Introduction

Eating a wide range of foods helps to reduce nutritional deficiencies. In Niger and Burkina Faso, a sustainable diversified diet depends on identifying and developing edible nutritious natural resources, diversifying local agricultural and livestock production, and teaching families how to incorporate these foods in their daily diet. According to the latest demographic and health surveys, 44% of children under the age of five in Niger and 35% in Burkina Faso have stunted growth, and 16% of women of reproductive age suffer from chronic energy deficiency.¹ These surveys also found that the prevalence of anemia in Niger and Burkina Faso, which is closely related to iron deficiency, was 73% and 88%, respectively, among children 6-59 months old and 46% and 49%, respectively, among women 15-49 years of age. Although data are limited on other micronutrient deficiencies, those that are available show that these rates are also high.

The Resilience and Economic Growth in the Sahel—Enhanced Resilience (REGIS-ER) project, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), aims to strengthen the resilience of the most vulnerable populations in Niger and Burkina Faso through improving their food, nutrition, and economic security. At the nutritional level, USAID|REGIS-ER improves the capacity of beneficiary households to access a quality diet through (i) the promotion of plant crops with high nutritional value (orange-fleshed sweet potatoes, cowpeas, biofortified millet, moringa, and various fruit and vegetables); (ii) the availability of animal protein from an animal loaning activity called Habbanaye (small ruminants, poultry) and (iii) increasing the production of staple foods (millet, sorghum, cowpeas) through conservation agriculture. These interventions make it possible to reduce the duration of the lean season for households—the period during which foodstuffs are scarce in rural households (July to September in Burkina Faso and April to August in Niger).

¹ Niger EDS-MICS IV 2012; Burkina Faso EDS-MICS IV 2010
USAID|REGIS-ER strategic approach for community meals

USAID|REGIS-ER works with families and communities to improve their knowledge and ability to produce and combine foods to optimize their diet. Promotion of dietary diversity includes the organization of community meals. During these meals, families are encouraged to use a variety of foods to prepare rich and diversified meals that include different food groups: staple foods (grains, tubers), legumes, nuts, fruits and vegetables, and animal protein or an alternative protein of vegetable origin.

These community events provide the opportunity to recommend, explain, and demonstrate to participants that rich and diversified meals can be made from locally available foods, including overlooked or under-used local or wild products. Families learn to experiment with food combinations that might not be obvious to them, and they learn health and nutritional tips, such as food safety and the importance of using iodized salt.

The community meal is intended for members of mother-to-mother (MtM) support group, which include pregnant and lactating women and mothers of children under the age of two and is generally led by the mother leader (ML) of the MtM group. The group decides on the menu for the meal, and each person helps to collect the ingredients. The meal provides an opportunity to strengthen solidarity, social cohesion and nutritional education. Husbands and mothers-in-law play a dominant role in households, as decision-makers and livelihood providers. Therefore, they are also invited to help them understand the importance of community meals and garner their support.

Key activities

Identification of local products to promote

Based on the realities of each country, an inventory was created of local products with high nutritional value, divided by project region and including the period of availability for each item. Small cards for each local food were made and used during the food diversification training of the trainers (project field workers and facility-level health workers) and community actors (ML and community health workers). The inventory included:

- Energy foods: corn, rice, sorghum, shea butter, peanut oil, cassava flour, wheat flour.
- Protein foods: beef, chicken, eggs, fish, liver, goat or cow’s milk, beans, cowpeas, lentils, peanuts.
- Fruits and Vegetables: moringa, baobab leaves, orange-fleshed sweet potatoes, squash, dark green leafy vegetables, eggplant, okra.

Project field worker and health worker training

During the training on the MtM approach, all the USAID|REGIS-ER’s field workers (30 in Burkina Faso and 40 in Niger) and health workers (18 in Burkina Faso and 44 in Niger) learned how to combine foods to ensure a nutritious, varied diet for children aged 6-8 months, 9-11 months and 12-23 months.

Training of mother leaders and community health workers

The project field workers and health workers trained MLs (1,656 in Burkina Faso and 1,639 in Niger) and community health workers (310 in Burkina Faso and 514 in Niger) on the principles of food diversification. Participants learned about local foods, including those that are often overlooked, and how to use them to prepare rich and diversified meals for their children and families.

Improvement in the availability of food products in villages

USAID|REGIS-ER promotes the cultivation of nutritional crops through Oasis Gardens and home gardens, including orange-fleshed sweet potatoes, moringa, wild mustard, papaya, melon, tomatoes, eggplant, and carrots. Trained field agents and health workers trained all members of MtM groups on how to produce and preserve vegetables from home gardens for use in off-season production. Additionally, USAID|REGIS-ER’s Habbanayé approach has increased the availability of goat milk, eggs and meat to its beneficiaries.

Organization of community meals and awareness raising of MtM group members

Community meals are held on average once a month in each village with around 30 people attending. The preparation involves: choosing the meal, based on available and accessible local products; review of the menu by USAID|REGIS-ER’s staff, who may decide to include additional foods to make the meal more balanced; establishing the list of ingredients and utensils needed and volunteers to bring them; and the choice of the health, nutrition, hygiene and sanitation topic to be discussed during the meal.

At the beginning of the community meal preparation, the discussion focuses on any new food items being introduced and their nutritional importance. The facilitator can use the counseling cards to guide the discussion. No matter the topic of the day, the following questions are fundamental to the discussion: (i) What does the topic of the day mean to you? (ii) What are the advantages of discussing this topic? (iii) Why is it important to observe good hygiene practices when preparing the meal? The last question makes it possible to highlight the critical times for hand...
washing with soap, to make the connection between hy-
giene and diarrhea, and to make the connection between
diarrhea and child malnutrition; (iv) What is the nutritional
importance of the community meal?

After the discussion and with the help of the other group
members, the facilitator prepares the meal, listing the
different ingredients used and at what stage of the prepa-
ration. Participants enjoy and share the meal together on
site, using the occasion to strengthen social cohesion.
Community meals also provide an opportunity to promote
good hygiene practices. To achieve this, a demonstration
session on hand washing techniques with soap is held for
participants.

At the completion of the meal, the participants are encour-
gaged to make the meal at home. The facilitator is available
to help with home preparation, if needed.

Results

Improved awareness of the importance of community meals

When the MtM approach started, USAID/REGIS-ER offered
a subsidy of up to 5,000 CFA to the group to cover the pur-
chase of ingredients that were not always readily available
in households (oil, sugar, meat, etc.). Some groups did not
need the subsidy and others only used a portion of it. For
those who used the subsidy, it was gradually reduced, at
first to 2,500 CFA then, as a group became established,
to no subsidy. By 2018, none of the organized community
meals were subsidized by the project.

As the mothers in the Niger MtM groups became more
aware of what it takes to improve the nutrition of their
children, they began to establish nutritional granaries to
stock bulk food products (millet, cowpeas, peanuts, ses-
ame etc.) to cover the lean period. The granaries make it
possible to continue community meals during this difficult
period without subsidies. As of July 2018, 116 villages
have these granaries.

Increased understanding of the range of possible meal combinations

Community meals have enabled MtM members and their
families to learn new ways to combine foods to improve
the nutritional value of their meals. The project field
workers and health workers regularly invite MtM members
to be creative, showing them how they can combine
different foods to achieve a nutritionally-balanced and
diverse meal. The following are combinations that MtM
groups and their families tested:

- Fried rice made with rice, sumbala, oil, meat/fish,
  and a variety of vegetables (tomato, cabbage, onion, 
carrot, etc.).
- Millet couscous with moringa sauce prepared with
  millet, moringa leaves, onion, and oil or with moringa,
  peanut paste, and peanut oil.
- Dark leafy vegetable sauce made with millet paste, dark
  green leafy vegetables, meat/fish, and shea butter.
- Porridge for children made from millet, cowpeas, pea-
  nuts/SESAME and moringa powder or with millet flour,
  milk, and baobab fruit powder.
- Soup of cowpeas, a variety of vegetables, and
  peanut paste.

Improved knowledge and behavior change

Through training provided by USAID/REGIS-ER’s
staff, health workers and members of the community
(community health workers, MLs and members of the
MtM groups) improved their knowledge on the importance
of dietary diversification and how to change food
consumption to include a variety of foods, with a focus
on using locally available foods.

The increased knowledge has begun to translate into
behavior change at the household level. According to a
small, rapid assessment carried out among MtM group
members in both countries in July 2018, approximately
84% of women surveyed gave enriched porridge to their
6-23-month-old child, a practice that is often discussed
and demonstrated during the community meals. Twenty-
ine percent of women surveyed reported having a home
garden. Of these women, 77% consumed moringa, 26%
consumed green leaves, and 22% consumed vegetables
from their home gardens on a regular basis.
Lessons learned
Meaningful behavior change needs to take a holistic approach that includes influencers.

Community meals provide an opportunity to counsel on feeding/eating behaviors and to provide messages about other issues that influence health and nutrition. The participation of other household members in the community meal sessions (husbands, mothers-in-law, community leaders etc.) reinforces the adoption of the promoted health and nutrition behaviors and improves the maintenance of the activity in the villages. As husbands better understand the importance of the community meals, they become more likely to support their wives by making the needed foods available in the households. Mothers-in-law participate in the community meals and have been reported to support the change in food patterns for better nutrition of pregnant and lactating women and young children.

Community meals is an empowering approach.
Initiatives to organize community meals without project support are becoming more common in the villages as the villages see the benefits of this approach. As communities understand that producing and using local products contributes to household dietary diversity and improves health, they feel empowered to carry on the activity. In addition, community meals have helped to strengthen solidarity and social cohesion in the villages.

Community meals have proven an important tool to create links between food production in home gardens, processing / preservation of garden produce, and household consumption.

To contribute to food security and improve nutritional status, USAID|REGIS-ER has strengthened local food production through home and community gardens and made animal proteins available to target households. Community meals have proven a successful tool to help families understand the link between increased food production and improved dietary diversity as well as its contribution to household food security. Participants have also learned that the processing and preservation of food is an important step to overcome seasonal availability of foods that contribute to a healthy diet.

Programs aiming at building resilience need to consider the time needed to understand local norms and work on behavior adoption.

Behavior change is a journey that takes time. USAID|REGIS-ER initiated community meals in 2015. However, noticeable changes started showing in 2017 with consumption of home garden products, establishment of nutritional granaries in Niger, and continued organization of community meals without USAID|REGIS-ER subsidy.