Tropentag, September 16-18, 2026, hybrid conference

"Towards multi-functional agro-ecosystems
promoting climate resilient futures"

Farmer research networks for food system innovations

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Abstract

Transforming agricultural research and development systems towards sustainability and resilience outcomes while increasing agricultural production is critical for farmers in Saheli-an West and Central Africa. The Farmer – Researcher Network (FRN) approach proposes to achieve this by strengthening farmers' and researchers' capacity to learn together and engage throughout the research process, conducting research in a rigorous and democratic manner, and facilitating knowledge sha-ring, iterative reflection and planning by network members.

Six Farmer Organisations (FO) in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger engaged in dynamic collaborations between producer organisations, researchers, and other stakeholders over the past 20 years, funded by the McKnight Foundation Global Collaboration for Resilient Food Systems program. What influence did this type of collaboration have on the FOs themselves, and what lessons can be learned from their journey that could be of interest to research for development systems for resilience and sustainability?

Using a collaborative learning approach, with reviews of FO documents, interviews with members of the six FOs and a workshop we identified a wide range of changes the FO members experienced over the past 20 years. All FOs reported how they professionalized their operations in terms of the services offered to members, transparency in financial and programme management, and diversification of their partnerships and types of research undertaken. Additionally, the FOs described strengthened skills in multiple domains, such as variety co-creation, seed production, soil fertility, pest management, agricultural pro-duct processing, and nutrition. Over time, they diversified their approaches for sharing

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knowledge and information widely. As a result, farmers reported diversification of their crops, improved food security in their areas, and increasing incomes for both women and men. Furthermore, gender relations have changed considerably. These combined changes signify substantial progress towards agroecological transformation of agri-food systems in these three countries. The evolution of relationships with researchers and government services appeared to contribute to these fundamental changes. These major learnings indicate that the FRN approach anchored in professional farmer organisations, as documented here, supports locally relevant innovations contributing to agroecological transformation in complex and unpredictable environments, including in the current Sahelian context of crisis, reduced mobility and insecurity.

Keywords: Burkina Faso, farmer organisations, farmer research network, Mali, Niger