

Gender equality and women's empowerment in pro-poor rural value chains: Case study of post-conflict Mozambique

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Background

In rural areas many women face severe constraints to participating in agricultural and other value chains, including access to finances to fund their economic activities, access to land and productive assets, access to technology, lower education and training, limiting culture constraints and norms, and limited labour and time to engage in activities beyond their household obligations. These are more severe in post-conflict zones where markets, infrastructure and financial institutions are underdeveloped or even non-existent, and cultural norms are often conservative. While there is a large body of research on women's economic empowerment, there is a gap on how it works in practice in the field in these contexts.

In 2006 the Sustainable Effective Economic Development (SEED) project was initiated in Northern Inhambane Province in Mozambique. It was a seven-year initiative implemented by CARE Canada and CARE Mozambique in partnership with IrishAid and the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), and in close collaboration with the Government of Mozambique (GoM). It aimed to reduce poverty¹ and to strengthen the agriculture sector through value-added chains that were sustainable and competitive. Women's economic empowerment and gender equality were the focus of SEED's interventions. The project aimed to improve the decision-making power of women, using market driven processes to increase household incomes.

This paper examines some of the practice developed by the implementing organisation, CARE International. It also considers the challenges faced in ensuring women's participation and the lessons learnt over the seven years to ensure women became more active in the value chains and were not further marginalised economically.

Project and generic model

The aim of the SEED project aim was to increase incomes by 30 per cent through the development of commercially-orientated activities, including cattle, goats and chickens, cashews, arts and crafts, in order to reduce poverty and promote sustained rural economic recovery post conflict. The project target was 7,200 households which included at least 25 per cent female headed households (FHH) and 20 per cent households living with HIV/AIDS. As a key aim was to enable women to engage in the economic activities, a target of a 60 per cent female participation rate was set. An additional component of a village savings and loans association (VSLA) was added mid-way through the project due to limited availability of alternative credit options for participants, which was key to the success of the market system.

Table 1: Total number of participants by sectors and targets

SECTOR	F	M	% Female	Target by end of Project	Total achieved
Livestock	589	1140	34%	1500	1729
Crafts	337	30	92%	350	1729
VSLA	3998	1008	79%	4150	5006
Cashew	602	600	50%	1200	1202
Total	5526	2778	67%	7200	8304

Figure 1: Generic model of the SEED Project Value Chain Development for Smallholders



The project developed a generic model of implementation which was divided into two main components: developing the value chain of the livestock, cashew and crafts sector and the methodology for this; and the cross-cutting elements of VSLA and gender and HIV (see Figure 1). Saleability and sustainability were key aims in the development of each sector model. The development of the three value chains involved four components, including:

- i. **Group organisation and management** focused on increasing production quality and quantity, as well as product aggregation to allow access to markets; training on group functioning and management to ensure good leadership; and accountability and transparency. Women were targeted for participation and strategies were put in place to attract and engage them.
- ii. **Technical training to improve production** skills was based on independent assessments for each value chain of the limiting factors and extension staff experience.
- iii. **Promoter training** in each sector to provide specialist services in their communities related to production quality improvement and commercialisation and to act as market intermediaries and entrepreneurs.
- iv. **Strengthening linkages to markets and value chains** through aggregation to attract buyers, developing a commercially attractive marketing system such as using live weight pricing and weighing scales for livestock; having

an above market price for aggregated raw cashew nut, and standard pricing for specific crafts; forging links to buyers and/or intermediaries. The project acting as financial guarantor for the costs of inputs or establishment and paid initial costs of buyers visiting producers to understand the production system.

engaging with issues including legal aspects regarding violence and family inheritance laws.

Indicators of success

Some of the indicators of women's economic empowerment and equality included:

- (a) *Women engaging in markets and earning an income:* For participants, the project model proved profitable from the beginning. The techniques and methods promoted were affordable and allowed participants to implement them with minimal financial risk. This allowed for market accessibility and replication resulting in scaling up to over 5000 women who participated in SEED. Overall household incomes of participants were 92 per cent above the SEED baseline study², compared with 74 per cent for non-participant household incomes in the same communities.
- (b) *Household decision making:* A key indicator of the success of women's economic empowerment projects is whether women are able to make household decisions, especially about how income is spent. SEED focused on raising awareness about household decision making using non-threatening, participative exercises. Changes in awareness around decision making were monitored annually with 45.8 per cent of SEED households responding that women made at least half the decisions, while 27.9 per cent of women reported leading decision making over the last year. In addition, 80.1 per cent of men could detail the benefits of women's participation in decision making, and engaged more actively with women to make these decisions.
- (c) *Household expenditure:* When women have more control of household incomes, expenditure tends to shift to increasingly benefiting the children and other household members. During the last annual survey, 93 per cent of participants indicated that their children attended school, compared to 87 per cent of non-participants and 75 per cent in the baseline study. Incomes were also spent on improving homes and buying assets such as livestock.
- (d) *Savings:* Through the VSLA component, which was made up of 79 per cent women, savings increased from two per cent of household incomes (the baseline study value) to between five per cent and 12 per cent of household incomes, increasing participants' resilience. On average the participants made between 21 per cent and 23 per cent on their money saved per cycle of nine months, and used these savings for household expenditure and to engage in income generating activities.
- (e) *Other indicators:* There were a number of other indicators of women's empowerment during the project which were harder to measure but which indicated shifts in community mindsets. These included women's crafts groups joining together to establish two craft centres to sell their products; women's VSLAs not loaning money to men if they were seen as a risk or not allowing men in their group if they did not pay back loans; women using their incomes from one sector to engage in another SEED sector such as craft incomes used to buy goats, or in a new sector such as a microenterprise; women taking on roles as peer-to-peer trainers; and women actively

Challenges and lessons learnt

(a) *Mainstream gender from the start*

Changing norms and social values around gender is a long term process. For the SEED project it entailed changing not only beneficiaries' perceptions but the ways in which Mozambican project staff viewed gender and women's economic empowerment. From the outset of the project, integrating gender into all aspects of the projects was crucial. During the start-up phases of the project consultancies on gender for each sector determined the value chains which offered more opportunities for women to engage, which the project then targeted. A gender consultant developed a gender strategy. All staff received training on this as well on identifying their gender perceptions and biases; the challenges facing beneficiaries and discussions of solutions. Gender modules, including on women's empowerment and household decision making, were developed and regularly revised.

Within the SEED team there were gender and HIV specialists who assisted SEED extension staff with capacity building of farmers' groups using the training modules. At quarterly project planning and progress meetings, key issues around women's engagement were reviewed and joint solutions were identified, including adjusting times for group trainings; shifting to cashew processing, developing appropriate gender interventions (e.g. vaccination programs for chickens, identifying buyers for goats); and discussing alternative transport for female extension staff having difficulties in working in remote areas.

To ensure sustainability of the project in the communities, in the last three years agents of change were trained within the communities. These volunteer women had a role in increasing awareness around gender issues such as household decision making, HIV, and women's rights around property and violence. Their aim was to catalyse changes in thinking around gender issues and women's economic empowerment, as well as to assist in resolving gender-related conflicts.

(b) *Understanding the value chain and selecting value chains for women*

The strategy was to keep the interventions simple due to the complexity of the operating environment and the lack of understanding of market systems following their disintegration during the civil war. Key to the success in the women's economic empowerment was the use of pre-existing income-generating activities as women and men participated easily and saw increased income-benefits almost immediately.

A key criterion for choosing a commodity was the ability of women to engage and to earn an income. Detailed value chain analyses were then undertaken by sector specialists, sometimes by multiple specialists, to determine the product's market viability; potential limitations to the development of their quality and quantity; and constraints in the

commercialisation process. For example, in the crafts sector, design specialists were contracted to develop more suitable products and an NGO (Aid To Artisans) was contracted to identify potential markets.

These studies also identified key stakeholders who needed to be trained and integrated into the supply chain, forming a component of the project's core capacity building component. To ensure sustainability systems of generating incomes were developed such as fees for promoters and intermediaries so that they could replace equipment and cover other expenses, such as travel to markets.

There were however two major challenges, even with the careful selection of gender sensitive commodities, namely:

- i. *Engaging women in male-dominated value chains:* Barriers can prevent female entry into male value chains as they seldom own the productive assets and do not have the skills or networks to participate further in the value chain in processing to sale activities. Livestock are a key asset for poor households and important income generators, therefore, developing the value chains in this sector were identified as important for poverty reduction. However, it was challenging to engage with women as historically and culturally large livestock are owned by men. The project gained no traction until it strategically targeted veterinary and commercialisation interventions with small animals, such as chickens and goats, which are traditionally owned by women. By targeting small livestock women retained control over these two value chains and the incomes generated.
- ii. *Male intrusion in viable value chains:* Men often allow women to participate in value chains where they see limited economic value. However, it is widely documented that once women start to earn money in a value chain men will often engage and take over the key roles. The cashew sector was an example where the sale of raw cashew nut (RCN) was dominated by women, as there were low profit margins and it was easily managed as the trees were close to homes. After sales in the first year saw incomes rise from higher product quality and quantities from aggregation, men started to engage in the sale of RCN and women were sidelined. SEED looked for alternative intervention points for women which included improving processing techniques at a household level, a task traditionally undertaken by women, and creating linkages to markets.

(c) Creating linkages and diversity

Isolation of communities, poor infrastructure and a weak market system meant that producers lacked access to buyers. A key lesson was ensuring that producer groups had contact with buyers as early as possible to encourage production and for buyers to provide feedback on the production. In addition, it was important to have a diversity of buyers to ensure sustainability if a buyer stopped purchasing. Interactions between buyers and women through field visits were facilitated, some of which were paid by the project initially. Women buyers were specifically identified with the aim of encouraging women producers and to show that women could be a part of the wider value chain. This was successful in crafts and cashew processing, where buyers actually helped support training on quality improvement specific to the market needs.

(d) Overcoming financial constraints

Finance for inputs, production costs and sale costs was a key constraint for households. Due to poverty levels, participants, especially women, had limited finances to engage in or expand economic activities, or to save money that was earned. Credit options were explored but were limited due to very high interest rates (i.e. greater than 40 per cent) or high minimum loan amounts (i.e. greater than \$5000) when women required small amounts (\$50–\$100). The integration of VSLA became critical for participants in terms of having access to funds, as well as learning to manage money and to use additional incomes generated to re-invest in commodities or diversify their income sources. Five thousand and nine households participated (79 per cent women) in saving a proportion of the money generated through product sales. This component supported improving financial literacy and empowerment of beneficiaries, and it supported increasing women's decision making on how money could be spent at a household level. It also allowed women independent decision making regarding saved money, which they were unlikely to have had if the money had been loaned by a bank or micro-finance institute, where uses would have been stipulated as part of the loan.

(e) Multi-pronged capacity building approach

A multi-pronged capacity building approach focused on women underpinned the project. However, very low levels of literacy, especially amongst women (85 per cent had not completed primary school) posed a challenge to the acceptance of new and understanding some commercialisation concepts such as pricing of products (i.e. fixed weight price using scales, and payment for crafts associated with a pricing table). The project had to develop various capacity building methods including pictorial training models and hands-on training; training younger women with higher literacy levels to support other women; and experience exchanges which encouraged peer-to-peer learning with other successful or entrepreneurial women or producer groups. The frequent hands-on group training in particular was core to the project's success to ensure concepts were grasped. Experience exchanges allowed visits to provincial and national markets, including craft and cashew processors, allowing them to better understand the market and market demands for quality and quantity production, and highlighting the importance of aggregation.

Promoter training was more formal and technical and was based on the specific intervention. For example para-vets received basic veterinary training, arts and crafts promoters on design and finances, and cashew promoters on disease prevention and eradication and tree maintenance. They regularly received refresher trainings to deepen their knowledge, and to increase networking opportunities with each other. Training also had a gender component of how to work with women to ensure that women were not marginalised during promoter interactions.

A key constraint for capacity building was the severe time constraint of women due to balancing household, farming and reproductive responsibilities. Further time constraints exist during planting and harvesting of crops and for FHH. Convincing women that the benefits of engagement

would outweigh other commitments was an issue, as well. Therefore, participatory exercises such as developing annual and daily calendars were undertaken to understand these time constraints. These exercises assisted with determining the most effective times for group training sessions on production quality and quantity, and mechanisms to work with buyers, such as bringing buyers or intermediaries to the communities. Once women participated in the trainings and started to earn money from the value chains, they engaged more actively, and increased production and sales.

In retrospect there are two capacity building areas which SEED could have included to improve the intervention for women. The first could have been inclusion of a basic literacy program for women as literacy was a key impediment in the project. The second was upskilling some of the private sector partners as due to the lack of sophistication in the market, it was clear that they lacked some of the basic skills, such as profit calculation and fair negotiation, and many tended to focus on men and not the women in their interactions.

(f) *Experimentation, innovation, and adaptive learning needs a strong MEL system that supports their decision making and stakeholders who are open to change*

The project aimed of catalysing markets for the poor is complex, especially in post-conflict countries where market systems are highly dysfunctional. It can take a number of years to develop a successful market system in terms of capacity building, knowledge transfer, behavioural change, creating quality products in sufficient quantity, and creating linkages to buyers. Based on the experience of SEED, value chain development with smallholders needs to be a minimum of four years to have an impact and be sustainable.

Due to the complexity of the project design, value chain projects need to be flexible, with activities easily modified if required. Due to the open mindedness of the donors, SEED was designed with this flexibility, although in some instances it was challenging for the donors to allow the project to unfold. SEED was able to stop working in horticulture and micro-enterprise following recognition that these interventions were not scalable, or begin new interventions when it was evident that women were either unable to engage (cattle) or were being pushed out (cashew). It could also link to new buyers when required to ensure diversity, and when the international cashew price collapsed for RCN in 2008–09, the project was adaptable enough to source Mozambican buyers. When suitable credit was unavailable by the mid-term review, there was flexibility to develop an internal credit process through the VSLAs, which was likely to have had the

highest impact for women in terms of developing financial skills and creating access into the markets.

In order to support the project, SEED created an adaptive learning process. Integral to the learning process was a robust M&E system which was both quantitative and qualitative in nature, using surveys, focus groups and interviews. Information was collected across the value chain at participant, community and buyer levels on input purchases, sales, changes in behaviour towards household decision making, changes in household assets, incomes earned and expenditure. Staff met every three months to discuss progress, challenges and opportunities based on their in-field experience and the data collected, in order to refine and modify the interventions. The project also integrated other stakeholders into the learning process, such as the private sector and government. Through dialogue and reflection, they became key in catalysing some of the changes in how the value chains functioned and women's engagement. Without this learning process, it is unlikely that the project would have had the successes it had.

Conclusion

SEED had a large impact on women's empowerment through the development of three sustainable value chains in which women could engage and earn an income, as well as creating savings groups. Behavioural changes occurred at a household level around decision making for those incomes, application of new technologies and group engagement. An adaptive, flexible design and implementation approach allowed women's needs to be met and ensured they were able to engage throughout the project. The successes were made possible by having a direct and unwavering focus on women's empowerment and gender equality. Many of the lessons learnt are significant in terms of building a body of practice internationally which could support implementing principles, guidelines and potentially investment decisions for donors and other international funders in women's economic empowerment in post-conflict zones.

Notes

- ¹ In 2006, average incomes in this area were \$0.75 per capita per day (Langworthy, M 2006, 'Baseline Study for the Sustainable and Effective Economic Development (SEED) Project').
- ² The SEED baseline study was conducted in 2006 to create a base of information against which annual surveys and other quantitative data could be tracked relating to household incomes, assets, decision making, input purchases, typology (FHH and HLWHA).