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Identifying Farm-Level Pathways to Food Security in West Africa: A Qualitative Case Study

LUCILLE GALLIFA, FILIPPO LECHTHALER

*Bern University of Applied Sciences (BFH), School of Agricultural, Forest and Food Sciences (HAFL),
Switzerland*

Abstract

Background: While the essential interlinkage between agriculture and food security has been widely recognised, there is little evidence that analyses this relationship at farm-level. Understanding these multiple linkages is needed to identify policy levers that reduce malnutrition especially for small-scale farming households in rural areas of West Africa.

Objective: This research aimed at embracing livelihoods complexity by identifying farm-level pathways to household food security, using a people centred and qualitative approach. Assessing how key assets and contextual elements influence pathways to food security. Finally, this research investigated whether farm-level pathways to food security can be identified discussing farmers livelihoods.

Methods: The Sustainable Livelihood Framework was used to operationalize the research questions and develop data collection tools. Data was obtained from semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, dietary diversity questionnaires and structured interviews in four villages of the department of Taabo, Côte d’Ivoire. Participants were farmers from two different ethnic groups as well as representatives of the health and rural development sector. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded based on content analysis.

Results: Interviewed farmers are largely food self-sufficient but rely on the market on a regular basis. Two main farming systems coexist in the region, based on farmer’s ethnic group. Income and food stocks depend strongly on the latter, which implies different perceptions of the lean period and translates in a different diet.

Women are responsible for subsistence crops and use the income from selling surplus to buy additional foods. Men rely on cocoa for their income, which is partly used to cover non-food expenditure. While support to small-scale farmers exists for growing cocoa, subsistence crops under women responsibility are completely neglected. Although cocoa represents an important share of household’s income, women’s activities are more closely linked to household food security.

Conclusion: Agriculture as main source of food and income plays an undisputable role in food availability, access, and stability at household level. Women’s role is central in each identified pathway therefore their responsibilities and constraints must be carefully considered to achieve food security. Local food and health systems shall be sensitive and act upon these specific needs.

Keywords: Agriculture, food security, livelihoods, smallholders, West Africa

Contact Address: Lucille Gallifa, Bern University of Applied Sciences (BFH), School of Agricultural, Forest and Food Sciences (HAFL), Sandrainstrasse 83, 3007 Bern, Switzerland, e-mail: lucille.gallifa@bfh.ch