

Transforming gender relations in agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa: Promising approaches

Agriculture is at the core of many of humankind's greatest challenges: how to feed a population fast rising to 10 billion, how to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and how to protect and restore vital ecosystems and agro-biodiversity. These challenges are particularly pronounced in Africa, where productivity remains far short of potential, hindered by poverty, drought, land degradation, low budget allocations to the sector, and in some cases, corruption and turmoil.

For decades, efforts to boost Africa's agricultural outputs have focused primarily on men, as heads of households and the ones best-positioned to engage in commercial farming. Those efforts have indeed raised incomes, but they have done little to bolster food security – because it is primarily women who grow the food consumed by rural African families. Yet social norms often constrain women's decision-making power and their access to equipment, supplies, even to extension services and development programmes that seek to support them. What they produce within these limitations is impressive, but they could do much better. Closing the gender gap in agricultural inputs alone, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has estimated, would lift 100–150 million people out of hunger.¹

Women in Sub-Saharan Africa have the highest average agricultural labour force participation in the world. In Ghana, for example, women produce 70% of the food crops, provide 52% of the agricultural labour force, and contribute 90% of the labour for post-harvest activities. In East Africa as a whole, women make up about 51% of the agricultural labour force. Yet the resource gaps are huge: one study in Kenya found the tools owned by female farmers were worth 18% as much as men's. And women have far fewer opportunities to earn cash from farming: less than 10% of the farmers in smallholder contract-farming schemes in the Kenyan fresh fruit and vegetable export sector are female.

Learning from experience

Recognizing the importance of empowering women farmers, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) commissioned a study of the gender aspects of five of its major agricultural programmes in 2009. The analysis found many difficulties in working for gender equality, but also many valuable lessons and promising approaches. To further disseminate the findings, Sida and the Swedish International Agricultural Network Initiative (SIANI) hosted a seminar and writeshop in April 2011 to gather and



Women at village meeting, Kenya (Photo: R Malinga/Azote)

synthesize new case studies and recommendations. The resulting materials, edited and further enriched, will soon be published as a book; this brief offers a preview.

The aim of the book is to highlight innovative methodologies in small-scale farming in Sub-Saharan Africa that have been shown to improve gender relations – and, in turn, contribute to increased food production, food security and nutrition, stronger value chains, and better use of natural resources. Thus, the approaches selected all address both the ‘business case’ – boosting the productivity of female farmers – and the ‘social justice case’: fostering gender equality and women’s self-determination.

The case studies at the core of the book were prepared by 15 women from Sub-Saharan Africa who work directly with female farmers. The focus is on innovations and methodologies that can be replicated and scaled-up, with lessons and insights for development partners, including bilateral and multi-lateral agencies, that wish to support such efforts. The book also emphasizes the need to work with men as well, to build more equitable, productive relationships that will benefit entire families and communities.

Contents at a glance

The book opens with a discussion of why gender in agriculture ‘matters’, presenting data that link levels of gender equality to levels

of agricultural productivity. It also sets up a conceptual framework, identifying three different ‘empowerment dimensions’: agency, structure, and relations. Agency is the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them – self-determination. Structure refers to the political, cultural, economic and social structures and norms that shape agriculture and women’s daily lives; they can serve as vehicles for women’s advancement, or constrain women. Relations – social capital – are the relationships within communities, between communities and with external entities, which can expand women’s resources and opportunities – or exclude them. The book argues that interventions in the agriculture sector often fall short because do not adequately address all three dimensions.

Next, the book considers the overall environment needed to support the successful formulation and implementation of innovative approaches to transforming gender relations. This includes policies, strategies, methodologies, and effective data management and use. Subsequent chapters explore specific challenges more in depth: improving women’s access to and use of land, facilitating women’s participation along agricultural value chains, and enabling women to benefit from ‘climate-smart’ interventions. Each chapter provides ‘how to do it’ case studies and practical recommendations.

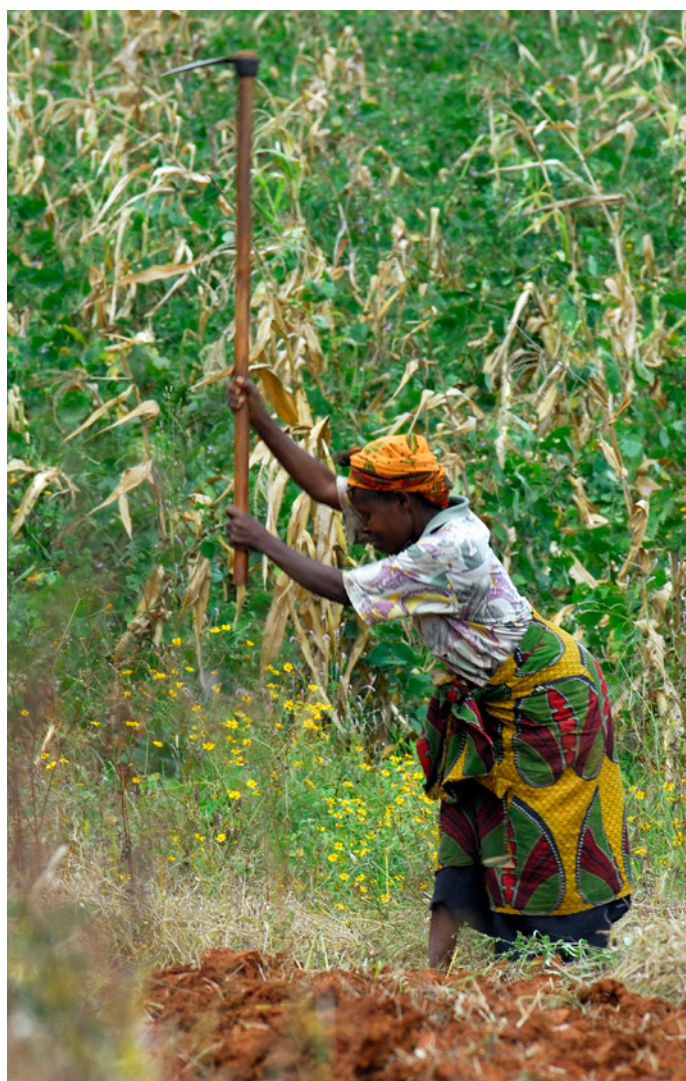
The final chapter brings all the learning in the book together in the form of an ‘empowerment pathway’. The goal is to show how to create strategies that work in a coordinated manner across the three dimensions of empowerment, and between organizational ‘levels’ – from individuals to the national level.

A closer look: women and land

Addressing inequalities in land ownership is crucial because women need to be able to access and control farmland to grow food. Countries where women lack any right to own land have on average 60% more malnourished children;¹¹ in Ghana, a study showed that a 1% increase in property owned by rural women resulted in a 2.8% increase of monthly expenditure on food. Land is also valuable as collateral when seeking loans for agricultural and non-agricultural businesses.

Studies tracking formal land titling programmes show that lack of legal literacy, weak implementation and pervasive gender biases can constrain women’s ability to claim their rights and participate effectively. Civil society involvement is critical to ensuring that women are able to make the most of land reform programmes. The book describes two successful efforts to improve women’s land ownership in Kenya, one at the national legal level, another at the grassroots. A case study from Zambia explains how women can benefit from changes to land use within customary tenure systems.

Even if programmes succeed at helping women obtain land titles, however, that’s only a first step. Women still need capital and credit, access to better farm technology, and on-farm processing facilities in some cases. Plus they need training on good agricultural practices, on nutrition, and on identifying consumer needs to grow crops for the market. Coalitions comprising grassroots women, civil society groups, academics, policy-makers and others will need to continue working to ensure women have access to all they need to ensure their farming is effective and efficient long after they have secured land rights.



Woman working on millet field in northern Tanzania. (Photo: J Lokrantz/Azote)

A closer look: Women and agricultural value chains

Women's empowerment in agriculture shouldn't be limited to household food production; women should also be able to effectively access markets to earn cash from their crops and related goods. Yet although women typically provide do most of the farm work, it is men who dominate commercial farming and agricultural value chains. A chapter in the book explores ways to level the playing field.

Gender inequality hinders women at all points of the value chain: they may need their husband's permission to grow different crops, to participate in training programmes, or to sell products. Cultural norms may prohibit them from travelling outside their communities. Women also often have weaker literacy and numeracy skills than men, which puts them at a disadvantage when bargaining. And they may not control most of the money they earn. In some places, men and women are in direct competition. A case study in Uganda, an application of the Gender in Action Learning System (GALS) methodology to the coffee value chain, shows how improving gender relations can benefit both men and women (and the quality of the coffee) by helping households form a collective vision and collaborate to achieve it.

Forthcoming publication

The forthcoming publication upon which this discussion brief is based analyzes the ways in which gender relations can be transformed at the same time as agricultural productivity is increased.

The analysis is a practical one based on practitioner experience in selected thematic areas including women's access to land, to value chains, and to climate smart interventions. Each chapter provides case studies and practical recommendations for programme planners and implementers. The final chapter brings all the learning in the book together in the form of an 'empowerment pathway'. The aim of this is to provide practical suggestions for how to create strategies to work in a logical manner across the three dimensions of empowerment discussed throughout the book, and also between organisational 'levels' - from individual to national.

Table of contents

Foreword
Introduction
Conceptual Framework
Policies, Strategies, Data
Transforming Gender Relations in Household Level Decision-Making
Transforming Gender Relations in Community Networks
Transforming Gender Relations for Climate Smart Interventions
Transforming Gender Relations to Land
Transforming Gender Relations in Value Chains
Conclusions and Forward-Looking Strategies

Table of contents of forthcoming publication



Farmers weeding bean field in Kenya's Mount Kenya region. (Photo: Neil Palmer - CIAT (CC BY-SA 2.0))



Woman vending vegetables in Mathare, Nairobi, Kenya. (Photo: R Kautsky/Azote)

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