



Local food security reserve in Songha, department of Rambo, Burkina Faso.

PROMOTING LOCAL FOOD SECURITY RESERVES IN THE SAHEL

The case of AAAE in Burkina Faso

This case study describes the experience of a community-based organisation (*Association Aidons l'Afrique Ensemble- AAAE*) in the establishment and management of local food security reserves (*greniers de sécurité alimentaire*) in the department of Rambo, Burkina Faso. The aim of this case study is to illustrate some of the advantages and limitations of FSR by presenting key findings obtained through a series of individual questionnaires and semi-structured interviews conducted in June 2012.

INTRODUCTION

Burkina Faso is a landlocked country with a population of 17.25 m. In 2013, it occupies the 183rd position in the annual Human Development Index (HDI) ranking, with over 46% of its population living on less than 1\$ a day and an average life expectancy of 54 years.

The population of Burkina is heavily dependent on subsistence agriculture to meet basic needs and faces a complex range of environmental challenges (notably land degradation and desertification as a result of recurrent droughts). These factors particularly affect the northern semi-arid provinces of the country, creating a situation of structural food insecurity for the most vulnerable groups.

The increase in prices witnessed since 2007 has worsened this situation, bringing to the forefront the importance of promoting instruments that improve food access and availability for those most at risk. Local food reserves (LFR) are one of the key instruments that can positively contribute to these efforts. LFR are uniquely placed to support community-based food security strategies since their focus on the local dimension of food security makes them particularly well suited to meet the needs of the most vulnerable groups.

Over the last two decades, Oxfam has been actively supporting the promotion of local food security reserves in West Africa. This case study aims to illustrate how this type of community-based response to food insecurity can improve the living conditions of the population, particularly in the semi-arid areas of the region, which suffer the devastating effects of recurrent food crises.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In 2012 the countries of the Sahel were confronted with the second food crisis in 3 years. In Burkina Faso, the crisis placed 6 million people at risk of food insecurity and nearly 400 000 vulnerable households were directly affected. Furthermore, the country received a large influx of refugees as a result of mounting conflict in neighbouring Mali, exerting growing pressure on the limited resources available for the local population as the food crisis loomed.

In the northern regions of Burkina, low cereal production, recurrent droughts and the absence of adequate techniques to improve yields create a context marked by structural food insecurity, chronic poverty and a high rate of malnutrition in women and children.

Local food reserves are often established and managed by community organisations. These organisations are well acquainted with the needs of the communities they serve and can offer tailored solutions to local problems in an effective and flexible manner. Apart from promoting LFR, community organisations engage in a wide range of supportive measures aimed at improving the overall wellbeing and living conditions of the most vulnerable (often with the participation of external actors).

For over 15 years, the local community organisation *Aidons l'Afrique Ensemble* (AAAE) has been addressing the problems faced by the most vulnerable populations by supporting activities that seek to improve agricultural practices and guarantee food access and availability at times of severe need. AAAE has established a network of 21 LFR in its area of intervention as part of ongoing efforts to improve the food security situation of the province of Yatenga.

This case study presents a summary of key findings drawn from a study analysing 6 local food security reserves (*greniers de sécurité alimentaire*) established and supported by the AAAE in the department of Rambo. The study focused on two key aspects: firstly, on how beneficiaries perceived the benefits and shortcomings of having access to local FSR and secondly, on how the management committees

(COGES) interviewed the challenges affecting the overall performance and sustainability of local food security reserves.

LOCAL FOOD SECURITY RESERVES

Local food security reserves (FSR) have the objective of contributing to food security by ensuring stock access and availability during the lean season at rates below market prices. This can be achieved in a number of ways. Local FSR can mitigate the effects of price spikes by reducing excessive price differentials between seasons; they can strengthen broader food security strategies geared towards improving agricultural practices and can also increase the income of small producers while at the same time protecting their livelihoods and assets. Local FSR can also help communities overcome remoteness and isolation and can empower individuals by increasing their capacity and decreasing their dependence on external actors for access to food. Women's participation in FSR constitutes another positive factor, although their access and effective involvement in decision-making processes are invariably conditioned by socio-cultural factors.

Given the fact that they are tailored to the local context and established on the basis of local needs and preferences, local FSR are uniquely placed to provide long-lasting solutions to food insecurity. However, despite their potential to play a pivotal role in food security strategies, the performance of local FSR to date has been uneven as a result of their vulnerability.

AAAE'S COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH TO FOOD SECURITY

AAAE (*Association Aidons l'Afrique Ensemble*) pursues the objective of fighting poverty and food insecurity through a wide range of social development initiatives conducted in 7 provinces of Burkina Faso. AAAE's core activities share a strong focus on building local community capacities and strengthening agricultural practices in order to improve the living conditions of the communities and overcome structural food insecurity.

AAAE's key areas of work

AAAE's community social development programme covers the following areas:

- Agriculture (technical assistance, equipment, construction of grain mills, wells and fruit tree planting)
- Education (construction of schools, alphabetisation and child sponsoring)
- Health (awareness raising, nutrition initiatives and provision of medicines)
- Social protection (healthcare for vulnerable groups and provision of free food)
- Income-generating activities (technical assistance and microcredit)

Food security reserves in Rambo: a three-level model

Local food security reserves (FSR) constitute a key pillar of AAAE's work. Since 2005, the association has been supporting the establishment and management of local FSR in the province of Yatenga in Burkina Faso and has developed a fully-fledged model for operating 21 local FSR in the department of Rambo.

Every year, the FSR are stocked between January and March, after the harvest, when prices are lower. Cereals (mainly maize, sorghum and millet) are stocked until the lean season (June-September), when prices are high and food is not always available and/or accessible for all. It is during this difficult period that FSR sell their stocks to community members at “social prices” (below market prices) and provide free cereals to those most in need on the basis of vulnerability criteria established by AAAE. In order to guarantee the widest possible access, detail sales are allowed (from as little as 250g) and in certain cases, sales by credit are also permitted for those most in need.

The food security reserves supported by AAAE operate at three levels:

- Departmental (central reserve)
- Community (local food security reserves)
- Neighbourhood (joint small producer reserves)

Departmental: the central FSR is situated in Rambo (departmental capital) and constitutes the hub of the network’s distribution system. The central stocks are obtained through 3 main channels: donation, in-kind contributions and purchase. Donations are received from the central government, local authorities, international donors and non-governmental organisations. In-kind contributions are provided by AAAE members as part of their membership fees. Purchases are made at different markets (mainly located in surplus areas) depending on cereal prices and availability, or obtained through the SONAGESS (in charge of managing national food reserves). Cereal can also be purchased from community FSR when there are excess stocks at this second level. The central FSR is responsible for the allocation and sale of grain according to set guidelines established and agreed upon by the association. AAAE distributes these central stocks among the community local food reserves on the basis of both the population served by the FSR and the level of income and resources of each community.

Community: a network of local FSR has been established across the department in 21 locations. Four sizes of FSR exist: 400t (in 1 community), 30t (in 13 communities), 40t (in 6 communities) and 60t (in 1 community). Each local FSR receives most of its supplies from the central reserve although direct donations and in-kind contributions are allowed under special circumstances. Each local FSR is managed by a COGES (management committee) composed of three members and including at least one woman.

Neighbourhood: AAAE supports small producers in the establishment of neighbourhood reserves. Each of the small neighbourhood FSR is jointly established by four small producers who partner to formally establish a group with the support of AAAE. Each group is allocated a common plot of land to be jointly cultivated by the group and agrees to also jointly work on each of the four individual fields of the members in turn, in order to maximise yields. In addition, AAAE grants each group of four a credit of 320,000 CFA for the purchase of oxen and sowing equipment, to be reimbursed over a period of 5 years (with a 2-year grace period). The four members are responsible for stocking their neighbourhood FSR and can sell excess production to community FSR.

COMMUNITY VIEWS AND PERCEPTIONS ON LOCAL FSR

The study focused on local FSR (community level) and involved a series of semi-structured interviews and the administration of questionnaires. 59 members of 6 communities answered a series of questions that primarily focused on the advantages of local FSR and their suggested areas for future improvement.

Advantages of local food security reserves

The following advantages of having access to a local FSR were identified:

- 100% of respondents stated that their **overall living conditions** had **improved** as a result of the existence of a FSR in their community.
- 93% claimed that having access to a FSR had **reduced migration** to other areas (and neighbouring countries) in search for food and/or work. Ensuring that the required workforce is available is particularly important for future harvests, given that it is during the lean season that sowing begins and workforce is required in the fields.
- 56% of respondents positively valued the **proximity** (which saved them time that could be devoted to agricultural income-generating activities and the family); 44% highlighted **accessibility** as a key advantage (FSR are open to all); 41% of respondents particularly valued **availability** (FSR have cereals during the lean season when local markets may not).
- 32% of respondents positively rated “**social prices**” as a key advantage that allowed access to the most vulnerable (and better prices for all when market prices are excessively high during the lean season). The **special supportive measures** in place for the most vulnerable families (notably the distribution of free cereal) were considered a key advantage by 15% of respondents, with 10% rating **credit sales** for the most vulnerable and 5% rating **retail sales** as positive features in support of the community.
- 5% mentioned **reduced road accidents** (proximity= less travel time) as another related advantage. A further 5% valued FSR’s contribution to **social cohesion** (creation of a community space, sense of common ownership and belonging and reduced tensions and conflict). 3% positively valued **training opportunities** linked to the local FSR (agricultural practices, family and health issues). An additional 2% mentioned **self-confidence and raised awareness** as advantages.

Areas for future improvement

Respondents identified key shortcomings and provided a series of recommendations which could improve the service being currently provided by local FSR.

Shortcomings:

- 31% noted the limited capacity of their local FSR
- 22% stressed the absence of adequate funding and credits
- 20% cited the poor state of roads as a key obstacle
- 10% highlighted that stocks were often insufficient to cover the entire season
- 7% stated that the stock allocation from the central reserve agreed was insufficient

- 6% cited difficulties related to transport (infrastructure and high costs)
- 5% highlighted inadequate storage facilities
- 5% mentioned the poor state of local storage facilities
- 5% inflation causing price changes

*N.B: 36% of respondents stated that there were no limitations worth noting.

Recommendations:

- 49% of respondents called for increasing the capacity of FSR
- 29% for improved road access
- 25% for enhanced FSR infrastructure and equipment
- 22% for capacity building and training opportunities
- 14% for greater government support
- 14% for increased finance
- 7% for the provision of credit
- 5% for increased cereal donations
- 5% for increasing the number of FSR
- 5% for increased rotation resources
- 5% for better agricultural equipment
- 5% for improved management of the central reserve
- 3% for greater support to the AAAE
- 2% for the promotion of greater synergies between members
- 2% for the incorporation of seed donation among FSR activities
- 2% for the construction of water wells in FSR

MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES ON FSR

Interviews and group questionnaires were administered to a total of 6 management committees (COGES). A total of 18 members of management committees participated in the group questionnaires (3 members per COGES) in the six communities covered by the study. The questions focused on the challenges faced by local FSR, the main reasons for their failure as well as on possible State actions required to improve their performance.

Key challenges identified

The management committees identified the following key challenges:

- 3/6 of the management committees mentioned **insufficient funding** as a key limitation in their everyday work. 2/6 regretted having **insufficient access to credit** that would allow more effective FSR performance as well as the expansion of the activities and services offered by FSR.
- 2/6 of the management committees noted the **lack of capacity and training** of their members as a key obstacle that deterred the performance and sustainability of local FSR. 1/6 cited **poor management** (particularly the absence of effective control mechanisms) as another negative factor.

- Several infrastructure-related obstacles were noted by COGES members. 1/6 cited the **poor state of roads** as well as **inadequate storage facilities** (2/6) and **limited capacity** (2/6). **Transportation costs** were also mentioned by 1/6 as a deterring factor.
- 1/6 of the management committees described **tension between COGES and the communities** (disagreements, unmet expectations, etc) as an issue that negatively affected FSR performance.
- Finally, 1/6 of the management committees also reported that the cereals provided by the central reserve were inadequate for local needs.

Key reasons for failure

Among the key reasons for failure of other local FSR in the past, the following were highlighted:

- Poor management practices
- Lack of adequate funding
- Poor communication between COGES members
- Tensions between COGES and communities
- Credit sales that were not returned

Suggested areas requiring state support

The following concrete actions for improved State support to local FSR were mentioned:

- Cereal donations
- Financial and technical support
- Support to local councils and community initiatives
- Improved FSR infrastructures
- Better roads and access
- Provision of microcredit
- Provision of agricultural tools and materials

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study confirm the positive contribution of local FSR to food security strategies, even though the limitations and shortcomings described by respondents highlight the complex challenges faced by FSR. Apart from the inherent obstacles posed by price risk and climatic factors, responses reveal a wide array of difficulties linked to management practices, funding and infrastructure that cannot be overcome by local community organizations such as AAAE without support.

Addressing these issues necessarily requires effective action on the part of State actors and donors. Policies in support of local FSR should therefore seek to create an enabling environment in which local FSR can receive the support required to ensure they have the highest possible chances of attaining their full potential.

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