IWMI
International Water Management Institute

Water Issue Brief - 15
Putting research knowledge into action

Transformative solutions for inclusive economic growth in West Africa

The context

West Africa is experiencing persistent structural changes in the economic and social relations that surround individuals, households and communities. Referred to as social transformation, these changes are giving rise to growing inequalities, poverty and exclusion. A better understanding of the drivers of social transformation as well as the groups most affected is essential for advancing solutions that reduce inequalities and promote inclusive societies in both rural and urban settings.

Key messages

- State actors are crucial for achieving inclusive rural-urban growth and building strong rural-urban linkages for inclusive development.
- Transformational interventions, such as enhanced support for women's access to land, irrigation technologies and extension services for climate-smart agriculture, can help meet urban food demands while promoting inclusive rural growth.
- Enabling factors, including evidence-based policy strategies, context-specific climate adaptation measures and adequate funding for their implementation, can facilitate market and institutional innovations that drive transformative change.

Key issues

Urbanization, climate change, and economic, financial and health crises are leading to widespread social transformation in West Africa. This is most evident in the extent of migration, gender-youth dynamics and the overall resilience of communities. Although migration is nothing new (seasonal migrating populations have long existed for various farming activities), the difference now is that many migrants are no longer returning home to farm their own plots.

There are several interlinked reasons for this. In many populations, a bulge of ready-to-work young people is putting pressure on available jobs. This, combined with climate variability and the resulting stress on agricultural systems, is compelling many rural residents to look for new livelihoods elsewhere. Out-migration, often to urban areas and predominately by young men, is also leading to the feminization of agriculture. This means that women are increasingly taking on nontraditional roles and responsibilities in agriculture, without necessarily gaining additional access to or control of productive assets.

Women planting onions in the Upper East Region of Ghana (*photo:* Hamish John Appleby/IWMI).

West Africa has experienced intense and uncontrolled urban development over the past decades. Despite this, little effort has been made to understand how rural-urban interactions affect the livelihoods of low-income and vulnerable groups in both settings. These interactions include the movement of people, goods, money, information and waste between urban and rural areas, as well as the links between agriculture, services and other sectors.

Pioneering social transformation research conducted by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) prioritizes the examination of rural-urban linkages, migration, water systems and inclusive development. Rather than seeing social change as a problem to be solved, our focus is on supporting evidence-based decision-making that ensures the changes are inclusive and sustainable. We target policy responses at all levels, advising policy makers on water governance arrangements that give women and men equal access to adequate water supplies to support resilient livelihoods. We also use our deep understanding of the gender dimensions of water governance and new technologies to strengthen the inclusion of women, youth and other marginalized groups in key decision-making processes from the outset. Cutting across all these activities are our long-term partnerships with higher education institutions, the primary goal of which is to strengthen human and institutional capacity for social transformation analysis in development planning.

Linking research knowledge to policy priorities

The pace of social change in West Africa is underscoring the need for a better understanding of diverse transformation processes and how sudden disruptions, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, can affect these processes. To fulfil this need, IWMI has partnered with higher education institutions to support a number of master's and doctoral students.

The students, who are hosted by the University of Ghana and the University for Development Studies, follow research streams dedicated to gender, migration and youth issues, and community resilience. These research streams also feed into other social transformation activities. These include stakeholder and policy dialogues on the effects of Covid-19, and the strategic solutions needed to minimize the negative impacts of the pandemic and capitalize on emerging opportunities.

The students are an integral part of our research teams for the duration of their studies and are expected to continue working in the area of social transformation knowledge after graduation. Using the research and analytical skills they acquire, the students will be well positioned to provide evidence-based recommendations on social transformation dynamics for inclusive development planning and implementation in their future careers. This will help to link research knowledge to local policy priorities in the long term.

Mainstreaming social transformation in development planning

In the shorter term, IWMI is supporting the uptake of research knowledge by engaging with the critical actors involved in policy cycle and development planning processes, and identifying the types and forms of social transformation information they need for decision-making.

This engagement revealed a lack of clearly understood definitions of, and methodological approaches to, social transformation analysis. Consequently, IWMI and partners organized a participatory learning event for district development planning, agriculture and gender officers.

During the event, we presented a theoretical conceptualization of social transformation related to migration, gender and climate resilience as well as policy and

Across West Africa, IWMI is engaging with stakeholders to support inclusive policy development (*photo:* Sander Zwart/IWMI).

Improved water access is helping to curb out-migration in Ghana, particularly by young men (*photo:* Hamish John Appleby/IWMI).

implementation gaps in existing interventions in these three areas. In turn, the officers shared their practical experiences of social transformation and ways in which theoretical understanding and practice can be integrated to better frame and facilitate transformation. As new IWMI research becomes available, it is hoped that participants will build on the core definitions and frameworks introduced at the learning event to inform the participatory design of analytical tools and pathways for mainstreaming social transformation in development planning.

Facilitating inclusive policy making and interventions

Water security is essential for most forms of economic activity. A lack of water in the right quantity and quality, or an overabundance in the form of flooding, directly threatens economies and the livelihoods of communities. In conditions of scarcity, allocation between rural agriculture and urban consumers, or between industrial uses and environmental flows, can have immediate or long-term impacts on economic growth and the well-being of societies.

IWMI's research on these challenges is helping to identify the institutions, policies and governance arrangements required to build more robust and water-secure economies. It is also contributing to increased agricultural productivity, reduced poverty and more equal sharing of development benefits.

In the Upper West Region of northern Ghana, where changing rainfall patterns and poor management of water resources are among the factors causing young farmers to migrate to cities, IWMI is introducing participatory scenario modeling. The process brings together development planners and decision makers in the community – farmers, local leaders, government officials, environmental agencies – to predict how various water management solutions could affect the region. Acting as a process facilitator rather than a solution provider, IWMI encourages young farmers and migrants to share their experiences with policy makers and together find contextually relevant ways to improve water governance and access. The expectation is that improved water access, particularly when combined with climate adaptation measures, will help revitalize agricultural opportunities and curb out-migration.

IWMI was among the first to use participatory scenario modeling (Andersson et al. 2010) to address water challenges. However, previous experience in Ethiopia and Kenya demonstrated that the process was highly effective in capturing the complex relationships between competing water demands and showing how one factor, such as a new dam, will affect another, such as food production. The involvement of stakeholders allowed IWMI to identify scenarios that maximized the opportunities and limited the risks for all stakeholders. We are building on this experience in Ghana, where the process is supporting policy making and gender-sensitive interventions informed by the needs of all water users. If adequately funded and appropriately implemented, these interventions have the potential to drive transformative change in rural communities.

The way forward

IWMI's research is helping to identify key constraints to positive social transformation as well as evidence-based options to enhance equality and expand economic opportunities for rural women and youth. Our research insights complement other activities such as capacity building and stakeholder engagement, which together are informing innovative climate-smart technical and policy solutions that benefit everyone.

IWMI research is helping to ensure all farmers, including women and youth, can benefit from agricultural opportunities in Burkina Faso (*photo:* Manon Koningstein/IWMI).

References

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