

[Innovation of the Week: Banking on the Harvest](#)

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In the Maradi area in south central Niger, where 70 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, the months before the harvest are called “the hunger season.” From mid-July to mid-September, food supplies are at their lowest and most families only eat one meal a day.

Since the 1960’s, the entire Sahel region which includes Burkina Faso, Chad, Eritrea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Sudan, has been experiencing increasingly extreme drought and hunger. The Maradi region has been hit especially hard and cereal harvests have dropped by nearly a third. Strained or empty grain reserves cause many families to sell tools, seeds, and livestock in order to raise money for food and the next planting. Farmers with nothing to sell are forced to work for others to earn an income. Some even leave their homes in search of work in other villages, leaving behind their wives and children to tend to the farm and home on their own.

But with the help of the [International Fund for Agricultural Development \(IFAD\)](#), many women are taking local food security into their own hands. In response to the food crisis in the area in 2005 when severe locust attacks compounded with drought to put 3.5 million people in the Sahel at risk of starvation, IFAD’s [Project for the Promotion of Local Initiative for Development in Aguié](#) helped to create a new kind of bank, run entirely by women, that dispenses loans in the form of cereal instead of money.

Called the soudure bank, or pre-harvest bank, IFAD’s project is based on exchange. Every week during the pre-harvest season, poor farmers receive cereal as a credit. At the end of the season, farmers can pay back the loan with their own crops with 25 percent interest—an interest rate that the villagers picked on their own.

The banks have already made a huge difference. Today there are 168 soudure banks throughout Niger, managed by over 50,000 women and storing over 2,800 tons of millet—enough to feed 350,000 people for at least a month. During the 2008 global food price crisis, when 90 percent of the population living in Niger was at risk for starvation, villages with a soudure bank were able to sustain themselves through the harshest period of the year.

One bank client, Rabia Ada, quoted on the [project page](#), says that “from the bank I had 56 kilograms of millet that helped us cope for one month and gave us something to eat other than just leafy vegetables.” Adds another client, Nana Ayouba , “if we didn’t have the banks, our alternative strategies would have been to borrow from our neighbors or to send the men away in search of jobs.”

And the banks help to empower women who are otherwise left out of community-wide organizations and decision making. In their new roles as bank managers, with the support of their

husbands, women can now play an integral role in improving local food security, diets, and livelihoods.

To read more about innovations that keep farmers on the farm, empower women, and improve food security, see: [Giving Farmers a Reason to Stay](#), [How to Keep Kids “Down on the Farm,”](#) [Conversations with Farmers: Discussing the School Garden with a DISC Project Student](#), [Cultivating a Passion for Agriculture](#), [Turning the Catch of the Day into Improved Livelihoods for the Whole Community](#), [Women Farmers: An ‘Untapped Solution’ to Global Hunger and Women Entrepreneurs: Adding Value](#).