

Targeting women pays when

In Nebbi district, Uganda, women and girls eat after men have filled their stomachs. A local NGO targets women to discuss nutritional values and cultural norms. Surprisingly, when approached with respect, both men and women are willing to review traditional practices and make sure all get enough food.

Alfred Lakwo

Social exclusion is a fact of life that also concerns the political, economic and religious domains. The people most affected are often those stereotyped as being “weak” – among whom are women. It is now common knowledge that gender inequalities slow development, and cannot be solved by adopting the correct gender jargon. Simply “adding-and-stirring” gender within traditional development programmes is questionable. This is why the Agency For Accelerated Regional Development (AFARD) a local NGO working in Nebbi district, West Nile region of Uganda, primarily targets women in its food security promotion.

The effects of exclusion

Nebbi district was formerly known as the food basket of the region. However, during the last six years food insecurity has become an issue in every household. In 2004, AFARD undertook a participatory food security analysis, looking at four dimensions of food security: a) food availability throughout the farming season, b) food adequacy in terms of all household members eating enough and at least three meals a day, c) food affordability as being able to purchase what is needed from the market, and d) food acceptability that focuses on eating not only traditional food but also other food types, as well as equal sharing of food in a household.

Mrs. Florence Thona, aged 52, Dwong pa Mungu Nen Group:

“Even though I was in the group for a long time, I lacked knowledge on proper food preparation and good feeding. For instance, I never used to give tea to my children in the morning, but now I give it to them. We never used to eat *muziri* (silver fish) thinking that it is not nutritious. But now it is our main meal. I share with my husband liver, kidney, and spleen that initially I would fear as only meant for men. The nutrition education has really caused a lot of changes in our lives.”

From this study, it became clear that food (in)security is enmeshed with gender relations. This is because government extension services excluded women. The “contact farmer approach” favoured men who owned and controlled land, livestock and cash crops. The government’s commercialisation of farming considers women as unable to revolutionise farming for poverty reduction. It denies access to improved technologies to women who farm food crops. Men who focus on producing cash crops are supported. Less attention is paid to food production for domestic consumption, which then drops.

Further, women noted that they are restricted from being able to diversify their household livelihood activities. Although it is now acceptable for women to engage in petty trade, such trade must be confined within their marital village boundaries. Should a woman attempt to trade in distant places, she is



Training women farmers on the production of crops for the market may have more impact than training their male counterparts.

considered “a man woman” and the husband is ridiculed for allowing her. Thus, it is difficult to effectively support the development of women’s entrepreneurship skills, which could act as a buffer against declining food production.

Finally, it was noted that despite low production, eating non-traditional foods and equal sharing of foods within the household were biased against women and girls. Women are solely charged with the task of food preparation, serving and storage, but traditional culture requires that men eat first and often the choicest parts of the meals. Their sons follow and women and girls eat last. In cases of food scarcity, such practices mean that women always eat small quantities of food or even go hungry. Worse still, women and their daughters are prohibited from eating certain protein-rich foods like chicken, eggs and some fish species that are enjoyed by men and their sons.

Targeting women in food security

Realising that food insecurity affects women more, AFARD piloted a community multiplication approach of improved and marketable crops and livestock in its various projects. AFARD worked with more than 53 Community Based Organisations (CBOs), many of which were women’s groups, to reach the member households.

Multiplication strategies involved identifying food and income security crops, and procuring the start-up stock from either a research centre or a recommended stockist. Then half of the initial stock was planted on CBO farmland. The other half was distributed to the CBO members, on the agreement that they would provide the group with some portion of their harvest for on-lending to other members. This is done in order to buffer any losses, as well as to encourage further multiplication and adoption. High value crop varieties traditionally grown by

promoting food security

women, but modified by research centres, are promoted. As a result, staple food crops are now highly marketable. Cassava, Irish potatoes, sesame, vegetables and maize are grown by women in their farmer groups. The men continue to specialise in cotton and coffee production. Small ruminants like goats and chicken are also promoted among women.

These inputs are accompanied by agronomic and livestock management extension services. These services are offered at the time women can immediately apply the skills on their group and individual farms. All members must attend such trainings. Their gardens are visited to check adoption rates and to provide on-the-spot advice. AFARD also conducts entrepreneurship skills development, and seed selection and preservation with the groups. Nutritional education is provided jointly for both women and their spouses. This process includes a critical analysis of household food insecurity from a gender perspective. In the training, participants explore causes and effects of food insecurity, identify who should do what within their household setting, and look at how to move forward.

The pay-offs

A “Beneficiary Strategic Impact Inquiry” and partners review workshop held in 2007 revealed that, in the last five years, we have been able to empower women and include them within a socially just food security approach. There have been changes in traditional practice, for example:

- The number of women adopting high-value crops, improved practices and agro-processing technology has increased. With this, crop yields have increased and the “frequent cries from kids are no more”, confessed a beneficiary. Women can also now make strategic choices of what crops to grow. They look not only at food production, but are shifting to growing crops that yield high returns, aware of the importance of the market. As a result, producer and marketing associations are emerging with higher collective yields, bargaining power, and greater incomes for women.
- Increasingly, men are confessing their shame for being family heads who could not protect their household food inequalities. They now realise that following traditional values made them greedy within their own families. An old man noted: “It did not occur to me why my wife continued to remain small bodied. I now know that I was underfeeding her”. As such, many spouses now eat together as a family unit. Parents are now allowing girl children to eat traditionally “forbidden” foods which are healthy for human growth and development.

Mrs. Cwinyaai Joa, aged 49, Bedober Ogonjo Group:

“I have been farming both before and after joining our group. But I had little knowledge and skills on best practices and improved seeds. This gave me routinely low yields and a low income of only US\$ 10 000 (approximately US\$ 6.50). But AFARD provided various trainings, like agri-business skills training that made me know that even from farming, once planned well, I can make a good income. I, therefore, tried to put the knowledge and skills gained in to use by planting tomatoes. The yield was very good and I earned US\$ 50 000 in just two months. I used US\$ 40 000 to rent two acres of land and US\$ 10 000 for supporting my husband to plant one acre of Irish potatoes. I never thought I could in any way acquire two acres of land and now all this has been possible because of AFARD. Our income has increased and I am very grateful for being a group member. The future looks so bright for my family now.”

- Through the groups and group incomes, women have started buying and owning land as well as engaging in businesses outside their village.

Lessons and plans

Lessons learnt during the last seven years shape our strategies for expansion. We are currently working with 30 new CBOs and church-based partners with more than 7000 beneficiaries (80 percent women) over the next 3-7 years. Targeting women in our projects is a key policy direction as specifically targeting women yields more food and income security in rural households.

The activities we have been engaged in were not without their challenges, and we are still working with some of these. For example, the linkages with local government extension staff are weak. We have encountered difficulty with supply of inputs – potato vines have dried up in transit, and it has been difficult to source healthy goats for example. Low literacy levels hamper effective record keeping, and it has been a struggle to tackle value addition and marketing. While we have successfully targeted women, there has been little land available for women to use for extensive production.

Meanwhile there have been some valuable lessons:

- Household food security cannot be attained only from what a household produces. It is necessary to have different income sources;
- Gender relations within the household affect food security – some household members are more vulnerable. Gender analysis and programming are needed to ensure that the vulnerable are reached and the benefits are attained;
- While CBOs provide a good entry point into communities, their members tend to take more care of their individual enterprises. As such, groups are better channels for a wider community outreach, but it is individual households who benefit most;
- When exposed to improved practices through input supplies, training, and regular support supervision, people are willing to change their subsistence and gendered practices.

To avoid strategic exclusion by targeting only those women who suffer from gender norms, it is important to promote sustainable agriculture using mixed-gender farmer groups. In groups where there are only women members, it is important to engage with their spouses too (for those who have one). In this way, increasing access to improved practices and viewing farming as a business becomes a household affair. This thereby dispels the myths and norms of social exclusion. But more important is the fact that capacity-building initiatives should be designed to counter gender biases rather than reinforcing them.

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