



Photo by CRS Burkino Faso staff

# A gender-transformative resilience-based approach to building functional organizations

## SYNOPSIS

The inequities that exist in Burkinabe society—especially in rural areas—prevent women and girls from participating in and benefiting from development. Cultural and religious norms—which, in certain contexts, restrict women from acquiring skills and knowledge—weigh heavily against the well-being of women and girls in these areas. Unequal power in decision-making and natural and livelihood resources management further contributes to their vulnerability. Building functional organizations is a crucial step for long-term development and change in systems and structures, including communities, smallholder farmers, and organizations.

Since its inception, the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Burkinabe Families Achieving Sustainable Outcomes (FASO) Program has focused on a number of aspects of local governance through the support of village development councils (VDCs), municipalities, water users' associations, rice producer groups, rice parboiler groups, tool management committees, market gardening site management committees, and private service providers (PSPs) (e.g., village poultry extension agents, pump and moto-pump repairers, etc.). FASO supports women's groups in the villages as well as women's participation in formal organizations, and it ensures that women have access to training, agricultural inputs, and other productive assets.



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## OVERVIEW OF FASO GOVERNANCE RESULTS

- **94%** of village development councils (VDCs) are coordinating the development and implementation of community development action plans.
- **82%** of targeted VDCs have developed community development action plans.
- **95%** of adult education participants are able to pass a basic literacy exam.
- **86%** of VDCs meet three of the four functioning criteria.
- **57%** of targeted community structures have at least one woman in a decision-making position.
- **58%** of targeted VDCs have at least one woman in a decision-making position.
- **1,037 food-security** private enterprises (for profit); producers organizations; water users associations; women's groups; trade and business associations; and community-based organizations (CBO) receive FASO assistance.
- **FASO has influenced** the development of land tenure issues, including the allocation of 650 hectares of lowland to FASO beneficiaries for agricultural production.
- **FASO has trained** 666 male and 270 female VDC members in roles and responsibilities while providing them with essential management tools.
- **FASO technical support** and facilitation in 100 pilot villages has raised awareness of VDC roles.
- **Foutouri, Bartiebougou, Kalitaghin, and Nagbingou VDCs** mobilized \$14,000 to support their community development projects.

Source: FASO Monitoring and Evaluation Indicator Tracking Table data for FY2015.

### Promoting good governance and more resilience equitable programming.

Components of resilience are not a recipe or a checklist to follow; instead, they are contextual, requiring the involvement of community members to discuss options and address different types of shocks and stresses. Women rely on internal village groups that allow them to tap into a network of risk-sharing village organizations. These include informal mutual-help groups and formal associations. The formal and informal women's village-level groups excel in solidarity and local initiative. Women successfully depend on such social relations to cope with, manage, or adapt to stress in their daily lives. Through those networks, some women have gained recognition as leaders within their villages.

However, when it comes to community-level decision-making, women's voices are often left out of conversations on resource provision and infrastructure placement. Women observe that their participation in community groups and local government is often limited, and, even when they do participate in meetings, they do not feel free to voice their thoughts and opinions.

The FASO Program identified components of more equitable functional organization programming, including:

- Approaches that empower women and reduce gaps between males and females
- Functioning institutions of good governance and democratic accountability

The VDC is the legal entity created as part of decentralization reforms. It represents and governs the smallest demographic level (the village) and reports to the community (see text box on page 3). In order for FASO to institutionalize and sustain nutrition and agricultural outcomes, it must not only work with the VDC, but also provide active support to grow the role and status of women in these committees. Improved internal governance creates the organizational environment necessary to catalyze more effective performance and active pursuit of the committees' goals and objectives.

FASO educates VDCs and the populations they

## VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT COUNCILS (VDCS)

VDCs were established in 2004. Since 2004, the Government of Burkina Faso (GoBF) has invested in training VDCs and communities in their roles and responsibilities. However, this training is often insufficient and impractical, especially given that most VDCs and mayors are illiterate. Most VDCs do not hold regularly scheduled meetings, record meeting discussions or decisions, maintain transparent processes for managing village finances, or raise funds. The organizational structure is comprised of twelve members: a president, vice-president, secretary, assistant secretary, treasurer, assistant treasurer, two people responsible for women's issues, two people responsible for rural issues, and two people responsible for youth issues.

Source: FASO Proposal

serve on their roles and responsibilities as citizens or as elected and appointed officials. This education includes information about laws, regulations, rights, and methods of advocacy. In addition, FASO provides training on basic governance skills, such as regular meetings, record keeping, information sharing, transparent decision making, and financial management and accountability. FASO believes that a more active, engaged citizenry strengthens social cohesion in the community and creates an enabling environment that sustains the continued progress of program outcomes. FASO supports VDCs in the implementation of key governance concepts and attainment of benchmarks set. For example, it engages them to equitably oversee distribution of improved lowlands to limit risk of conflict, especially between farmers and livestock owners.

**Access to land and leadership.** Male household heads or community leaders typically allocate the most marginal land to their wives or women. FASO made its program-supported land reclamation, which is labor-intensive, slightly easier through Food for Work interventions, community labor, or hired labor. The introduction of soil and water conservation techniques, as well as land reclamation, have enabled many farmers, including women, to grow crops on land long since abandoned as unproductive.

Tenure security is critical to enable the scaling up and adoption of these land reclamation techniques. Many women lack the necessary control over the land they farm and this potentially diminishes their incentive to invest in productivity-boosting measures. Enhancing resilience requires a dual focus on both production and women's rights to revenues and resources.

Market gardens highlight an important issue for resource ownership, income, and resilience. Land-owning families often welcome the development of market gardens on land of little current value; however, once the gardens generate significant revenues, the heads of the land-owning families (usually men) are often tempted to reassert traditional ownership rights and claims on income from those lands. This easily overlooked issue needs to be adequately addressed before investments are made. For example, the reclaimed lowland plots allow for the production of sorghum and rice. Within the FASO communities, growing rice is a sign of privilege; therefore, the process of identifying which households benefit from these reclaimed lowland plots needs to be carefully managed to ensure equity and minimize conflict.

Because the market gardens are invariably cultivated on lands that fall under the jurisdiction of local leadership, local leaders must also be involved in and committed to any equitable decisions. For this reason, the FASO Program went through a documented negotiation process involving municipalities and traditional authorities to declare these lands "community land," with a minimum of 25 percent of plots allocated to women. FASO made this a firm precondition before investing in the improvement of these marginal lands. FASO found, in practice, that some municipalities actually exceeded this minimum, which allowed more women to benefit from the plots. In addition to this negotiation, FASO facilitated women's groups to help with social communications about land tenure and supported them in obtaining collective grants of land.

Gender inequality at the household and community levels must be addressed in all organizations seeking to improve long-term resilience of vulnerable populations, and organizations must make this priority explicit. FASO attempts to maximize women's economic

empowerment, decision making, access to social services, productive resources, and opportunities to increase household incomes.

FASO's inclusive and participatory approach contributed to the VDCs becoming more geographically diverse, socially diverse, and representative of the community – with the number of female VDC members increasing from 15 to 29 percent. FASO's support to seven municipalities for the renewal of VDC has increased women's representation in leadership positions from 1 percent to 14 percent. In addition, many women now note that they feel more empowered to speak because they have access to income through other FASO-supported activities, such as poultry raising. Specifically, women feel that they can now solve problems. Men also now recognize that women have greater value in organizations – and, for some women, this means they play a greater role in decision making. With this newfound respect, women now sit together with men in organizational groups to discuss and find solutions to problems.

**Transformative capacity is a long-term investment, which means that it may span a period greater than the life of FASO.** FASO contributes to community transformative capacity through good governance management and village-level transparency. It supports VDCs and various producer and livelihood groups. Because of this, councils and groups seem better able to mobilize resources to both sustain and expand community activities. Such interventions reinforce community-level structures and processes that enable communities to mitigate, deal with, and recover from shocks and stresses. For example, VDCs have started to improve their provision of social services and collective action, such as contributing to food collection for school canteens, planting trees in school yards, and mobilizing the community around

literacy sessions. In addition, the municipalities' involvement in the FASO monitoring committees helps FASO more easily address practical concerns related to the allocation of land for market gardening and infrastructure for lowland improvement.

However, the FASO Program recognizes that there are limits to addressing social and cultural norms that inhibit people's capacities to deal with resilience. Within a five-year program, FASO can only realistically achieve small gains in terms of gender equality and women's empowerment. To build advocacy efforts for gender equality with local organizations, including VDCs, communities need to demonstrate a genuine willingness to work on gender in the context of resilience to shocks and climate changes. Through a conscious program of facilitated affirmative action, FASO can support women in decision-making roles to build leadership and management competencies, allowing FASO communities to increase gender equity and women's empowerment.

**Learning to-date:** The FASO Program has increased women's willingness and ability to engage in community- and organizational-level planning processes. Program interventions provide training and tools to women that encourage their involvement in community organizations and leadership roles. However, the process of transforming systems often encounters resistance. To ensure transformation, the FASO Program communities need greater investment and long-term commitment. While FASO strives to ensure the equitable participation and increased leadership of women in its activities, there are still few women in leadership positions of organizational groups

