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“Development on the margin”

Adaptable Livelihoods: Wild Foods, Resilience and Food Security in Rural Burkina Faso

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Abstract

The dominant form of subsistence in rural Burkina Faso is a combination of crop production, livestock keeping and agro-forestry. This research set out to understand how rural populations choose their livelihood activities in order to maintain the flexible and resilient livelihood system which has allowed them to survive in the arid and highly variable climate of the Sahel for hundreds of years. The study was conducted over an entire agricultural cycle (Oct. 2009 — Dec. 2010), within eight family compounds (containing 23 households). In addition to their own agricultural production, all families also bought food, gathered wild foods and received food from friends and relatives. Cultural norms and power relations played an important role, particularly in determining women’s access to resources and men’s aversion to credit. Nonetheless, these norms were regularly subject to re-negotiation within a household, thus endowing the livelihood system with flexibility. Conflicts of interest arising between individual household units and the larger family compound resulted in different families sharing resources to varying degrees. Compounds were found to merge and split again into individual household units during the year, balancing the costs and benefits of pooling resources from a larger group of people. The flexibility of household size which allows resources to be pooled at critical moments was found to be a successful adaptive strategy in such a marginal environment. Contrary to theory, diverse livelihood strategies did not necessarily confer livelihood resilience, but carried significant costs of labour and time. Most households exhibited a less diverse system which could be diversified at key points during the year, due to low barriers of entry and exit. This flexibility allowed short-term benefits of improving food provision to be weighed against any long-term loss in resilience, with a clear preference for sustainable long-term food security. It is important to demonstrate the nuances of adaptation over time (between seasons) and over scale (household and compound size) in order to better understand what drives resilience in marginal areas.

Keywords: Food security, Resilience, sahel, Seasonality