowed to eat eggs from the fifth month of pregnancy, as it was believed that eggs are responsible for child malformation. Furthermore, pregnant women were also expected to reduce their food portions from the six month onwards, as it was believed to make the baby too big and cause birth complications. It was also believed that women who go for prenatal care in the health facilities are lazy and unable to bear the problems that come with pregnancy. The Dimitra Clubs facilitated dialogue with community members and sensitized them on good nutrition, maternal and child health, agricultural production, among other important topics. The club members also acquired knowledge on different food recipes, personal hygiene, pre and postnatal care, as well as infant and young child feeding. The Dimitra Clubs also promoted women's leadership and economic empowerment."*

Amina Seyni is a Dimitra Club leader in her village. She explains the new nutrition knowledge that she gained through the training. *"Before the nutrition trainings, we only wanted to eat and fill our stomachs. Now we know the nutritive value of the different foods. For example, sorghum and cassava give us strength, cowpeas and meat help to prevent anemia, baobab leaves, moringa leaves, okra, carrots and other vegetables protect the body from illness. We also learned the need to serve food to everyone in the family, including us women. We have learned about hand hygiene before meals and the importance of buying iodized salt instead of the one that is not iodized. This helps to prevent goitre. Now women know the importance of prenatal care and they are keen on going to health centres as soon as they find out that they are pregnant. We also learned the importance of diversifying diets, especially for young children, and of sleeping under mosquito nets, proper use of latrines, etc."*



Partners

Resource partners

- United Nations Multi Partner Trust Fund

Technical partners

- Government of the Niger
- IFAD
- UN Women
- WFP
- National NGOs
- International NGOs

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