
SAHEL URGENT NEED FOR CHANGE: FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSITION IN A CONFLICT AREA

Wageningen Sahel Platform

CONTENT AND RATIONALE

The current upsurge in violence and conflict in the Sahel is the manifestation of a wider and deeper ecological, economic and political crisis. It can be understood as a revolt of the disenfranchised rural youth, against their seniors, the state and the outside world: a revolt of rural areas against decades of neglect by national governments and the international community.

The rural peripheries where the youth is entrapped, belongs to the global bottom in most development indicators such as malnutrition rates, and infant and maternal mortality. The absence of public services, exploitative governing relations against a background of fast-growing population that has to subsist on a finite amount of natural resources and harsh climate. Recurrent droughts and low agricultural productivity form important threats to both short- and long term food security.

It is estimated that about 80% of all the farming households is not able to do the necessary investments to move from their current marginal existence to a more prosperous future. Many youth are trapped in this situation. For this, major investments in smallholder farming and alternative employment in rural areas are needed to ensure food security, increasing income, resource conservation, sustainable landscapes as a basis for more political stability. This paper will first analyse the root causes of the dire situation of the rural peripheries in the Sahel. Then a number of directions to which we might be able to contribute for food system transition will be presented to rebuild resilience, provide productive (youth) employment and increase productivity and diversity for long term healthy diets.

Disenfranchised youth, entrapped in rural peripheries, revolt against seniors, the state and the outside world.

ROOT CAUSES OF THE SAHELIAN CRISES

1. Governance, land and water access

The governments of the Sahelian countries have been unable to provide solutions for the increasing poverty in rural areas, the decline of natural resources and the lack of opportunities for youth. On the one hand they lack the fiscal basis to set aside capital needed for the tremendous investments needed to transform the current food systems. And investment in agricultural research, infrastructure and services in rural areas have a low priority compared to other expenses. As a result labour and physical resources (water, soil) cannot be used efficiently. On the other hand, investments allocated for rural and agricultural development do not always arrive at the intended destination due to untransparent budget allocations by the urban elites. This severely hampers local farmers, herders and entrepreneurs to get more benefits from their production activities and invest in more productive farming systems.

Institutions and policies should be oriented towards distributional justice so that all people have sufficient chances to build resilient livelihoods. A basic and decisive resource for farmers and pastoralists is access to land. Secure access to land enables long-term planning which is critical for sustainable management rather than exploitation at the short term. Sufficient land of good quality is critical, otherwise, people cannot make a decent living from agricultural production. The lack of public services hampers access to land and other productive resources.

Complicated and exploitative property relations over land and water and the expansion of the "agricultural front", the increase of cultivated area at the expense of pastoral rangelands, fuel conflicts. This has eroded trust between farming and herding communities and undermined traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. Also increasing non-agricultural use



Access to land and productive resources is the basis for farmers and pastoralists.

Interventions need to be based on disaggregated understanding of the nature and sources of unequal access to productive resources.

of land adds to the tensions. Unequal access to the benefits of food systems means that the most vulnerable groups will be more affected by external shocks and long-term changes in temperature, rainfall, soil fertility and world markets. Therefore, interventions should be based on a disaggregated understanding of the nature of sources and of unequal access to productive resources. To tackle this multifaceted issue, systematic, multi-sectoral approaches are required.

2. Resilient livelihoods: intensification, diversification and productive employment

Access, defined as the ability to benefit from natural resources and labour, is pivotal for understanding increasing inequality and vulnerability and the decrease in resilience of rural livelihoods. It also allows to link this lack of resilience to existing economic and political relations that mediate access to resources and income for vulnerable groups such as women, youth and pastoralists. The number of young people in the countries of the Sahel is unprecedented, with over 60% of the population below 25 years of age. Two thirds of them live in rural areas and more often lack access to employment, skills, financial services and technology. In addition, because of their vulnerabilities, they may be at risk of radicalization, negative coping mechanisms or migration, given that this region is also both the departure point for migrants and a key corridor of different migration routes. If no action is taken to improve access to education, vocational training and opportunities to make a decent living, the Sahel could potentially become a hub of mass migration, losing its younger generations in search for prospects not available in the region, and becoming a potential hotspot for recruitment and mobilization of radical groups of religious and ethnic calling.

In their current state, Sahelian food production systems in the rural areas will not be able to provide these youth with meaningful and productive employment. Even though many people move from rural to urban areas, farming, livestock keeping, and other employment related to food production systems will remain an essential component of the economy. The absorption capacity of cities in terms of employment is limited and the rural population in these marginal rural areas will continue to grow for the next decades. Other components of the food system, such as trading, processing and retailing, as well as service provision, will have to absorb significant numbers of people moving out of primary production. Therefore interventions in value chains, food processing and valorisation of side streams are important contributions to food system transformation, provided that it focuses on creating productive employment and distributional justice.

3. Gender inequality

A deeply engrained socio-cultural driver of poverty and inequality is gender discrimination. Women are a major contributor to food systems in the Sahel and its estimated 89% of agricultural employment in these countries. However, persistent gender inequalities regarding access to resources, higher value land, credit, agricultural inputs, and education continue to hold back women. Literacy rates among girls and women in the Sahel region are significantly lower than among men. Because of historically evolved gender norms they are not allowed to own land and property. In some cases religious leaders deepen the gender inequality, aggravating the issues described. As a result, a significant part of their potential contribution to food production and value creation, hence increasing resilience is missing. To help break the cycle of intergenerational poverty, investments in women and children are required to bring down population growth.

4. Environmental stress

Climate change and climate variability, coupled with inherent low soil fertility and land degradation, are major drivers for the persistence of temporary and chronic food insecurity in the Sahel. Poor soils, erratic rainfall (causing both droughts and floods), a lack of investment in soil fertility, water conservation technologies and quality seeds, and poor health of farmers, herders and their animals keep productivity of land at a low level. Expansion of food production currently takes place on low-quality soils, previously used for long term fallowing and the current farming system is not fitted for long-term, sustainable and sufficient food production without additional investments. Investments in the increase of food productivity and value addition and infrastructure, research and development have been too low. Markets are not functioning properly and food quality systems are insufficient to

A growing number of young people is vulnerable to mass migration and recruitment by radical groups.

Improved access to education, vocational training and opportunities to make a decent living is essential.

Interventions in value chains, food processing and valorisation of side streams are important contribution to food system transition.

Gender discrimination is a deeply engrained factor, investments in women and children are required.

Climate change is a major driver for food insecurity.

guarantee safe and high quality food for urban residents. Yet, with proper support, the Sahel region has the potential to feed the growing numbers of consumers. Crops and livestock fit for the Sahel ecology can be produced sustainably. Combined with improved inter-regional trade within ECOWAS member states, food imports from global markets can be substantially reduced. This will contribute to higher levels of food system resilience enhancing the capacity to respond to sudden shocks.

With proper support, the Sahel region has the potential to feed the growing numbers of consumers.

5. Research & Development

Local research capacity is (inter) national underfunded and often instrumentalized by international donors for their own purposes. International support for agricultural development has been erratic, too little, too fragmented and generally has not focused on creating opportunities for the rural poor. The main subsistence crops in the Sahel, sorghum and millet, receive far less attention from international research than other major crops such as rice, maize, and wheat. This applies even more to high-protein crops and livestock needed to provide consumers with a healthy and affordable nutritious diet. Nomadic pastoralism as a viable way of exploiting the Sahelian semi-arid areas does not figure high on research agendas either. Research, development and policy paid little attention to the improvement of diets through crop diversification, the cultivation of pulses and vegetables and the possible contributions of perennials to improve food security and healthy diets. Substantial investment in context relevant research is required and use the evidence as the basis for future policies and development programmes.

International support has been too fragmented and development programmes often not based on evidence. Invest in research and evidence as a basis for policy & development

HEALTHY, AFFORDABLE DIETS, SUSTAINABLE INCOME & RESILIENCE

Current food systems are both the source and the result of poverty and food insecurity and are at the same time affected further by violence and conflict leading to further impoverishment and increasing food insecurity. Yet they are also an essential component of any type of future solution for conflict, violence, poverty, and food insecurity. Food systems do not only provide food, but also income for those producing and distributing food. Especially in the Sahel a large part of the population depends on food systems for food and income for other basic necessities, such as clothing, health care, education, housing, and leisure activities. Therefore, it is argued that the transformation of food systems is a condition sine qua non (of course not the only requirement) for the restoration of peace and political stability in the Sahel.

Food systems transformation is an essential component of any type of future solution for conflict, violence, poverty and food insecurity.

Food systems consist of all the interconnected components of food production, distribution and consumption. They are shaped by ecological and human parameters, but also by policies and resource governance regimes. Therefore the multitude of factors that undermine affordability of nutritious diets and the resilience of Sahelian food systems have to be addressed in a coherent and integrated manner at various scales. In order for Sahelian food systems to contribute to peace and stability, their resilience, productivity and inclusivity have to be increased.

Research has shown that soil and water conservation technologies are important for resilient and sustainably productive production systems. Enhancing resilience is not only taking place at the level of soils, cropping systems, herding strategies or individual livelihoods. It should also consider higher levels of aggregation, such as communities with institutions and mechanisms to regulate access to sufficient amounts of resources for all its members including women, youth and pastoralists and to revive customary conflict resolution mechanisms. Resilient landscapes provide buffers and mutual services from one production system to another in order to mitigate and adapt not only to fluctuations in rainfall and temperature, but also market failures and price hikes and lows on international food and input markets. At present these fluctuations jeopardize the opportunities for sustainable intensification and building resilience.

To be addressed in a coherent and integrated manner at various scales, including women and youth.

Interventions aiming to increase resilience should also focus on existing and potential diversity in food systems. More diverse crops (pulses, vegetables, fruits), vegetation (trees for fodder and fruits), and livestock (animals for different purposes), and more flexible and inclusive natural resource management strategies and conflict resolution mechanisms may contribute to more resilient, climate-smart land use systems and rural livelihoods. Greater diversity may create more opportunities for income earning for youth, women, and

Include focus on diversity, based on evidence.

pastoralists to occupy specific occupational and agro-ecological niches in these food systems. Interventions should be based on a holistic analysis, rather than a small part of the food system to ensure that impact pathways are based on all critical determining factors.

The envisaged food system transitions require considerable investments in research and development in order to provide the necessary evidence, insights, and technological and managerial tools to guide these transformations and to monitor and evaluate their impact. In addition, investments will have to be made in infrastructure, market development, but also in the reform of legal frameworks, governance structures, conflict resolution mechanisms and the building of research and administrative capacity. This requires interdisciplinary and interorganizational collaboration and the long-term (decades-long) commitment of governments and international and bilateral donors to supply the funds for investments and the necessary expertise.

Long-term commitment to interdisciplinary & interorganizational collaboration required.

CALL TO ACTION FOR IMPACT

This paper touches upon various root causes of the Sahelian crises. Many actions have been developed, yet the challenges remain enormous. There is no direct single solution available for such a complicated entanglement of issues. Collaboration is much needed, amongst local and international organizations, between government, private sector, civil society and research to work together on solution pathways. Collaboration is also required between scientific disciplines, to work out new innovative ways and avoid negative trade-offs between various solutions pathways. We propose to further strengthen local capacities to take the lead in developing evidence-based, context specific pathways towards more resilient food systems in an environment affected by climate change and conflict. Moreover, we wish to increase impact through supporting local research organisations breaking down disciplinary and stakeholder silos by working and training together in multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder research in development programmes.

Strengthening local research & development capacities is the basis for context specific sustainable food system transformation.

Finding answers together is the title of the Strategic Plan 2018-2024 of Wageningen University & Research, a well suited title for this quest. The Wageningen Sahel platform invites researchers from all disciplines and experts with an interest in the Sahel region from all organisations and stakeholder groups to join forces to exchange information, and ideas and to work on new interdisciplinary research and innovation programmes, that enable the Sahel region to work on its foundations for a stable and prosperous future.

Let's work on this together.

The Wageningen Sahel Platform Core-Group consists of: Andries Bosma, Inge Brouwer, Annabelle Daburon, Katrien Descheemaeker, Han van Dijk, Bas Hetterscheid, Johan Leenaars, Jelle Maas, Jennie van der Mheen, Asaah Ndambi, Simon Oosting, Marianna Siegmund-Schultze, Bart de Steenhuijsen Piters, Tomaso Ceccarelli, Gert-Jan Veldwisch. We received contributions to earlier versions of this paper from partners in the region, for which we are grateful.

We appreciate receiving your views and ideas on this paper and the issues addressed. For more information on the activities of the Wageningen Sahel Platform and your feedback;

have a look at www.wur.eu/Sahel

Or contact Jennie.vanderMheen@wur.nl or Bart.deSteenhuijsenPiters@wur.nl

