

**UNITLIFE Trust Fund**  
**MPTF OFFICE GENERIC ANNUAL PROGRAM NARRATIVE PROGRESS REPORT**  
**REPORTING PERIOD: 1 JANUARY – 31 DECEMBER 2023**

<b>Programme Title &amp; Project Number</b>	<b>Country, Locality(s), Priority Area(s) / Strategic Results</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programme Title: Sustainably improve food &amp; nutrition security through Market Systems Development, Social &amp; Behavioural Change and Financial Inclusion</li> <li>• Programme Number - 00134306</li> <li>• MPTF Office Project Reference Number: 00134306</li> </ul>	<p><i>Country: Niger</i> <i>Region: Zinder</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Priority areas: Mirriah and Gouré</i></p>
<b>Participating Organization(s)</b>	<b>Implementing Partners</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UNITLIFE Trust Fund</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• GOAL</li> </ul>
<b>Programme/Project Cost (US\$)</b>	<b>Programme Duration</b>
<p>Total approved budget as per project document: USD 300,000 MPTF /JP Contribution:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>by Agency (if applicable)</i></li> </ul> <p>Agency Contribution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>UNITLIFE Trust Fund – USD 300,000</i></li> </ul> <p>Government Contribution <i>(if applicable)</i></p> <p>Other Contributions (donors) <i>(if applicable)</i></p> <p><b>TOTAL: USD 300,000</b></p>	<p>Overall Duration: 12 months</p> <p>Start Date <i>(15/12/2022)</i></p> <p>Original End Date <i>(14/12/2023)</i></p> <p>Current End Date <i>(31/12/2023)</i></p>
<b>Programme Assessment/Review/Mid-Term Eval.</b>	<b>Report Submitted By</b>
<p>Assessment/Review</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes,      <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b></p> <p>Mid-Term Evaluation Report</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes,      <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Name: Michael O’Neill</li> <li>o Title: Desk Officer</li> <li>o Participating Organization (Lead): GOAL</li> <li>o Email address: <a href="mailto:moneill@goal.ie">moneill@goal.ie</a></li> </ul>

## Executive Summary

Between November 2022 and December 2023, with support from UNITLIFE and Irish Aid, GOAL implemented a project with the overall objective of reducing the prevalence of chronic malnutrition among children under 5 years, Pregnant and Lactating Women (PLW), through agricultural innovations that are nutrition-sensitive and climate-smart in 20 villages in Mirriah and Gouré areas, Zinder region.

The project purpose is to **“Sustainably improve food & nutrition security through Market Systems Development, Social & Behavioral Change and Financial Inclusion”**, and it has three major objectives:

1. Improved production and availability of nutrition-sensitive crops.
2. Women’s empowerment – agency, income, assets – enhanced, and improvement of household nutritional status.
3. Improved health through behavior change – improved nutritional practices and community well-being.



**An example of branding materials used during the activities' implementation.**

The Theory of Change (ToC) for the overall project is:

- **if** the range and supply of nutritionally improved and climate-adapted seeds is strengthened to meet and stimulate demand, and
- **if** the production of nutrient dense food is increased and food waste is reduced, and
- **if** communities have access to, and see the benefit of protecting, natural resource critical to crop food systems; and

- **If** early warning systems reach and are used by small scale producers, and anticipatory actions are planned and triggered in time to reduce the impact of context specific shocks, and
- **If** increased production of better-quality crops stimulates more efficient and inclusive aggregation and off-taking, and
- **If** socio-cultural behaviors that drive chronic malnutrition and women’s lack of power, and
- **If** communities have access to and use appropriate financial services, have improved nutrition knowledge, skills and practices, and can identify early signs of malnutrition; and are empowered to address their own socio-cultural norms,
- **Then** households will be more food & nutritionally secure, gender imbalances will be reduced, the systems critical to food and nutrition security will be strengthened and households will be more resilient to climate and socio-economic shocks and stresses.

Evaluations conducted in January 2022 and in July 2022 by GOAL Niger with the technical oversight and quality assurance from GOAL’s Regional MEAL Advisor contributed to the measurement of results at endline for this project.

At the end of the 12 months, Phase II project and 2 months No Cost Extension (fourteen-month project), **24,118 individuals (47% female), have been reached – 118% of the planned target of 20,355. Most of these individuals benefited from multiple interventions implemented under this project.** Out of the total reached, 90% were adults, (46% women) and 10% were children, of which 51% were female. More people were reached than originally planned, especially people reached via digital awareness messages from VIAMO in the project intervention areas, but also from the family MUAC approach.

## 1. Results

**Outcome 1. Increased production and availability of nutrition-sensitive crops** was measured by two indicators:

***Indicator No. 1 – The percentage of target farmers producing nutrient-dense crops such as vegetable and biofortified crops in the catchment areas.*** At baseline this was 0%, the target value planned was 75% and the result achieved was 53%. Possibly the target was set too high for communities unfamiliar with nutrient improved and climate adapted seed. As for production, an assessment conducted in January 2024 found that farmers across Zinder who purchased improved seed saw substantially improved yields in 2023. 216-278% for nutritionally improved millet, 137-235% for ground nuts, and 221-257% for climate adapted cowpeas. Good evidence of yield being used for household consumption was also found.

In 2023, although 76% of those interviewed kept 75% or more of their production for household

food security, an increasing percentage - 32% - kept 100% of their production for household food security, suggesting more farmers are producing at a subsistence level.

Sources: GOAL Production Survey 2023.

In terms of availability, significantly larger volumes of seed were available and sold in 2021 – 22.5 tons – when compared to 2020 – 1.8 tons. In 2022, utilizing Irish Aid support, a further 15 tons of improved seed was sold across Zinder and 31 tons sold in 2023 compared to 2022. This reflects an upward trajectory in terms of availability and access to improved seeds as well as an increase in production.

This initiative will require several years to stimulate demand with other private sector supply actors entering the Zinder market and creating supply competition which can drive demand and increase the nutritional value of what people already eat.

**Indicator No. 2 – The percentage of the target population with an acceptable Food Consumption Score (FCS)** this indicator is intended to reflect the impact of all project initiatives.

Baseline and endline data were collected in different seasons. Baseline date was collected in February, when there is greater food availability during the fed season, and Endline date was collected in July, when there is less food availability during the lean season.

At baseline this was 52.7% (IA 2019), the target was 55% and the result for 2022 was 53%. A subsequent FCS assessment has been undertaken in July 2023 and the result obtained was 71%.

**The data shows that the FCS was maintained during the lean season when compared with data from the fed season, and more households moved from a poor FCS score to a borderline score – a positive trend.** So, while this data suggests little change in 2022, the overall FCS has been maintained during the lean season at levels commensurate with the fed season (October to March). Compared to the results of the previous year (2022), we see a positive development at all three levels of food consumption, including:

Poor FCS 19% to 6% (improvement); limit 28% to 23% (the poorest have reached the borderline); acceptable 53% to 71% (improvement based on project impact).

These results are due to the actions undertaken by the project – strengthening the sales system for biofortified seeds, the popularization of home gardens, community gardens, the action of the VSLA and raising awareness among seed farmers. These developments undoubtedly contributed to the increase in agricultural production, the increase in household income and thus improve the availability of food for consumption in households. Evidence from seed assessment results in January 2024 revealed that approximately 75% of agricultural production was kept for household consumption.

**Outcome 1.** has three associated output indicators, detailed here. See log frame report for activity level reporting.

**Outputs 1.1** Strengthened linkages between input suppliers and farmers for timely access to improved and diversified seeds, measured by **the percentage of the target population linked to input suppliers of high-quality seeds of nutrient-dense crops & input sources.**

To improve production and availability of nutrition dense and climate adapted crops, GOAL partners with local private sector actors to strengthen the linkages between input suppliers and farmers in Zinder for timely access to nutritionally improved and climate-adapted millet, groundnuts and cowpea seed, as well as vegetable seeds.

At baseline the percentage of the target population linked to input suppliers of high-quality seeds was 0%, the target was 90% and the result 82%. During the final evaluation conducted in July 2022, 82% of households interviewed reported having heard about, and knew of, the retail points to purchase improved seeds in the project area, although it should be noted that seed retail agents were located across the whole of Zinder and not only the target project area. This is important as improved supply stimulates demand for new products and increased demand stimulates supply. The evaluation in January 2022, shows that relatively inexpensive radio advertising seemed to be effective in creating demand for new seed varieties.

Nutritionally improved and climate adapted seed sold.

Three types of nutritionally improved and climate adapted seed – millet, groundnuts & cowpeas – were promoted across Zinder region in 2021 at 50% reduced price, in 2022 with 40% reduced price and in 2023 with 30% reduced price. Improved seed was sold through a network of 32 retail agents across Zinder, who were resupplied by FESA. To date, 68.9 tons of nutritionally improved and climate adapted seeds have been sold – 40.4 tons of millet naturally biofortified with Iron and Zinc, 19.5 tons of improved cowpeas and 93.7 tons of improved groundnuts.

The ultimate objective of a decreased buy down sale price (50%, 40%, 30%, 20%, and 10% in 2025) is to incentivize farmers to experience new crop varieties they did not know before. The intention was to make it an easier decision for farmers to risk trying a new variety. The improved millet was the most challenging to market as the plant is significantly different from the local variety, having a much shorter 'head'. Sustainability will be guaranteed once farmers become familiar with improved and biofortified seeds qualities such as their contentment in microelements (Zinc, Iron, Vitamin), higher yields, short mature, and resistant to some plant's disease.

A notable area of success under this outcome is the substantially increased access to Improved Crop Storage (PICS) bags, a low-cost technology for storing grain and seed without using chemicals to control insect pests.

GOAL also partners with a private sector actor Abdoul Azizou to increase access to good quality and low-cost food storage equipment, PICS bags to reduce food waste and to increase farmers access to markets through aggregation and off-taking of millet, cowpeas and groundnuts as shown below.



***Aggregation and off-taking of millet, cowpeas and groundnuts by Abdoul Azizou.***

Abdul Azizou, one of the three private sector partners, imported PICS bags and sold 27,000 bags in 2021 across Zinder. 15,000 bags were sold to women at a sale price (25% off), bringing the price nominally below the price of a poorer quality storage bag available in the market. Additionally, 12,000 bags were sold to men at the full price, demonstrating untapped demand for quality low-cost storage technology. GOAL continues to monitor and collect data on this initiative. This initiative cost ~\$7,800 and the return on this investment increased in 2022 with 50,150 PICS bags sold at the full price and 31,000 sold in 2023.

With approximately 30-40% of food lost before it reaches consumption, there are huge opportunities to reduce food waste and increase household food security for small scale farmers. With an investment of only \$7,800, over 81 thousand low-cost storage bags for grains and legumes have been sold in Zinder. This is an example of how a small amount of donor funding can catalyze sustainable change on a scale. Finding a market actor who sees the opportunity to do business differently, and sharing the risk, was and is critical to the ongoing success of this initiative.

**Output 1.2:** Improved production skills to increase availability of nutrient-rich foods is measured through the **percentage of the population (children 6-23 months) with Minimum Dietary Diversity (MDD)**.

MDD is a measure of the minimum number of food groups, 4, being consumed by different age groups and of the breastfeeding status of infants 6 - 23 months of age. It's collected through the NIPP approach activities. The baseline 95% (2022 achievement) and target reached this phase 2 was 98,8% (NIPP graduation) 6

After NIPP graduation (final NIPP data collection), enrolled targeted children achieved the minimum dietary diversification (MDD) of 98.8% based on the 4 food groups consumed for a 24-hour recall prior to the time of data collection.

This efficient result was achieved because the children evaluated are registered and followed in groups where culinary demonstrations are regularly held and where awareness was raised for families by CHW's. A fortiori the activities of the NIPP are by far the most appropriate in improving the state nutritional status of children.

This large increase in MDD is consistent with GOAL's national NIPP data for MDD and illustrates the positive impact of the NIPP methodology, an interpersonal Social Behavioral Change (SBC) methodology that supports individual's practical application of positive behaviors.

**Output 1.3:** Women's dry-season production and income generation increased, measured by *percentage of target women trained on skills supporting food value addition such as food processing, preservation, and storage techniques*. At baseline this was 0%, the target 85% and the result 99.9%. There was very high participation of women in the NIPP activities.

**Outcome 2: Women's empowerment (agency, income, and assets) enhanced, and household nutritional status improved,** measured by the *percentage of target women associated in financial decision-making at HH level*. At baseline this was 25%, the target was 85%, and the result was 38%. This indicator measures the increasing change in social and gender norms that govern women's role on economic decision making. It would appear from the results that men continue to make the decisions on economic issues such as purchasing larger livestock and crops for cash and woman on the smaller ruminant's purchases such as goats and hens, so little change on the wider social and gender norms yet.

This could be attributed to the fact that intrapersonal SBC community conversation activities that have a greater impact on social and gender norms are still on going.

**Outcome 2** has two associated output indicators, detailed here. They are:

**Output 2.1:** Women's decision-making power and income increased measured through the *percentage of target women involved in decision making on use of household assets and income*. The baseline was 53%, the target was estimated at 85% and the result 58%. For this household decision indicator, it appears that the majority of woman can make decisions on the income required for the daily running of the household, can bring children to health care, can spend their own income, and decide on the smaller household purchases such as daily food and buying of household utensils. However, due to the baseline being secondary data, the endline cannot be compared to show progress but a 58% is an increase from secondary data used in the baseline. This higher percentage could be attributed to the fact that 14 goat banks were established in 2021, 392 women linked to veterinary services and 1,575 joined Village Savings and Loans groups which may have translated into increasing their power within the household.

**Output 2.2:** Women's financial literacy and inclusion increased, measured by the *percentage of target women who accessed either informal or formal financial services*. The baseline was 0%, the target value was 85%, and the result achieved was 81%. This result represents a substantial increase in women's access to informal financial services, from a very low base. A financial systems assessment has been conducted in July 2023 by an international consulting firm, Agora

Global, to explore formal financial service providers and appropriate financial products and services to support women towards financial inclusion. The final report was shared in August 2023 and the findings from this financial systems assessment, conducted by Agora Global, were used to guide GOAL during the design of UNITLIFE Phase 3 project.

The study outlined 3 opportunities and intervention areas for a better financial inclusion for women, as follows:

1. Increase the quantity and quality of supply and reduce the price and demand of productive loans.
2. Increase the quantity and quality of supply and reduce the price and demand of savings products.
3. Increase the quantity of supply and reduce the price and demand for remittances and payments.

This progress was achieved mainly thanks to the activities of 63 VSLA groups constituting 1,575 women in 20 project villages. These groups of women contribute cash among themselves, and grant loans to any women in the group they desire, with the objective of this activity being to increase women's access to credit. They saved around 7,752 Euro and made loans easier with the monitoring of their VSLA committees.

The expected target (85%) of the project was not completely achieved of course, simply because there are other women within the 20 targeted villages who do not participate in VSLA, and who were therefore interviewed during the final evaluation.



*Financial systems assessment July 2023: Zermo village VSLA women focus group by Agora consultant Rapson.*

**Outcome 3. Improved health-seeking behaviors, nutritional practices, and community well-being,** measured by ***the percentage of target community members with ability to care for their own well-being.*** This approach was adopted because of GOAL’s SBC approaches focusing on health-nutrition-WASH behaviors. At baseline this was 51.5%, the target was 60% and the result was 78%, demonstrating good progress through a combination of different social and behavior change and communications approaches such as the intrapersonal, Community Led Action approach creating community solutions for the adoption of positive health behavior,

interpersonal peer approaches namely NIPP and Family MUAC to increase knowledge and the skills of individuals, and mass media to create high awareness on the positive behaviors.



*Family MUAC to monitor the acute malnutrition status of children (Refreshment training)*



*Men MUAC refreshment training*

**Outcome 3** has three associated outputs detailed below:

**Output 3.1:** Improved household nutritional awareness and practices, measured by the *percentage of households with improved knowledge and skills in food preparation, use, processing,*

**and storage including nutrient dense food.** At baseline this was 20%, the target was 95%, and the result achieved was 98.8%, demonstrating high knowledge in food safety, important for good nutrition.



*Lead farmers women training on improved seeds knowledge and nutritional value. December 2022.*

**Output 3.2:** Strengthened infant and child malnutrition household-level screening and self-referrals, measured by **Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) of children screened referred by Family MUAC and admitted at the health facilities.** At baseline this was 0%, the target was 82% and the result 90%. This was achieved through the extended roll out of the Family MUAC approach.

## 2. Changes and Amendments

### Activity 1.1.4: Support FESA in developing marketing strategy.

There was a change in a planned activity in relation to FESA's marketing strategy. FESA had secured assistance from USAID to procure a consultant to develop their first business plan but progress on this has been slow and in addition to this, FESA's exposure to formal business capacity strengthening is limited and for now they do not see the difference between a business plan and a marketing strategy. As we work with partners, aiming to do the 'right thing at the 'right' time', we could see that this was not the right time and therefore planned to redirect these resources to the following new initiatives. The budget realignment was approved by UNITLIFE in September 2021 and there are no further developments in relation to this point.

### Training retailers & lead farmers in product knowledge and production skills.

Despite the substantial increase in sales of nutritionally improved and climate adapted seed in Zinder (22.5 tons in 2021, and 1.8 tons in 2020), there was a lack of knowledge on the benefits of improved seed. In the strategic alliance meeting held in August 2021 with key players –

wholesale input suppliers, retailers, off-takers, financial service providers – it became clear that the retailers are not equipped with enough information to be able to confidently promote the benefits of improved seed when compared to local varieties, in terms of their nutritional value and their climate adaptability.



***On farm training by the regional seeds control expert of the MoA for lead farmers on biofortified and improved seeds***

To sell responsibly to farmers, it is critical that retailers have this knowledge. Retailers, who are often also farmers, should be able to provide sound production advice while selling inputs. Retailors, who are buddied with lead farmers, who also support improved production skills in their communities are a critical avenue to knowledge / extension services in Zinder.

To respond to this, redirected resources were utilized to train 30 retailers and 30 lead farmers, all male, on October 20-21, 2021, in marketing, production and the nutritional value of bio-fortified crops. Training was conducted by the National Agricultural Research Institute (INRAN) and experts from the Department of Agriculture. The same training was repeated in July 5-6, 2023, to the benefit of 52 retailers including 32 for FESA and 20 for AINOMA firms.

**A note on lack of women’s inclusion:** The sale of improved inputs leveraged FESA’s existing retail network, which were all male retailers, and acknowledged that it must be the wholesaler who makes the decision on who they will work with. That said, the project highly recommended to its partners to specifically target women as retailers and lead farmers. As a result, from 2022 onwards, some women were included in their activities. This was a key learning.

**Leveraging Abdoul Azizou Ali Sidi’s retail system to increase access to nutritious vegetable seeds:**

The off-season flood recession in Zinder – between October & March – is when households produce vegetables, primarily for household consumption. In Zinder, access to quality vegetable seeds is low and households do not see a return on their investment, negatively affecting production and dietary diversity.

The previous initiative in mid-2021 to increase access to nutritionally improved and climate adapted seed for millet, groundnuts and cowpeas through FESA and their network of 32 retailers, demonstrates what is possible and signals a system level change in how the seed system can work more inclusively, sustainably and at scale.

In 2021/2022, GOAL and FESA co-designed a similar intervention to increase access to quality vegetable seeds but with an emphasis on increasing women’s access by ‘buying down’ 50% of the cost of vegetable seed inputs (carrot, cabbage, okra and moringa PKM1); men paid the full retail price.



*FESA improved seeds retailing point.*

As before, GOAL monitored and verified sales of seed and FESA was paid based on seeds sold. This initiative was not as successful as hoped, as seed was not available early enough in the vegetable seed selling season (October - January 2022).

Additionally, we learned that FESA wholesale supply came from Abdul Azizou, the other project private sector partner. This created an inefficiency in the systems, essential creating another ‘middleman.’ In programming in 2022, GOAL partnered directly with Abdoul Azizou to increase access to vegetable seeds, with a 40% buy down sale price specifically for women. The same agreement – a cost share agreement – was signed with Abdoul Azizou once again in November 2023 with a 30% buy down sale price for women only, men pay the full price.



*Dan Balou women harvesting vegetables from their community garden*

**Increasing access to low-cost post-harvest handling inputs (PICS bags), to reduce crop losses.** Improved seed increases yields, which is good for household food security and farmers' incomes. However, post-harvest losses substantially reduce return on investment for farmers. Cereal grains are the basis of staple food, but account for as much as 50–60% of losses during storage. Use of low-cost storage technology can reduce losses to as low as 1–2%. The Purdue Improved Crop Storage (PICS) bags are a low-cost technology for storing grain and seed without using chemicals to control insect pests.

From our market scoping assessment, we found that the national supplier of PICS bags, Zanguina, and the retailer in Zinder Town, Alhaji Sani Lawali, sold approximately 5,000 PICS bags at a cost of CFA 1,000 in 2020. This represents a fraction of the PICS bags sold in other areas, and highlighted the considerable opportunity to increase sales and use of PICS bags in Zinder to reduce post-harvest losses. Secondly, poorer quality storage bags (called **BEST**) are available in the Zinder market, they cost 800 CFA, but represent a false economy for farmers due to low quality and durability.



***Retailer women selling PICS bags among others such as improved staple crops and vegetable seeds at Guidimouni town (Goure department)***

An intervention was co-designed with Abdul Azizou, a retailer and supplier of other agricultural inputs in Zinder, to retail PICS bags through the established network of retailers who had earlier in the season retailed nutritionally improved and climate adapted seed with FESA. Abdul Aziz pre-financed the importation of PICS bags from an accredited manufacturer in Nigeria, just 300kms from Zinder.

The project used redirected resources to increase access to PICS bags for farmers, but to provide a sale price of CFA 750 (25%) only for women farmers. Male farmers paid the full price CFA 1,000. The 25% sale price for women was intended not only to increase their access to low-cost storage technology but also to increase their exposure to retailers selling other critical productive inputs and to make it an easier decision to buy the PICS bags rather than the other lower cost storage bag. Simple radio advertising was used to market and stimulate demand and 27,000 bags were sold, 15,000 to women. The GOAL team provided independent monitoring of sales data.

### 3. Overall beneficiaries

	Female planned	Male planned	Total planned	Female reached	Male reached	Total reached	% reached/ plan	% Female
<b>Adult</b>	8758	7997	16755	9961	11637	21598	129%	46%
<b>Children under 24 months</b>	826	794	1620	707	679	1386	86%	51%
<b>Children 24 months and over</b>	1010	970	1980	578	556	1134	57%	51%
<b>Total</b>	<b>10594</b>	<b>9761</b>	<b>20355</b>	<b>11246</b>	<b>12872</b>	<b>24118</b>	<b>118%</b>	<b>47%</b>

At the end of the fourteen-month project, **24,118 individuals (47% female), have been reached, 118% of the planned target of 20,355.** Of the total reached, 90% were adults, (46% women), and 10% were children, of which 51% were female.

The overachievement was link to the number of people reached via awareness messages from VIAMO in the project intervention area, but also from the family MUAC approach which also reaches adults (mothers and fathers) and children.

#### **Beneficiary Selection / Targeting**

For Outcome 1 – Improved production and availability of nutrient sensitive crops used a market facing approach, with participants self-selected. Both men and women benefited from the 50% sale price on nutritionally improved millet, cowpeas, ground nuts and vegetable seed in 2021 and 2022. The buy down sale price was 40% in 2022 and 30% in 2023 for vegetable seed, and only available for women.

There was purposeful targeting of women who benefited more from the sale price on PICS bags and consequently they bought in greater numbers.

GOAL uses a Positive Deviance approach to identify caretakers from well-nourished, but similar socio-economic status as most households in their community. Volunteers are selected by their community using GOAL pre-defined terms of reference for NIPP volunteers (as per GOAL Implementation guidelines for NIPP) and verified by GOAL staff.

A female peer is selected to facilitate the female circles, a male peer for the male NIPP circles and either a male or a female for the community leader NIPP circles. NIPP participants are selected based on their nutritional vulnerability as per GOAL Implementation Guidelines for NIPP. They are pre-identified by their community and verified by GOAL staff.

A village assembly was organized in each community to clearly explain how the activities of the community gardens will be implemented. Following this explanation, women volunteers

expressed their interest and were selected in a general assembly and therefore designated as direct beneficiaries of the community garden activity.

The female beneficiaries of the goats were identified using the Household Economic Analysis (HEA) targeting technique. The HEA methodology is a process that involves targeting beneficiaries from vulnerable households by involving communities through general assemblies.

Critical to the VSLA methodology is that VSLA groups are self-selecting, as there are fundamental issues of trust in informal saving mechanisms. VSLA are a cost-effective way of helping communities prepare for access to and use of financial services, critical to their resilience to shocks, especially for communities dependent on agriculture.



***VSLA groups training and provided materials.***

VSLAs usually become independent within a year. Linking them to the formal financial system is the challenge and a financial system assessment was undertaken in August 2023, which proposed recommendations for better women and youth financial inclusion.

Those recommendations have been considered in the preparation of the UNITLIFE Project Phase III.

#### **4. Risk Management**

In response to the following identified risks, GOAL implemented a holistic approach in conjunction with multiple stakeholders, that combined risk communication and community engagement with sub-national and national coordination.

1. The military coup of July 26, 2023, did not negatively impact activities. GOAL was able to rely on the community workers for continued community involvement in SBCC and other activities; community level activities proceed as planned.
2. Disease outbreaks – of meningitis in March-June 2023, and diphtheria in March-August 2023 – caused a pause in activities to focus on immunization campaigns.

As foreseen, the meningitis epidemic occurred between March-June and the diphtheria outbreak in March-August. Thanks to the preparedness of the health authorities and the contribution of partners, those two outbreaks were handled without seriously impacting the program. GOAL participated actively in the responses by supporting the health services with equipment, materials, and hygiene kits, building the capacities of caregivers, raising awareness among the populations through several communication channels including local radio stations, but also with logistical support and participating in cluster meetings with key partners and authorities.

3. Health workers strike and low staffing: there was no strike action during the life of the project second phase, therefore, no advocacy mitigation action was required.

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## 5. Innovation

### **Increasing supply of nutritionally improved and climate adapted seeds.**

The project worked to demonstrate to an existing market player (FESA), how to do business differently to increase access to nutritionally improved and climate adapted seed and to increase turnover and profits.

In 2022, it was recommended to increase the number/reach of wholesalers and their retailers selling improved seed in Zinder region. In 2023, GOAL Niger partnered with two wholesalers and multipliers of improved seed, namely FESA and AINOMA. Introducing a new actor into the Zinder region, where FESA had previously a 100% of the market share, is good for competition. Competition is good for farmers giving them choice and helping to keep prices down.

Introducing a new partner selling improved seed resulted in better geographic coverage, better choice for farmers and higher quantity of seeds sold to producers - 31 tons in total in 2023 instead of 15 tons in 2022.

Although FESA, had an established system of 33 retailers throughout Zinder region, they engaged with them informally in the past, supplying small amounts of seed only once at the beginning of the season, and often not returning even to collect the money from seed sales.

Through a co-design process, the project was able to persuade the two private partners (FESA and AINOMA) to resupply retailers throughout the seed selling season as their stock depleted. The result was a ten-fold increase in the sale of nutritionally improved and climate adapted seed by FESA in 2021 when compared to 2020, demonstrating that there is unmet demand for quality seeds.

This resulted in increased profits for both FESA and their retailers, critical to sustainability and may herald the beginning of a system level change to a more sustainable supply chain of critical productive inputs to farmers.

### **Incentivizing farmers to experience new crop varieties.**

Of the three improved commodities promoted in the project – millet, groundnut and cowpeas – the improved millet was considered to be the most challenging to market as the plant is significantly different from the local variety, having a much shorter ‘head.’

The project addressed this by making it possible for our partners to promote the three types of nutritionally improved and climate adapted seed across Zinder region with reduced prices. Reductions of 50%, 40% and 30% in 2021, 2022, 2023 respectively.

In 2023, improved seed was sold through a network of 53 retail agents across Zinder, who were resupplied by FESA and AINOMA, both multipliers and wholesalers of improved millet, groundnuts, and cowpeas.

To date, 68.9 tons of nutritionally improved and climate adapted seeds have been sold, 40.4 tons of millet naturally biofortified with Iron and Zinc, 19.5 tons of improved cowpeas and 9 tons of improved groundnuts. The intention was to make it an easier decision for farmers to risk trying a new variety. The sale of all commodities including millet is substantially higher than in previous years and invested donor resources to stimulate the adoption of the new seeds is smaller than in previous years. Production is also higher than for traditional varieties.

- In 2021, \$23,004 was invested to stimulate demand for improved seed resulting in 22.5 tons of seed sold.
- In 2022, \$19,189 was invested resulting in the sale of 15 tons of improved seed.
- In 2023, \$15,219 was used to stimulate demand for 31 tons of nutritionally improved and climate adapted seed.

### **Incentivizing women farmers to buy quality low-cost post-harvest handling inputs.**

With post-harvest losses impacting significantly on household food security and incomes, the project sought ways to increase access to low-cost quality storage bags (PICS). Market scanning identified two key dysfunctions. Namely, poor-quality lower cost alternative products and a district level supplier of PICS bags who was not reaching or stimulating demand. See above for more details.

#### *Using digital technology to increase access to information.*

GOAL worked with VIAMO to use a digital platform (3-2-5) on Airtel mobile network to increase its health, nutrition, agriculture, and SBC messaging reach nationwide. VIAMO uses simple, low-cost technology for data collection and for the provision of information and communication technology for development through mobile phones.

The pre-recorded messages available on the platform in several national languages can be listened free of charge for the users.

The topics covered included protection, home gardening (including messages on nutrition and crop pests), VSLA, CLA, NIPP, Zai holes and composting, biofortified millet seed and linkages to seed retailers.

Five messages of that type have been created in 2023 in addition to the 15 created in 2021 and put on the VIAMO 325 Airtel mobile network platform. Those messages are available and accessible free of charge to whoever has an Airtel SIM card.



***UNITLIFE messages creation workshop for the VIAMO 325 platform in March 2023***

The number of registered calls was 152,736 from January 2023 to December 2023, involving 130,626 unique listeners. Content has been received across the 8 regions of Niger including an average of 14,347 listeners originating from Zinder region.

The gender distribution is approximately 70% male and 30% female. Community and home gardening were the most popular topics listened to. This demonstrates demand for alternative trusted sources of information on multisectoral livelihoods, health, and nutrition practices.

**Community Conversation (CC) on family relationship to support women’s empowerment.**

This activity is aimed at reinforcing women empowerment in the communities through changing of social and gender norms on household decision making. The strength of CCs is that they bring the whole community together to discuss the current social and gender norms around woman’s role within the household and how that role can be changed to improve the well-being of families. Community facilitators are trained in participatory skills and participatory learning in action tools that allows for sensitive subjects to be discussed and support the community to visualize different social and gender norms that do not change the fabric of who they are as a community. This has been introduced to GOAL Niger in the frame of UNITLIFE project through a training led by the GOAL HQ technical team as shown below.



***Community conversation practice at the Dan Balou village in March 2023***

Each UNITLIFE supported community must hold three discussion sessions a month, facilitated by a trained community facilitator selected by the community using criteria provided by GOAL. The community facilitators were trained in 2021 and the CC discussion sessions started in January 2022. The data collected during the first six weeks of CC has been analyzed to help identify the social and gender norms that cause barriers to woman’s empowerment within the community. This data guides the remaining discussion sessions to allow the community to find solutions to overcome those barriers and achieve positive social and gender norms change before the end of the CC – one that encompasses 24 sessions.

Given the implementation difficulties a new approach was trialed from October 2023 using a smaller number of CC implementations with the objective of learning from it for CC implementation in the frame of the project’s Phase III.

## **6. Sustainability**

Sustainability is all about ‘how’ we programed this is different depending on what we are trying to achieve, and who the key and permanent actors are in the system we are engaging with. To create change, it is always necessary to change behaviors. Understanding how behaviors and relationships are currently working is key to stimulating change. The principle is to make sure that the different players are permanent actors and that every one of them gets a reasonable benefit from the established system. This will ensure sustainability.

Although GOAL does not make formal agreements with community members, their contributions in terms of time, effort and expertise have been well recognized and appreciated over the life of the project. Many of the community-based initiatives such as NIPP, Community

Conversation, Community Led Action, VSLA, farmer groups, gardening, family MUAC, etc. would not be possible without the contributions of community members. GOAL community-based initiatives are designed to empower communities by building their skills and confidence so that community members are key actors of their development and well-being.

### **Involvement of market systems actors**

Much of the work under Outcome 1 has centered on demonstrating how changing business behavior can lead to increased access to improved productive inputs and better business. GOAL did this through a collaborative co-design process where GOAL and three businesses – FESA, AINOMA, and Abdoul Azizou – partnered. The proposals and milestone agreements are available on request. The joint proposals document the results of this collaborative process and demonstrate the investment leveraged from the private sector.

By first understanding the seed system, we could see that FESA has a hundred percent of the market share for seeds in Zinder region in 2021 and 2022, not usually the conditions for change to happen. We are hugely pleased that FESA came on the journey, even though they were not initially enthusiastic, they are now. We attribute this to them and recognize the importance of the co-design process which puts them firmly in the driving seat, they are the experts in seed sales, and in the relationship management, which if done well, over time begins to build trust.

The partnership with Abdul Aziz was as a result of his excellent performance in terms of sales of improved seeds, we could see that he was ambitious and had good capacity, demonstrating that one partnership can lead to another.

The project leveraged an existing network of retailers, their relationship management was primarily through FESA, who put in place agreements with them and provided sales training and their supply chain. The project responded to retailers request for additional training on product knowledge, and on marketing aspects so they could provide their customers with better information to make informed purchasing decisions.

### **Involvement of Government Actors**

Government authorities – Ministry of Agriculture, and National Institute of Agronomic Research of Niger – have been key actors in the project. They are collaborating in terms of information sharing and provision of technical support through trainings. GOAL adopted a facilitator role from the outset, working in collaboration with FESA, AINOMA and regional ministries departments and the relevant authorities, municipal, and state structures in planning, training facilitation and monitoring of activities. This collaboration throughout the duration facilitates these key actors' continued support beyond the life of the project.

Ministry of Health workers: through the regional public health (DRSP) and the health districts of Mirriah and Gouré, health workers were made available in the respective project areas to facilitate the various trainings (NIPP, Community mobilizers, and the continuous supervision of these community actors). They also facilitate the systematic treatment of cases of malnourished children referred by MUAC mothers from communities to Health facilities.

## 7. Integration / Collocation

### Government

An implementation protocol is signed with the regional authorities guaranteeing the full involvement of state technical services. Also, the Grant Management Meeting (GMM) was organized at GOAL Zinder premises with the participation of some regional technical services. The local authorities – town halls, prefectures, decentralized technical services – were officially informed of the start of the project. The launch ceremony was a trigger for coordination of partner's interventions. The coordination with local authorities made it possible to identify other actors intervening in the target communities to ensure coherence and avoid duplication.



***Joint supervision of activities in June 2023 with government and traditional officials (Mirriah department Prefete, a woman, and the Representative of the chief of the Mirriah Canton)***

### Collaboration with peers

For the design of digital awareness and sensitization campaigns, in addition to the Government technical services involved (agriculture, health, livestock, community development, etc.), several partners including OXFAM, SAVE WADATA/USAID project, Regional Chamber of Agriculture, CARE international were invited to the co-design workshop.

GOAL Niger participates also with the food security and livelihoods cluster coordination meetings, as well as those on health and nutrition, both at national and regional levels. At the national level, a well appreciated presentation of the UNITLIFE project was made to the national health / nutrition technical working group on June 25th, 2021.

### Accountability to communities

Appropriate Community Feedback Mechanisms (CFM) were established at community level to

facilitate interactions and exchanges with the target communities in relation to the activities undertaken by the project and shared their concerns and complaints. This allows beneficiaries to communicate feedback to GOAL and to have their voice heard, which is an important form of engagement and accountability toward affected communities. It also supports the early identification and mitigation of any protection concerns stemming from the project. Project participants were made aware of GOAL's Code of Conduct and were given information on GOAL's Community Feedback Mechanism at project set up.

### **Collocation with other supporters**

The UNITLIFE project is complemented by the Irish Aid funded interventions as their target area partially overlap and initiatives are complementary to both. Communities benefited from Irish Aid funded health system strengthening activities, allowing greater access to quality health and nutrition services at community and health facility level. Similarly, communities have increased access to agricultural inputs and skills, informal financial services, SBC initiatives that contribute to a decrease in chronic malnutrition from UNITLIFE supported initiatives.

Irish Aid support also provided resources to:

1. offer nutritionally improved and climate adapted millet, cowpeas, and ground nuts in the first season of 2022, using a 40% sale price, where 15 tons of improved seed were purchased by the community.
2. fund the establishment of a women community garden that is operational to date.
3. fund a very seasonal activity of vegetable seeds sales using a 30% buy down sale price for women only, men pay the full price.

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## **8. Implementing partners**

### **Partnerships**

- **FESA** is a Small to Medium Enterprise (SME), established in 2009, their core business includes the production and wholesale of improved seed through their network of retailers in Tahoua, Maradi and Zinder.

Their role in the project was to co-design with GOAL an intervention to increase access to climate adapted and nutritionally improved crop seed across Zinder. A second intervention in the second production season (October – March), is intended to increase access to vegetable seed with a smart subsidy to incentivize women farmers.

Both interventions constitute a partnership and not a procurement as the intervention was jointly designed and leverage investment from FESA, who are responsible for the multiplication and sourcing of improved seed, the relationship management with retailers and the supply chain of seeds to their retailers.

In terms of business capacity strengthening, the project piloted a new way of doing business for FESA which demonstrated increase turnover and profit for FESA and AINOMA in 2023.

Efforts to strengthen business capacity through development of sales and marketing skills, were not successful at this time. It is hoped that as the relationship with FESA deepens there will be opportunities to revisit this capacity area. FESA were however responsive to some informal capacity strengthening sessions on financial and administrative management, conducted by the GOAL team.



***Biofortified millet sold by FESA and AINOMA***

- **AINOMA S.A** is a private company (Ferme Semencière Ainoma) that was created to increase agricultural production in Niger through the production and marketing of quality and improved seeds. More specifically - improved varieties of millet, cowpeas, sorghum, groundnuts, maize and Moringa. Ainoma is a limited liability company, licensed in 2006. The objectives are produce, package and market improved rainfed and vegetable seeds. Facilitate import and export operations of agricultural products. The sale of agricultural inputs to landlocked producer organizations. Ensure the brokerage, consignment, storage, transit, and transport on the local and regional market of equipment and various agricultural inputs.

Introducing a new actor in 2023 into the Zinder region namely AINOMA, where FESA had previously a 100% of the market share, is good for competition. Competition is good for farmers giving them choice and helping to keep prices down.



➤ ***AINOMA General Manager, a woman, in her office during the codesign exercise in May 2023***

**Abdoul Azizou** is a retailer and supplier of other agricultural inputs (fertilizer, chemicals, and seed), to retailers. Established in 2019 and based in Zinder, he worked with FESA as a retailer and had the largest sales volumes of millet, cowpeas, and groundnuts seeds in the 2021 season. Although an informal business, Abdul Aziz is an entrepreneur with considerable potential to increase and formalize his business and increase farming input supplies in Zinder region. From 2021 to 2023, he has pre-financed the importation of 77,150 PICS bags. No formal business capacity strengthening activities have yet been conducted with Abdoul Azizou, but as evidenced by his ‘first mover’ behavior, there is every reason to suggest that investment in his business could provide a good return on investment.



*Biofortified and improved seeds at Abdoul Azizou shop at the central market of Zinder in May 2023*

VIAMO was founded in 2012 and uses simple, low-cost technology for data collection and for the provision of information and communication technology for development through mobile phones. They provide solutions in landscapes such as Niger, where technology infrastructure is poor and where populations are divided by language diversity and where education and literacy levels are low. The project procured the services of VIAMO to set up a nationwide awareness campaign on 20 – 15 in 2022 and 5 in 2023 – UNITLIFE related topics available on a digital platform accessible through mobile phones.

### **Ministry of Agriculture (MoA)**

The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development represented at the regional and departmental level by a Directorate is charged with the responsibility of initiating and implementing policies aimed at increasing food security, creating wealth and employment opportunities for rapid economic growth of the State. It is represented at the regional level by a Regional Directorate which is represented at the departmental level by a Departmental Directorate.

National Institute of Agronomic Research of Niger (INRAN) missions is to design and carry out agricultural research programs in all sectors of rural development; coordinate and supervise all agronomic research undertaken in Niger; to contribute to the development of national policy in the field of agricultural research; to participate in research training; to contribute to the development of scientific information. In the field of biodiversity, it contributes to the knowledge of flora and fauna through these researchers. It also develops new varieties of improved seeds in the agricultural, rice and horticultural fields.





**Joint supervision of project activities with government and traditional officials**

**Complementary partners**

GARKUA local NGO: GOAL partnered with GARKUA to implement a cash for work activities in the Mirriah department. From June to July 2022, 180 households in 3 villages constructed 354,600 Zaï holes on 35ha of reclaimed land. These 180 households were also trained in the technique of making compost.

Two project briefs have been developed from this project, they are:

<p><b>Nutritionally Improved &amp; Climate Adapted Seed and Storage Technology</b></p>	<p><b>Expanding the boundaries of SBC through multi-sectoral engagement to sustainably improve food &amp; nutrition security</b></p>
<p> FEB27-Food &amp; Nutrition Security Pro</p>	<p> UNITLIFE Ph2 - SBCC Project Brief May 202</p>

## 9. Lessons learned.

### Learning from the nutritionally improved & climate adapted seed and storage technology initiatives.

1. Nutritionally improved seeds can increase the **nutritional value** of what people already eat, short maturing crops mitigate **climate related risks** and improved seed also increases **production**. All contribute to increased food & nutrition security.
2. Using relatively small amounts of donor resources and leveraging private sector investment to test different ways of working, can change the **behaviors** of market actors, influence the **system** to work more efficiently, increase access to inputs that assist people to be more **resilient** to climate related shocks, increase access to productive inputs for those **excluded** and reach **scale**.
3. By using a Market Systems Development (MSD) approach, it is possible to reach **scale with less resources** (Seed: Est. USD 30,804) when compared to direct delivery programming (Est. USD 92,819). The estimated difference USD 62,015 is significant & demonstrates how resources can be used more effectively to increase access to improved inputs & technology.
4. Using a sale price for key productive inputs offers a way for farmers to experience new products through the actors which can provide access to productive inputs on a **sustainable** basis. But initiatives must be grounded in a sound business model.
5. Incentives can be used successfully to **target more vulnerable groups** and to increase access to quality inputs.
6. Farmers are wise, they spread **risk** when trying new inputs by growing both local and improved varieties and by inter-cropping.
7. Simple, inexpensive radio advertising seemed to be effective in creating **demand for new seed varieties**, although the project bought down this cost, rather than the wholesaler/retailers.
8. In agricultural systems, inputs need to be within the market prior to when producers require them.
9. **Adaptive management** allowed the team to make changes during implementation & increase sales.

See learning brief embedded above for more details.

### Expanding the boundaries of SBC through multisectoral engagement to sustainably improve food & nutrition security.

1. The observed change to date shows that households are embracing new ways of farming, of feeding their children and new ways of approaching social and gender norms.
2. Providing knowledge, building skills, and finally creating a safe space for community members to discuss sensitive cultural and gender issues creates an enabling environment that allows caregivers to start changing practices at household level. Multi-level SBCC targeting male and female caregivers and the community at large, coupled with on-demand mass communication via mobile, can positively change not only health and

nutrition practices at household level, but also social and gender norms within a community.

3. Home gardening offers a simple but powerful way to support households accessing a diversified diet all year round. Findings point towards the need to further scale up this initiative beyond NIPP households.
4. A simple, low-cost communication technology providing information through basic mobile phones allows many people to listen to information of interest in their own time. They provide solutions in landscapes where internet access is poor, where populations are divided by language diversity and where education and literacy levels are low. However, gender digital inequalities should be considered to ensure women are also reached.
5. There is great interest and demand of communities, especially the youth, for alternative trusted sources of information on multisectoral issues such as food production and health and nutrition practices at household level.
6. Leveraging private sector investment to test different ways of working can change the behaviors of market actors and influence a system to work more efficiently and at scale for people, including the most vulnerable groups. Behavior change must be seen as being relevant and important for households, but also of paramount importance and value for the other permanent players across a system such as service providers and businesses.
7. By tackling the behavioral drivers associated to the systemic drivers of malnutrition, this integrated SBCC approach has the potential to support food and nutrition security more broadly.
8. See the learning brief embedded above for more details.