Background

Boulounsi is a village in Zogore district, situated in the Yatenga province in northern Burkina Faso. Its population stands at an estimated 687 inhabitants, 55% of whom are women. The region is the most arid of the country, with a Sahelian climate characterized by a long dry season (from October to June). Annual rainfall is around 600mm. Despite the difficult natural conditions, the presence of various water sources help mitigate climatic uncertainty such that Yatenga is a pole for market gardening in the region. Market gardening was introduced to this mainly cereal-producing zone in 1998 when a hydro-agricultural dam was constructed to the south of the village. It is carried out as a family activity and a lot of the households in the village take part in it, specialized in onion production.

The Programme for the Development of Arid Soils (DryDev) aims to provide useful and contextually relevant support to smallholder men and women in arid zones. It is implemented by SNV with funding from the Dutch Foreign Ministry and World Vision Australia. The World Agroforestry Centre is the overall coordinator.

DryDev covers five countries - Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Ethiopia and Kenya. In Burkina Faso, the project was active in the Klembara, Kyon and Zogore sub-catchment areas, running from November 2017 to July 2019.

The challenges

Women without arable land

When the irrigated perimeter was being developed, land was distributed to male family heads given the traditions of patriarchy and rights of elders. Women quickly became interested in this off-season activity. A few women were able to access small pieces of land on their husband’s plots to produce for their own consumption. This was not enough for them to sell and generate income, especially as they were working in isolation and were not organized in groups.

“In 1999, there were a few women in the gardens, and in the year 2000, they realised that they too were capable of growing vegetables. One by one, they would come to help their husbands. Some of them set aside a portion of the plot to grow some vegetables for their cooking. We worked but there was very little profit. The women who were doing the best, were only earning a maximum of EUR 23. As for the men, if one managed to make EUR 76, their farming season was considered a success. Profits were very low because work was slow as we were doing everything by hand,” Ousmane Ouedraogo, 33 years, vegetable producer near the Boulounsi dam as well as local focal point for SNV.
Lack of organization, limited income

"It was difficult working alone. Before the group was created, each woman was struggling alone to get some income. Among all of us seated here, there were no more than 3 or 4 who were market gardeners. Most of us were working in artisanal mining. The farm plots around the dam were already not enough for the men, much less the women! Mining was also not profitable. We could spend a whole month looking for gold, to only find gold the size of the head of a matchstick, barely worth Eur 0.50”. Fatimata Soré, 52 years, market gardener during the focus group organized with the group near the Boulounsi farm.

Poorly adapted work tools

Despite the increasing interest in market gardening, yields were low generally, but even more so for the women farmers. The lack of mechanisation or suitable tools meant increased workloads, and that the work was both harder and longer. Frequent and substantial watering of the vegetable plots is key for good production. This activity can be very onerous depending on what equipment is available.

"We were using watering cans in the plots; we did not have motorized pumps. It was very tiring, we suffered. When we went out to our plot in the morning, we would not come back home before night fall.” Salamata Ouedraogo, 50 years, president of the group.

Poor work techniques

Poor production techniques and the size of the plots cultivated also limited profitability for the women producers. They were also constrained by conditions for acquiring land to farm that very much favoured men. Faced with these socio-cultural difficulties, the women of Boulounsi decided to get together to create the group “Relwende” in 2013. "Relwende” refers to the condition of a marginalised person who confronts the challenges of life with support from God.

Strategies implemented

The vision of SNV’s DryDev Programme is to support smallholder men and women producers to transition from subsistence agriculture and emergency assistance to sustainable development. In the context of climate change which is aggravating household poverty, the approach targets first and foremost the empowerment of the most marginalized.

Improving access to land

The producers of the women’s group Relwende were able to access a plot for market gardening, however the size of the plot very quickly became too small as the number of members increased. DryDev negotiated an extension of the farm plot with the landowner and the acquisition of another plot with support from the town council. This had the effect of increasing the number of producers to 130. The project also supported the Relwende group in the procedures to secure its tenure and supported the producers in enclosing their plots.

Increasing production capacities implied improving the technical expertise of the men and women farmers. For this tailored local technical assistance was developed through a network of 34 male and 4 female community trainers who had been trained and equipped for their role. This network carried out cascade training of the men and women producers on various technological packages, such as: assisted natural regeneration, climate-smart agriculture, Zaï and half-moons. 1351 producers, of which 602 women (44%) benefited from such training in Zogore district.

Optimise costs and yields

The training also covered technical protocols and the management of farm water in order to optimize costs as well as yields. These were developed with support from the National Institute for Environment and Agricultural Research, and benefited 633 women producers and 197 men producers.

Specifically, for the 130 producers of the women’s group Relwende, green technologies were also introduced in addition to their capacity building. This support consisted of dewatering infrastructure and small-scale irrigation systems equipped with solar pumps.

Support for joint sales

To respond to the problems of post-harvest losses, and access to finance while at the same time developing business opportunities, the programme built and rehabilitated warehouses to set up warrantage systems1 for women onion producers. Microcredit services were provided thanks to a partnership established with the microfinance institution UBTEC. 302 men and 222 women producers benefited from this system in Zogore district.
**Results achieved**

Thanks to support from DryDev, the land available to the Relwende group increased from 1.25 to 2.34 hectares and therefore a greater number of women were able to access land for market gardening. The group’s membership grew from 90 before the DryDev programme to 130 members, each owning 180m². 

**Increased incomes**

Following the training on market gardening techniques, the beneficiaries were able to increase their incomes considerably. They have thus been able to undertake investments which help them better organize their work and reduce the costs of various tasks.

**Contribution to household expenditure**

Most members of the Relwende group declare that they now contribute to meeting their household expenses, which were previously born solely by the men. The excitement generated at Boulounsi has created waves in the vicinity, which means that the perspective for scaling up is good.

**Contribution to food security**

In addition to producing onions, the group members also undertake initiatives which improve the food security of their households. A part of the market-garden plot is set aside for planting vegetables for family consumption.

**Transformation of the social status of the women**

The image the women have of themselves has been transformed thanks to various benefits and empowerment that they derive from their market garden activities. The onion farmers also feel that their work and their success has changed the way they are viewed by men: “Once in a while men from the village come here for a look and say to us: ‘you have managed to do all this! God bless you’. Azeta Zona, 42 years, onion farmer.

With hindsight, the Boulounsi women farmers note a lot of positive changes in their daily lives. However, they complain that the contributions they bring to their households leads to reduced engagement from their spouses: “The men from the neighbouring village come all the way here in the evening to buy onions for their wives […] Our men don't do that, seeing as we farm vegetables, they do not bother coming to buy anything from us.” Salamata Ouedraogo, 50 years, president of the Relwende Group.

Furthermore, through the setting up of a solar pumping system for watering and irrigating the plots, farming became less demanding without any additional costs.

**Lessons learned and success factors**

**The group, the basis of success**

The existence and the functioning of the group well before the implementation of DryDev was a key factor for the programme’s success. The strength of the group enabled women to access what they would not have been able to access individually. The programme boosted a pre-existing dynamic by facilitating the expansion of the plots and tenure security for the women’s access to their land, thus enabling an increase of the number of women.

“Thanks to SNV’s support we are now able to help our husbands with the household and pay our children’s school fees. When they are sick, we can take them to the hospital. We are now able to keep our onions and sell them when the price is better and this allows us to make greater profit… The women from other villages want to come to work here, but there is not enough space already for all the women of Boulounsi, much less women from other villages!” Noélie Ouedraogo, 32 years, onion farmer.

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1 System of loans given out to a producer organisation in which the collateral consists in stocking an agricultural product for deferred sale, which is supposed to fetch a higher price. The operation generally includes joint sales allowing households to reduce their food security risks and to meet their financial needs thanks to loans for consumption or investment.
This freed up working time for the women to do other chores.

**Men can also help bring about change**
The involvement of community village leaders was determinant as support. Thus, men also have a fundamental role to play in the process of empowering women.

**Reference studies improve the gender approach**
These relatively encouraging results for the empowerment of women producers, would have been optimized if they were guided by a gender strategy. A reference study would have allowed the programme to anticipate gender specific inequalities in the value chains, as well as the parts of the chains that were being supported. Aspects related to disparities in the representation of women and men in farming activities would have been analysed in greater depth and integrated into the approach. The same goes for the visibility and taking into account specific needs of young people.

**The household approach as a strength**
While targeting the women’s group worked well, such an approach can create misunderstandings and tension among males in the community. These aspects can be improved for a better integration of the household approach developed by SNV.

**Insist on visible roles**
DryDev trained and equipped 38 trainers, including 4 women. Despite the modest number of trainers, this encouraged women to take on new responsibilities in public space. By assessing the specific strengths and constraints of the women trainers, as well as the impact of their new roles on gender perceptions in a rural setting, proposals can be made to the state technical services.

In conclusion, the example of the Boulounsi women producers and the 4 women community trainers is of great importance for the scaling up of the gender approach of the DryDev Programme within the agricultural sector in the Sahel.