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## West African solutions: a hopeful note in a hostile world

In their recent publication '[L'espoir au-delà des crises : solutions ouest-africaines pour des systèmes alimentaires durables](#)' (Hope beyond crises: West-African solutions for sustainable food systems) (in French), ROPPA<sup>1</sup>, JAFOWA<sup>2</sup>, Fondation de France<sup>3</sup> and CFSI<sup>4</sup> offer a hopeful note and define what, for them, would characterise a transition towards sustainable food systems in West Africa. The report also presents several initiatives that demonstrate that it is possible to develop local value chains based on ecological agriculture.



### An unfavourable context

The authors of the report revisit the particularly hostile context in which food systems actors are struggling. They convey the picture of a world sick of its deficient infrastructure, of unfavourable public policies and insecurity, which suffers from a damaging international environment. They show how these conditions make the subregion vulnerable to crises (e.g. pandemic, climate change). In spite of this, they note that, in most of the countries of the subregion, food dependency on the rest of the world did not increase

during this last period and that it is estimated that 90% of the calories consumed in West Africa are produced locally par a majority of small family farms of which

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<sup>1</sup> ROPPA : West African Network of Peasants and Agricultural Producers.

<sup>2</sup> JAFOWA : [Joint Action for Farmers' Organisations in West Africa](#).

<sup>3</sup> [Fondation de France](#) is the leading philanthropy network in France.

<sup>4</sup> CFSI : [Comité Français pour la Solidarité Internationale](#) (French Committee for International Solidarity)

95% have less than 5 hectares. Let's recall, however, that some have estimated that the number of people in a situation of food insecurity requiring serious assistance jumped from 4 million to nearly 32 million in 5 years (between 2017 and 2022) in West Africa [[read p. 4](#)].

The situation of insecurity arising from terrorist threats and communal strife deeply disrupts economic activities [[read pp. 3-4](#)], and this is particularly the case for pastoralism that is of key importance in the Sahelian zone<sup>5</sup>. Population displacement, difficulties of access to production areas, ransoming, insecurity during transhumance and transport of goods, are among the most serious problems.

In the subregion too, according to the authors, the pandemic has demonstrated fragility of crisis preparedness and management mechanisms. Restrictions imposed by authorities have upset meetings and exchanges, making lives of pastoralists very difficult by putting them in a condition where they could no more secure their daily food and hampering the preparation of the agricultural season by farmers. The crisis has also fuelled speculation that further amplified its negative effects. Sole positive consequence, perhaps, was that it encouraged the consumption of local products.

### **The basic elements of sustainable food systems**

From this experience, report authors draw lessons on some basic principles that would allow the subregion's food systems to improve their economic, social and environmental sustainability:

- Diversifying food production for more resilience, in particular in the face of climate change, by adopting agroecological production methods that do not degrade the environment.
- Developing storage and processing infrastructure to limit post-harvest losses that remain considerable.
- Supporting micro- and small-scale enterprises operating in the food systems to ensure better food quality and safety, and more employment and inclusiveness.
- Quelling speculation and, through regulations, orienting financial resources towards productive and job-creating investments.
- Emancipating from imports that weaken food systems (i) by ceasing to use chemical fertilisers through diversified soil fertility strategies or the development of local inputs, and (ii) by combating the import of low-cost food (European powder milk, Asian rice, wheat) that compete unfairly with local products.

These ideas may not be entirely new, as they have been around for a few decades already, but it may be the case that the recent and current period the world is experiencing might finally help political leaders – under the joint pressure of

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<sup>5</sup> More than 20 million people in the subregion depend on agro-pastoral and pastoral systems (ROPFA, La situation pastorale en Afrique de l'Ouest, Roppa info, octobre-novembre 2020).

producers and consumers – to address the fundamental problems and reorient their policies and programmes.

### Available levers for action

To turn these ideas into reality, say the authors, national authorities should stop from abandoning their capacity to think and act. Because they are now handing it over to private actors such as digital sector companies that accumulate huge amounts of data that they will use to fine-tune their strategies for grabbing a growing share of the wealth created in the food and agricultural sector.

This increased appropriation of value would, of course, be at the expense of producers and their control of production, and in contradiction with medium- and long-term sustainability objectives, as was already emphasised by hungerexplained in several articles [[read](#)]. By losing in this way its capacity to decide, people and government would put their sovereignty into the hands of private interests that could use this power according to their wishes who are to give priority to technological solution they control [[read](#)] and that can so as far as to promote a food system without agriculture [[read here](#) and [here \(pp. 8-9\)](#)]!

The issue is thus highly political. It has to do with the need for the emergence of a political power genuinely committed to the common good.



The authors of the report deal with this political issue by identifying the levers available for promoting the listed (and wished) desired changes listed. They mean, in particular:

- to exert a strong pressure on the authorities with the help of professional organisations and by uniting civil society, producers and consumers alike;

- to defend a sustainable local production by giving value to its produce and by ensuring their use through public orders (e.g. to supply school feeding programmes);
- to acknowledge and pay better women's work;
- to better train youths;
- to combat the attempts by multinationals to impose uniform industrial fertilisers and seeds at the expense of the diversity of farmer seed systems and of the potential offered by local biofertilisers; and,
- to create a sovereign currency (the Eco) to stimulate the regional market.

## **Hopes generated by promising local initiatives**

To illustrate the fact that local people are already mobilised and show that there are good reasons to be confident, the authors present several examples of developing agroecology-based supply chains, at the end of the publication:

- three examples of vegetable farming:
  - in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in reaction to the negative consequences of the use of agrochemicals,
  - in Niayes, Senegal, for similar reasons, mainly because of the contamination of groundwater by chemical inputs, and,
  - in Nokoué, Benin, where the control of water hyacinth that is invading the lake has led to the production of compost destined to vegetable farmers.
- three examples of local produce:
  - in Burkina Faso where an association of women adopted the System of rice intensification ([SRI](#)) to preserve a local variety of paddy,
  - in Guinea Bissau, where a federation of women's groups is mobilised against deforestation and high dependence on cashew nuts, by associating a local oil palm variety with cashew trees,
  - in Togo, where people are developing a local breed of guinea fowl by feeding the birds with local products from ecological agriculture.
- two examples of mixed export/local market value chains:
  - in the west of Burkina Faso, where the organic and fair trade Upromabio/HBS cooperative is associating mango trees with other crops (red hibiscus, beans and potatoe peas),
  - in Bam, Burkina Faso, where the Regional Union of Horticulture Cooperatives (Union régionale des coopératives maraîchères) promotes and markets onions from ecological agriculture.

## **Conclusion**

With the help of a panel of specialists, the publication analyses the huge challenges facing food in the subregion and it proposes a series of solutions that appear promising, considering the success of the initiatives reviewed, with, however, the important pending issue of bringing them up to a scale sufficient for transforming in depth existing food systems.

In this sense, the work presented could perhaps have benefitted from being enriched with data helping the readers to measure the magnitude of the already ongoing changes. In the future, it will certainly be useful to monitor the development of such initiatives and produce quantitative indicators on their evolution and impact (e.g. number of people involved, area covered), as well as record policy decisions made by countries and evaluate if they are favourable (or not) to a transition towards more sustainable food systems.

The authors of this publication and the numerous cooperating entities associated to this work deserve to be congratulated for its quality and the hopes it raises. Let's wish that the up-scaling of the solutions will take place rapidly for the benefit of the mass of the people living in the subregion.

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To know more:

- Hiridjee,V., et E. Langlade, [L'espoir au-delà des crises : solutions ouest-africaines pour des systèmes alimentaires durables](#), ROPPA, JAFOWA, Fondation de France et CFSI, 2023 (in French).

Selection of past articles on [hungerexplained.org](https://hungerexplained.org) related to the topic:

- [The food situation in the Sahel is deteriorating](#), 2024.
- Opinion: [‘Natural meat’ and futurist fantasies?](#) by Maria Grazia Quieti, 2024.
- [The “food and agricultural transition” is ongoing – Nine changes tell us to what kind of world it is leading us](#), 2023.

as well as articles on our thematic pages [Africa](#), [Power](#) and [Governance](#).