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Boosting agricultural production in southern Niger

Niger is a land-locked country in Western Africa that takes its name from the Niger River. Covering a surface area of about 1,267,000 km², it is the largest nation in West Africa. The northern two thirds of the country is covered by desert and arid mountains, while the southwest is predominantly savannah, where the Niger River valley supports crop farming and provides seasonal pasture for livestock.

The population comprises farmers living in the arable southern part of the country, and nomadic or semi-nomadic livestock herders. With a rapidly growing population and consequent competition for natural resources, the livelihoods of farmers and livestock herders are increasingly threatened. In particular, the traditional nomadic lifestyle has been adversely affected as a result of recurrent droughts and the impacts of climate change.

A host of challenges in a harsh climate

The soils of Niger are naturally low in nutrients and organic matter and the amount of land suitable for cultivation is estimated at less than 12 per cent of the country's total surface area. Water is Niger's scarcest resource and the primary limiting factor in agricultural productivity. Some 99 per cent of cultivated lands are rainfed, leaving crops and farm incomes vulnerable to erratic rainfall and drought. Farmers lack the technology, credit and organizational skills to access ground and surface water and successfully share its use.

Productivity of the country's forests is poor and demand for fuelwood, poles and timber is high. Fuelwood and charcoal fill about 87 per cent of the country's energy needs, putting a huge strain on forest resources. Because of the country's growing population, consumption is expected to double in coming years, which will accentuate the severe degradation of forest resources.

Although the natural flora and fauna of Niger are well adapted to cope with erratic and harsh climatic conditions, increasing

climate variability combined with overexploitation has made them much more vulnerable. Overexploitation of natural species used for food, fodder, household energy, medicine, veterinary products and construction material has increased the loss of biodiversity.

Improving living conditions, increasing incomes

The GEF-funded Agricultural and Rural Rehabilitation and Development Initiative, which will complement the ongoing IFAD-financed Agricultural and Rural Rehabilitation and Development Initiative Project (ARRDI), will similarly focus on southern Niger's Maradi region – home to 20 per cent of the nation's population – targeting poor and extremely poor communities vulnerable to environmental risk, with special emphasis on women and youth.

Population pressure contributes directly to unsustainable exploitation of the region's natural resources, resulting in land degradation that adversely affects the livelihoods of rural households. Other than



GEF PROJECT INFORMATION

Agricultural and Rural Rehabilitation and Development Initiative – GEF

Executing partners: Ministry of Territorial Management and Community Development

GEF financing: US\$ 4,200,000

Cofinancing: US\$11,878,000

IFAD: US\$ 8,583,000

Government: US\$ 2,264,000

Beneficiaries: US\$ 1,031,000

Total financing: US\$16,078,000

GEF PROJECT COMPONENTS

Mainstreaming sustainable land management in development planning at departmental and local levels through

- establishing a multistakeholder sustainable land management platform for the region
- building institutional capacity and transferring knowledge for sustainable land management

Reversing land degradation through on-the-ground sustainable land management investments through

- supporting community-based natural resource assessments and land-use planning
- implementing innovative field-level sustainable land management practices and related microinvestment proposals
- building capacity for village management committees for community-based sustainable land management planning and investment

Promoting conservation agriculture and environment-friendly alternative income sources through

- conducting farmer-centered conservation agriculture validation trials and demonstrations
- producing technical manuals for the promotion of alternative, environmentally friendly ecosystem-based livelihoods
- providing training sessions on specific technologies and techniques for promotion of alternative livelihoods

The project will alleviate poverty and food insecurity in rural households in Maradi region by helping families and communities identify and adopt locally appropriate sustainable land management practices. These activities are expected to increase productivity and profitability of crop, livestock and environmentally friendly enterprises in the short term, while ensuring long-term economic well-being and improved livelihoods.



agriculture, people in Maradi region have few options for making a living. Improving land productivity is the best solution for increasing food security and improving people's social and economic welfare.

The ARDDI Project is working to improve the living conditions, incomes and food security of the poorest rural populations by helping the government strengthen private and public regional delivery institutions, and by strengthening the ability of rural communes to manage small-scale business models, in line with the government's decentralization process.

The GEF initiative will complement the efforts of the ARDDI Project by developing and promoting locally appropriate sustainable land management practices to restore and enhance the protective and productive functions of local ecosystem resources – key to alleviating rural poverty in Maradi region. Each participating village will determine the specific sustainable land management interventions to be implemented within its own territory.

To help ensure that sustainable land management practices become an integrated feature of agricultural development, the GEF initiative will launch a series of cross-sectoral activities to improve development and legislative and institutional policies. Targeted capacity-building among key advisory support service providers at regional, district and commune levels will help improve capacity to promote sustainable land management.

Another component of the initiative will build on Niger's experience with *Gestion des Terroirs*, an approach to rural development which emerged within francophone West African states and which transfers control of and access to natural resources from central government to local people. GEF funding will help develop the approach as a way of further encouraging rural communities to invest in sustainable land management.

The initiative will also support field-level investigations into alternative land management practices for sustainable rainfed farming activities in semi-arid zones,

and explore sustainable ecosystem resource-based livelihoods that could provide rural households with an additional source of income on a long-term basis.

Global benefits

The initiative will provide global benefits by reversing the decline in productivity of the region's soil resources; increasing biodiversity within crop, livestock and forest production landscapes; and reducing carbon emissions by promoting energy-efficient stoves and conservation tillage practices. It will also promote conservation agriculture; restore and increase vegetative cover and habitat diversity in areas of degraded rangelands, forests and woodlands; and increase the number of trees and shrubs planted on farms to increase carbon sequestration. The initiative is further expected to improve catchment protection, which will result in reduced sedimentation in the region's river systems, reservoirs, farm ponds and other water storage structures.

Innovative features

- The initiative will promote the establishment of a regional platform to coordinate SLM investments in the Maradi region.
- The initiative will establish a regional library where land users, subject-matter specialists and extension workers can access information on best practices for sustainable land management.
- The initiative will promote Radio programmes to rural communities providing information on concepts and principles of sustainable land management; new sustainable methods for improved crop, livestock and forestry production; important agro-meteorological data; and market trends.



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