

Challenges and Obstacles to Achieving UN Sustainable Development Goal 2 in the West African Sub-Region

Dr. Fatoumata Hama Ba (IRSAT/CNRST), nutritionist and principal investigator of the Child Nutrition Project in CCRP's West Africa Community of Practice (CoP), shared her thoughts on the challenges and obstacles to achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 2 in West Africa.

*Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso
August 11, 2022*

In 2015, all United Nations Member States signed the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), a shared blueprint aimed at peace and prosperity for people across the world and for our planet itself. At the core of the agreement are [17 Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) that address social, well-being, and climate improvements.

Achieving the 2030 SDGs is a dominant concern for Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali—especially Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture. That goal is far from being achieved in these three sub-Saharan countries, where malnutrition rates remain very high. One-third of children suffer from stunted growth, malnutrition's main indicator.

Nutrition is at the heart of the food system—and malnutrition at these rates reflects a general imbalance in the food system, i.e., the production, processing, distribution, marketing and consumption of food, as well as the wide-ranging consequences of these activities.

To be effective, a food system must be healthy, sustainable, and equitable. Sustainability will only be achieved when everyone experiences food and nutrition security without compromising the economic, social, and environmental foundations of future generations.

Current Challenges Bring Unsustainable Approaches into Sharp Relief

In addition to population growth, poverty, and climate change, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali are experiencing growing civil insecurity and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Areas such as health and education are being abandoned by their governments in favor of civil security.

To illustrate, the number of internally displaced persons increased 4.17% between January 2022 and February 2022, according to Burkina Faso CONASUR figures. Many families whose livelihoods came from agriculture no longer have access to land. Health centers are closed, leaving children in desolate situations. School closures mean that many school canteens that used to support parents in feeding their children are no longer functional.

Grouping homeless populations together creates additional challenges. Coupled with insufficient access to drinking water, poor sanitation has increased the morbidity and mortality of the population, especially children.

The environment that was the main source of food and income is increasingly degraded. Forests are devastated and waters are polluted, creating imbalances in biodiversity. The increase in greenhouse gases, pollution by industries, and the use of pesticides led to the loss of many vital species and created a decline in soil fertility. The multiplication of mining sites increases environmental pollution, promoting the loss of non-timber forest products and the destruction of many species.

Nutrition Should be Embraced as a Key Factor in Agriculture

The question of nutrition is hardly considered in agriculture. Varietal selection remains limited, overshadowed by the question of yield. Little effort has been made to develop varieties with good

nutritional value. Cultivation techniques—including post-harvest techniques—obscure the question of nutrition.

Nutrition within the food system also means control of the food chain. Porous barriers at customs in recent years led to the introduction of products of unknown quality destroying the local market when the population abandons local products in favor of cheaper foreign ones. The lack of accredited laboratories for quality assessment has also contributed to a decline in the competitiveness of local agricultural products.

The closure of customs barriers in response to the Covid-19 pandemic fueled a cost-of-living increase and a reduction in the use of health centers—both of which pose challenges to nutrition and health. The fear of the pandemic has led to a reduction in the number of people attending health centers, but also to a decrease in the number of health workers treating other diseases.

Food and nutrition security for all cannot be achieved when inclusion and equity are absent. Inappropriate understanding limits “gender” to youth and women, thus ignoring the many vulnerable social categories such as the elderly, and the socially marginalized identities, the mentally ill etc.

A number of factors combine to create a disregard at all levels for research that would help address nutrition and food insecurity:

- research methodology that doesn’t adequately account for local challenges
- failure to involve producers in research
- research topics that don’t address specific cultural and local contexts
- disregard for local knowledge
- lack of a system for sharing and restituting research results with farmers.

The inadequacy of interventions at all levels of the system effectively nullifies any and all efforts to address food-system challenges in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali.

At the state level, a lack of coordination of interventions creates an absence of potential synergies. Additionally, states aren’t addressing key nutrition indicators in their interventions, and monitoring and evaluation systems are inadequate, undermining their sustainability.

The inadequacy of the information and communication system is another key weakness of the food system. The tools are inadequate and the targets are not well chosen. And voiceless smallholder farmers are given little consideration in decision-making at the leadership level.

Leaving nutrition factors out of goals for the food system has led to a neglect—even an abandonment—of nutrition objectives, thus creating a systemic shortfall and short-term failure.

The consequences of that failure are enormous for populations where nearly two-thirds of the employed West African population depend on the food economy for their livelihood. Small farms represent about 80% of all farms. In many countries, women make up at least half of the workforce.

Seizing Available Opportunities Is the Path Forward

Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali have key unmet opportunities. First, they have young populations that are ready for dynamic change. Although the climate is Sahelian, many species of good nutritional value can be valorized. Forest ecosystems still exist and must be preserved. The incorporation of agroecology and agroforestry are essential to all agricultural fields. Introducing nutrition in all educational curricula from primary to university—and in other contexts—will support the need to keep nutrition factors at the forefront of food-system policy decisions.