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UN 2023 Water Conference Side Event

[Small-Scale Irrigation in the Sahel Region-Climate Action]

[24 March 2023, 10:00-12:00 EDT, online]

Organized by: World Bank, Ministry of Agriculture, Animal and Fisheries - SIIP/Burkina Faso, Ministry of Agriculture -SIIP/Niger, Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Equipment and Food Sovereignty - SIIP/Senegal

Background on the event

In the Sahel region of West Africa, food security, one of the key foundations of human capital and poverty reduction, remains elusive to most of the population. A key driver of this insecurity is water – namely, the reliance on rainfed agriculture, representing 30 to 40% of countries' GDP and contributing significantly to job creation. However, this dependence exposes livelihoods to the weather and climate change vagaries. In addition, gaps in water resources accessibility compounds this risk. The region can count on a largely untapped irrigation potential to address food security challenges. Scaling up this potential would improve crop yields and production and facilitate crop diversification, improving the resilience and sustainability of rural communities in the Sahel region. Such development will require integrated strategies and interventions.

This side event was an opportunity for the panellists to give an overview of the state of water for agriculture in the Sahel region and share results and lessons learned from the Sahel Irrigation Initiative Support Project (SIIP), which is currently under implementation in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal, and coordinated by the Permanent Interstate Committee for drought control in the Sahel (CILSS) at the regional level. The SIIP project is a regional initiative supported by the World Bank, focusing mainly on expanding small-scale irrigation in the region to increase beneficiaries' resilience to the effects of climate change, enhance the productivity of their agricultural activities, and significantly reduce their food insecurity.

Key issues discussed

- Irrigation development is critical to help the countries of Sahel in building resilience, accelerate growth, and ensure food security in the sub-region;
- Balancing public interventions across the different types of irrigation systems in the region allows for more efficient use of land and water resources;

- Building the capacity of key actors along the value chain and strengthening country systems for the planning of irrigated agriculture in conjunction with the development of farmer-led approaches and innovative technologies is necessary for these fragile contexts;
- As irrigation investment needs are enormous in the Sahel and budgets are limited, it is essential to work on controlling the costs of irrigation investments as done in SIIP;
- Smart climate agriculture (CSA), such as the promotion of affordable solar pumping technologies across the region will help expand resilience to climate change and CO₂ emissions ; CSA initiatives can sustainably increase productivity, enhance resilience, and reduce/remove GHGs;
- Investing in climate change modeling analytics is necessary to inform policymaking and better inform future irrigation investment development;
- Stakeholders and donors' coordination are also critical for better planning of irrigation projects and efficient use of scarce financial resources;
- Mobilizing private funding is also needed and it can start with better recovery of operating and maintenance costs. Many types of financial instruments and approaches can be used and combined to promote private fundraising by means of proper structuring of agricultural financing and related sub-sectors.

Key recommendations for action

- Adopting a market-oriented production system approach to irrigation development is essential;
- Engaging stakeholders directly in the planning and implementation of irrigation subprojects increases irrigation investments' sustainability;
- Secure land access for women and youth farmers and invest in small-scale irrigation infrastructures will enable small farmers to increase their incomes and yields;
- Documenting irrigation best practices across the region and sharing knowledge is also critical;
- Efficient management of low land is needed (currently less cultivated) to enhance agricultural production and households' livelihoods;
- Because of climate change and associated negative impacts, efficient mobilization and management of all water sources (rainfall, surface, and groundwater) is indispensable for agriculture development and food security.