



Women-Led Livelihoods Supporting Children, Families and Community Resilience in Cameroon

Cameroon Red Cross Society

CASE STUDY

Photo description: Portrait of a Red Cross Red Crescent Movement volunteer in Guere, Maroua, Cameroon, February 2025.
Photo credit: Daniel Beloumou Olomo, French Red Cross

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Photo description: Portrait of Astadjam Ahman (left), a 65-year-old widow and mother of nine, standing in front of her home. Financial support received from the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement helped cover health expenses and support her children and grandchildren. Photo credit: Daniel Beloumou Olomo, French Red Cross

Background

In the Far North of Cameroon, communities such as Kartoua face recurrent flooding, chronic food insecurity, and limited access to basic services. These challenges disproportionately affect women, children, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups, who often face barriers to accessing resources, participating in decision-making, securing sustainable livelihoods, and maintaining access to education, health and other essential services.

Within IFRC-supported resilience and food security programming, efforts have increasingly focused on combining community-based approaches, livelihoods support, and Protection, Gender and Inclusion (PGI) principles. This includes promoting dignity, participation, equitable access to resources, and community resilience, while addressing underlying vulnerabilities affecting women, children and families.

In many communities, women-led groups and community initiatives also play an important role in supporting household well-being, promoting girls' education, strengthening social cohesion, and raising awareness on health, hygiene and protection issues. These community-based approaches also help strengthen intergenerational support systems, with women increasingly playing active roles in promoting girls' education, raising awareness on early marriage, and supporting household well-being.

In this context, the Cameroon Red Cross, with support from the French Red Cross and the IFRC, supported women-led and community-based resilience initiatives in Kartoua, including a community-managed cereal bank, mothers' clubs, and income-generating activities. The objective was not only to improve food availability and livelihoods during lean seasons, but also to strengthen community resilience, support household well-being, and promote inclusive participation, local leadership and women's empowerment.

Who was Supported and How

The intervention engaged the broader community of Kartoua, with a particular focus on women, who are often disproportionately affected by food insecurity but underrepresented in decision-making structures.

Through the formation of the Groupe d'Initiative Commune (GIC), women played a central role in establishing and managing a cereal bank designed to store staple crops such as millet and rice. Women's groups and mothers' clubs also contributed to broader community resilience efforts through awareness-raising, mutual support, and income-generating activities aimed at strengthening household well-being and reducing vulnerability to recurrent shocks.

Support provided through the programme included:

- Capacity strengthening on storage techniques and post-harvest management,
- Training on cooperative management, governance, and basic financial practices,
- Support to establish community-based management and women-led structures,
- Facilitation of inclusive participation, including women in leadership and decision-making roles,
- Community awareness activities promoting health, hygiene, girls' education, prevention of early marriage, and family well-being.

The approach emphasized community ownership, dignity, participation and inclusion, ensuring that those most affected by food insecurity were actively involved in decision-making and implementation processes. By strengthening women's leadership and economic participation, the initiative also contributed to stronger household resilience and support systems for children and families. Through mothers' clubs and women-led community structures, women also supported awareness-raising with parents and caregivers on the importance of children's education and well-being, particularly for adolescent girls.

Successes

This initiative contributed to strengthening food security, household resilience, and community cohesion, while also supporting more inclusive social dynamics and women's leadership.

- **Improved food availability:** Households were better able to access cereals during lean periods, reducing immediate food insecurity risks and supporting the well-being of children and families.
- **Strengthened resilience to shocks:** The cereal bank functioned as a local safety net, helping the community better cope with recurrent floods, seasonal shortages and other economic pressures affecting vulnerable households.

- **Increased participation and leadership of women:** Women took on active roles in managing the cereal bank, participating in community decision-making processes and supporting broader community initiatives through women-led groups and mothers' clubs.
- **Enhanced agency and confidence:** Women reported increased confidence in organizing, planning, expressing their views, and contributing to decisions affecting their households and communities.
- **Support to household and family well-being:** Increased economic participation and mutual support mechanisms helped strengthen household stability and contributed to improved support for children's health, education, and daily needs.
- **Increased awareness on girls' education and family well-being:** Women-led groups and mothers' clubs contributed to community awareness efforts encouraging families to support children's education, particularly for girls, while helping raise awareness around harmful practices such as early marriage and promoting healthier and more supportive household environments.
- **Shifts in social norms:** Initial resistance gradually gave way to greater acceptance of women's leadership, with growing recognition of their contributions to community resilience and family well-being.

As reflected by Amina, *"Now, we organize. We plan. Even the men come to ask us for advice,"* highlighting a tangible shift in power dynamics and community perceptions.

Challenges and Difficulties

Despite these achievements, several challenges were encountered:

- **Social norms and resistance:** Women initially faced resistance from some men and traditional leaders when taking on leadership and decision-making roles. In some cases, persistent social norms also continued to affect girls' education and women's participation in community activities.
- **Barriers to inclusion:** Some groups, including older persons and persons with disabilities, faced challenges in fully accessing and participating in the initiative due to physical, social, and communication barriers.
- **Governance and accountability gaps:** Strengthening transparency and community feedback mechanisms required continuous support and accompaniment.
- **Contextual constraints:** Recurrent shocks, limited infrastructure, and resource constraints continued to affect livelihoods, access to services, and the long-term sustainability of community initiatives.

These challenges highlight the importance of continuous adaptation and inclusive programme design.

Lessons Learned

This experience provides key lessons for integrating PGI into food security and livelihoods programming:

- **Participation must be intentional:** Ensuring the meaningful inclusion of women, caregivers, persons with disabilities and marginalized groups requires deliberate design, continuous facilitation, and accessible community-based approaches.
- **Community ownership drives sustainability:** Locally led initiatives and women-led community structures are often more responsive to household and community needs and are more likely to be sustained over time.
- **Livelihood and food security interventions can support broader protection and well-being outcomes:** Beyond improving access to food and income, community-based livelihood initiatives can strengthen household resilience, support children's well-being, and contribute to more protective family and community environments.
- **Women's leadership and economic participation can contribute to intergenerational and social norm change:** Supporting women's participation in decision-making and economic activities can help shift perceptions around gender roles, girls' education, early marriage, and women's leadership within households and communities.
- **Inclusion requires ongoing attention:** Barriers affecting persons with disabilities and other at-risk groups must be continuously identified and addressed to ensure equitable participation and access to benefits.
- **Dignity and agency strengthen resilience:** Supporting individuals and communities to organize, take decisions, and lead local initiatives enhances confidence, social cohesion, and collective resilience.
- **Social cohesion and mutual support matter:** Community-led initiatives can strengthen solidarity, create spaces for dialogue and mutual assistance, and reinforce local support systems during periods of stress and crisis.

As one mother explained:

"I had to drop out of school in my first year of primary middle class. Today, I want my daughters to go further than I did. Thanks to the Red Cross, I have understood the importance of education, and I do everything I can to keep my kids in school."

Soureya, community member, Kodek