

NIGER:

The Power of Cooperative Action in Advancing the Right to Food in a Fragile Context

In Diffa, a region in southeast Niger, people are struggling with the combined challenges of conflict, climate change and food insecurity. But they are proving that by joining forces and with some external support progress towards the Right to Food is possible, even in such difficult contexts. Community cooperatives and smallholder farmers, women and youth jointly engage in labour-intensive work on hydro-agricultural schemes thus boosting wheat and rice production.



Multiple Crises Exaggerating Food Insecurity

Armed conflict and climate change drive the food crisis in Niger's Diffa region, stripping nearly half a million people of their Right to Food. The region's deteriorating security, coupled with restricted access to arable land and humanitarian aid, worsens food insecurity. Climate change exacerbates the situation, with erratic rainfall and pest attacks hampering agricultural productivity. Out of 755 villages in Diffa, 676 face food deficits, leaving around 600,000 people at risk of food insecurity. Vulnerable groups like young children and pregnant or breastfeeding women are particularly affected. Following the coup d'état on 26 July 2023 and Niger's withdrawal from the Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS) to form the Sahel State Alliance, a military coalition with Burkina Faso and Mali, crucial partnerships supporting the country's food systems were terminated. Exclusion from subregional trade exacerbated by months of isolation led to a surge in the prices of essential food items. Civil society actors struggle to reach the population in need as their activities are under scrutiny and lack safety guarantees.

Community Cooperatives for Greater Food Security

In many villages, the security situation prevents people from reaching their fields, leading them to relocate to safer villages or cities. In these new locations, WHH carries out Cash-for-Work (CfW) activities, sometimes on land provided by local authorities to the displaced individuals, or through negotiations with residents to share their land. Long-abandoned hydro-agricultural schemes for wheat and rice production were revitalized through highly labor-intensive work (so-called HIMO-approach - haute intensité de main-d'oeuvre). Cooperatives and vulnerable households are the primary actors in this approach. Small farmers also learn to use climate-adapted techniques and seeds to enhance resilience to climate change and increase their production. A portion of this harvest is allocated to the household within the cooperative while any surplus is sold to vulnerable households outside the cooperative at discounted rates ensuring food access during the lean season. Profits from sales are reinvested to sustain community

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initiatives. For example, they buy seeds and fertiliser for next year's harvest, or purchase tools to improve their productivity. The approach aligns with the new directives of military authorities, who prioritize agricultural production. This allows actors to operate in a highly sensitive environment. Regional officials have conducted field visits to observe the wheat and rice fields and acknowledged the effectiveness of the cooperative-driven approach.

Empowering Communities Through Sustainable Agriculture and Collective Action

1,559 households across the communes of Diffa and Maina Soroa, including 60 young girls and 326 young boys, engaged in Cash for Work activities for two months promoted by Welthungerhilfe. Last year, they rehabilitated infrastructure and transformed 195 hectares into arable land, harvesting 200 tons of wheat – a huge leap in combating food insecurity. With the cash they earned, vulnerable households possess a food

security buffer to endure the lean season, alongside access to climate-adaptive farming methods. The cooperatives will play a crucial role by selling the surplus of the harvest. Households gain the financial capability to continue the project themselves in the years to come, with little or no reliance on external support. This collaborative approach not only mitigates immediate crises but also lays the foundation for long-term resilience of communities as they take ownership of their future.

Lessons learned

- **The initiative was based on two complementary entities:** farmers organized in cooperatives on the one hand, and highly vulnerable households on the other. The combination of these two entities joining forces gave strength to the initiative.
- **The mobilization of youth for the rehabilitation of abandoned hydro-agricultural schemes** as part of the cash-for-work program was a key factor in preventing them from being recruited by violent groups.
- **Close collaboration with government technical services** to facilitate monitoring of activities in the field and support to producers has contributed to the success of the project.
- **The involvement of religious and customary leaders** at all levels was crucial to facilitating the provision of land for hydro-agricultural development.



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Harouna Malam Bélo, Farmer in Diffa Region:

After four years of disruption due to recurrent flooding, I was able to cultivate my fields thanks to the reactivation of hydro-agricultural schemes with support of Welthungerhilfe. Much of what I harvested was consumed in my household. I also sold some of it to meet my household needs, particularly my children's schooling, food, clothing and nutrition as income-generating activities.

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