



THREE YEARS LATER

EVALUATING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF A FOOD SECURITY PROGRAM IN NIGER



Ranked at the bottom of the 2015 UN Human Development Index, Niger is burdened by a lack of industry, high population growth, and frequent natural disasters. Eighty-five percent of the population depends on farming as a primary source of income. To address the chronic food insecurity many farmers face, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) partnered with CARE and Helen Keller International (HKI) to implement the Programme de Sécurité Alimentaire et Nutritionnelle (PROSAN), an intensive health and food security project in Niger's Dosso, Tahoua, and Zinder regions. From 2006 to 2012, the agencies worked together to increase agricultural production and agro-enterprise, develop and train health agents, enhance community resiliency, and improve household health and nutrition. The project was funded through USAID's Office of Food for Peace.

THE STUDY'S GOAL

Three years after the end of the PROSAN project, a team including consultants from Valuing Voices used community mapping, focus group discussions, and beneficiary and stakeholder interviews to determine 1) whether the targeted communities sustained the project activities three years after the project ended, 2) whether the project was considered a success by the communities, and 3) what the prospects were for continued sustainability. Drawing on more than 500 interviews in six communities in the Dosso region, the team sought to discover whether participants and partners trained in agricultural livelihood, health, nutrition, and hygiene activities through PROSAN developed new innovations based on their experiences. They searched for evidence that the project's concepts had taken root in the form of improved practices.

WHY EVALUATE SUSTAINABILITY?

Sustainability is the yardstick by which projects are measured. It is therefore imperative that donors and implementers follow up with post-project evaluations, focusing on both the drivers and the barriers to sustainability so those lessons can be applied to future projects. Equally important, NGOs must share their lessons from past projects to help others fill gaps, strengthening the broader network of both development agencies and community-based organizations who can play a role in future development efforts. Only through evaluation can the real impact of our work be judged, donors be confident in their funding, implementers better their work, and beneficiaries be assured of receiving impactful, sustainable assistance that improves their lives.

FINDINGS

The results of the evaluation were conclusive. Three years after the end of PROSAN, the project was considered a success by community members, national partners, former CRS staff, and donor representatives. The team found communities deeply appreciative of the project,

partners thankful to CRS, and staff and donor representatives eager to laud the project's impact. Across the evaluation areas, participants cited increased agricultural production and community engagement as the greatest legacy of the PROSAN project, with the vast majority of communities reporting that trainings continued, mills were being maintained, and seed multiplication was expanding. The evaluation also found that management at the community level remained strong, an important indicator of the success of the project.

Notable findings include:

- 80% of all project activities were reported as self-sustaining.
- On average, households reported moving from being food secure for 3-6 months per year during PROSAN to 8-12 months at the time of the evaluation.
- 92% of respondents (male and female equally) stated that the range of food they consumed at home had increased since the project.
- Women reported greater income through increased sales of food produced and processed through the grain mills supported by the project.
- 91% of survey respondents indicated that their health and sense of well-being had improved, especially through the efforts of the health posts and clinics that CRS helped build and the government of Niger now sustains with resources and staff.
- More than 85% of respondents said they had received health, nutrition, and hygiene training through the project.
- 81% of the committees set up by PROSAN were functioning at the time of the evaluation.
- Some new NGOs and international organizations have built upon PROSAN's success, for instance, by using land previously managed by PROSAN for a new vegetable gardening training program, building hygiene programs on past health awareness efforts, or extending agricultural credit for further inputs.



Habsu Boubacar, a PROSAN beneficiary, holds her youngest daughter, Nafissa, in Toudoun Jaka, Niger. With her husband away looking for work during much of the project period, Habsu and her family resorted to eating millet husks, a food normally reserved for livestock. During one three-month period, her children ate nothing but millet and water until CRS distributed bulgar, corn soy blend, and vegetable oil to the most vulnerable families in Toudoun Jaka. *Lane Hartill/CRS*

In all, this evaluation showed that active participation among consortium and CRS staff, communities, and partners is critical for sustainability. Such linkages, in conjunction with a reasonable project timeframe, foster country-led ownership and initiative. Communities will prioritize their own resources to meet their needs, and continue activities they feel are of greatest value.

80%

OF ALL PROJECT ACTIVITIES WERE REPORTED AS SELF-SUSTAINING

The evaluation also revealed that committees established through the project played a key role in sustaining PROSAN's activities and training in the communities. As a whole, PROSAN partners were successful in continuing to provide support, especially given their resource constraints.

CHALLENGES

While the PROSAN project has had a lasting impact in Niger, challenges remain. Although most committees established during the project were still functioning, there were no processes in place to train youth and new village residents - of particular concern since 50% of Niger's citizens are under the age of 15. As well, there are limited ministry resources available to take the place of

organizations like CRS once the program ends, and some evaluation results indicated varying degrees of aid dependency, which could best be addressed through better handover at the project's end to cultivate feelings of self-sufficiency. Finally, there is little management of project data, which is further exacerbated by staff changes in NGOs, government ministries, and donors. It is essential that such data be accessible for future projects to use and for villages to conduct self-evaluations.

Other challenges included:

- 20% of implemented activities were not sustained or had stagnated.
- While households sustained hygiene practices and there was widespread latrine construction, sanitation was poor in the villages, and most latrines had fallen into disrepair.
- Fewer than 50% of women reported practicing exclusive breastfeeding for children less than six months of age.
- Literacy training and theater groups had completely ceased.

OUR APPROACH

To gather the most accurate data available, the team combined both qualitative and quantitative methods. The approach allowed team members to document the sustainability of PROSAN's activities and highlight areas for deeper exploration while also addressing more specific project-related issues like the reasons behind that sustainability, the causes of reduced exclusive breastfeeding

rates, and the extent to which partners adopted the project's activities.

The evaluation team, comprised of a Valuing Voices consultant team leader, a CRS health/nutrition expert, a CRS agriculture/environment expert, and a translator, chose six villages of the 70 in the Dosso region based on 1) the concentration of PROSAN activities and villages, 2) the highest agro-ecological diversity, 3) access to healthcare, and 4) proximity to markets in Dosso. Though included in the project coverage area, the Tahoua and Zinder regions were inaccessible due to security concerns during the evaluation period in April and May 2015.

QUALITATIVE

The team launched their evaluation with a rapid rural appraisal (RRA), the objective of which was to identify the sustained expected and unexpected outcomes of PROSAN. Working in three communities, the team evaluated health and hygiene, environmental, and resilience activities in each, and used the RRA to determine which activities, committees, and institutions had continued and why, which trainings had the most impact on behavior change, and whether others uninvolved in the project had adopted the same activities. Through the RRA, the team also sought to determine the extent to which project resources had been successfully replaced by local resources, and what characteristics differentiated those groups and institutions that remained.

QUANTITATIVE

To garner quantitative feedback, an expert selected by Valuing Voices used a questionnaire that provided feedback on respondents' demographics, livelihood activities covered in the PROSAN project, group membership, training participation, health metrics, and practices related to nutrition, hygiene, and breastfeeding.

In all, a total of 393 (292 male and 101 female) interviews were conducted from a possible 480 interviews that had been randomly pre-selected from community village lists provided by CRS. The team used an equal probability systematic sampling method to distribute the sample across the selected villages evenly, with each village allocated 80 total interviews.

MAPPING AND SEASONAL CALENDAR

Through the RRA used in the qualitative investigation, the team identified trends before, during, and three years after the project. To



Women prepare the land for agriculture as part of a CRS Cash-For-Work project in Jougola, Dogondoutchi district in the Dosso region of Niger. The land could then be irrigated using simple techniques so crops could be grown. Tahirou Gouro/CRS

contextualize the three years since the project close-out, the team created seasonal calendars in each community to account for any crises, especially climatic events, that may have derailed activities. This approach also allowed the team to evaluate the sustainability of the early warning system committees developed through the project. By asking participants how well they fed their households throughout the year, and the extent of their food production, food processing, and food sales, the team was able to calculate the number of households that could cover their food needs during the PROSAN implementation period, post-PROSAN implementation, and for the last year (2014).

FOCUS GROUPS, DEBRIEFINGS, AND INTERVIEWS

The CRS team used focus group discussions built largely around the questions, "Did project participants have the ability to sustain the outputs of the project?" and "Did project participants have the necessary resources to sustain the project results?" The team also used focus group results to determine which activities they would carry forward to the quantitative survey. Every few days, the team debriefed with each community, confirming findings and filling any remaining data gaps. Through a regional partners' plenary which drew 24 attendees from local government and 13 village representatives, the team also discussed its findings and received feedback on how to foster sustainability.

Finally, the evaluation team interviewed six CRS local partners and a USAID Food for Peace/Niger Officer for their perspectives on PROSAN's sustainability.