

Women's empowerment and value chains: Experiences of women in Cambodia, Palestine and Uganda

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This paper presents findings of an evaluation undertaken by ActionAid Australia and local partners in Uganda, Palestine and Cambodia to understand how changes in economic participation affect women's lives, and how women value these changes. The projects were supported through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP). It is timely to revisit women's empowerment as aid agencies around the world recognise the importance of supporting women and increasingly focus on economic empowerment as a means to achieve this. The study confirmed the significance of economic empowerment for women and highlighted that economic empowerment is more than a question of money.

Study framework: Chain empowerment, women and ActionAid's human rights based approach

The evaluation was designed as a series of case studies. ActionAid defines poverty as the result of unjust power relations. In developing the framework for collecting and analysing information ActionAid sought to capture shifts in power and in line with its human rights approach, to focus on women's empowerment. Change for women occurs when women have essential resources and knowledge and can work together in collectives or groups to build capacity, confidence and vision to take action. The 'chain empowerment' matrix developed by KIT et al. provided a useful way to understand how activities and power move across value

chains and fitted well with the concepts that underlie ActionAid's approach.

Value chain analysis, upgrading and chain empowerment

A value chain is the chain of production for a commodity from its origin as raw materials to its marketing and sale as a finished product. Value Chain Analysis (VCA) is a business development tool that has been adapted for reducing poverty. It involves assessing the context and legal framework, processes, issues and actors who affect the chain, in order to identify potential for adding value to a product. Products go through stages of value-adding such as: input; farming; planting; harvesting; grading; processing; packaging; transporting; wholesaling; retailing/marketing. Costs are incurred and profits made as products exchange hands and move 'up' the chain.

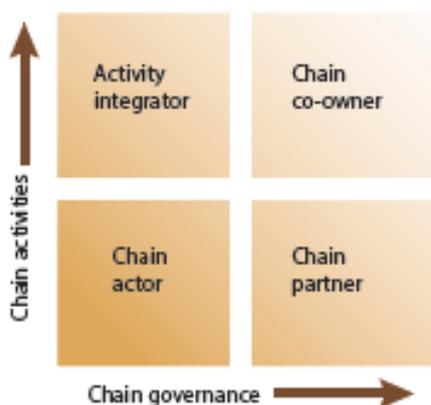
Upgrading is a key term for value chain analysis, and refers to improvements that chain actors can make to receive better financial returns from their products.

Inequality, lack of knowledge and lack of power make such change difficult for people living in poverty. Without considering issues of power, 'upgrading' potentially results in poor female farmers gaining skills and increasing production, but without control over income. Chain empowerment occurs when participants add value to their products and also increase their control over income, relationships and the processes involved in value creation.

Figure 1: Value chain processes



Figure 2: Chain empowerment matrix



Source: KIT et al. (2008)

Data collection

Data collection tools were developed drawing upon the resource book, *Challenging Chains to Change—Gender Equity in Agricultural Value Chain Development*. Information was collected through focus group discussions in Cambodia (2), Palestine (1) and Uganda (2) at project sites and by a review of project documents. While the study focused on women's experiences, ActionAid Uganda also conducted a survey assessing income to verify economic gains alongside the changes in power dynamics.

Study context: Overview of projects in Cambodia, Uganda and Palestine

Cambodia

The north-western province of Oddar Meanchey is one of Cambodia's poorest. ActionAid, with local partner,

Children's Development Association (CDA), worked with 940 women smallholder farmers across 16 villages to increase income, access to sustainable resources and engagement with decision makers. Although gender equality is enshrined in Article 45 of Cambodia's Constitution as well as in government policy documents, significant issues remain. Broadly speaking, social attitudes about women preclude them from having the same educational and employment opportunities as men.

ActionAid's livelihoods project supported women smallholder farmers involved in the production and sale of vegetables and non-timber forest products (NTFP). The vegetables included water spinach, cabbage, cucumber, eggplant, long bean, tomato and melon. NTFP refers to wild fruit, potato, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, plant fibre (for making rattan mats), honey and frogs.

Palestine

One hundred and fourteen women from the Hebron Governorate in the West Bank were engaged in savings and loans groups supported by ActionAid. The project initially provided capital to women to start small businesses or savings and loans groups. It later introduced activities to increase women's awareness of their rights and to identify opportunities for improving policies and initiatives that promote women's empowerment.

Since 1967, the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip have been occupied by Israel. The Palestinian economy is affected by factors including military occupation, trade restrictions and border control, and is highly dependent on foreign aid. It is characterised by growing rates of unemployment and decreasing access to and availability of land and water for farming. The Palestinian Authority recognised CEDAW in 2009, but obstacles to women's full enjoyment of rights include:

- patriarchal culture: both men and women believe that women are not equal to men;
- female labour force participation was only 19.4 per cent in 2014, although women make up the majority of Palestinian students;
- violence against women, including honor killings and a lack of legal protection;
- military occupation limiting women's freedom of movement and access to services leaving women at risk of arbitrary arrest, harassment and abuse at checkpoints; and
- political issues remain the priority over issues such as gender equality.

The members of the savings and loans group in A'Samu town participated in this study. The town is located along the 1949 Armistice Line (Green Line) and employment opportunities have reduced significantly since the building of the 'Segregation Wall', which is close to this line and separates Palestinian from Israeli territory.

This group started seeking income through collective processing/production and marketing of four products: maftool (Palestinian couscous), loofah (derived from the Luffa vine, dried and used to exfoliate skin), packaged vine

leaves and embroidered clothing. They later dropped maftool production as it was too labour intensive, although profitable.

Uganda

Kapchorwa and Kween Districts lie in north-east Uganda. The Women's Rights in Agriculture Project (WORIA II), through ActionAid and two local partners, supported 500 women to develop their capacity in the agriculture (vegetables) value chain on land purchased in their name through the project. Women in eight groups developed vegetable collectives which link women producers to markets and reinvest income in ways that strengthen women's capacity to generate income and realise their rights in other ways. The intermediate outcomes were improved income, food security and access to productive resources.

The Constitution of Uganda provides a legal framework for protecting women's rights and promoting gender equality, but more work is needed in its implementation. Some of the issues that affect women's ability to engage with value chains include:

- marriage and divorce laws that effectively exclude women from owning land (for example through non-recognition of traditional marriages);
- agricultural programs that provide the bulk of benefits to commercial farmers and require women to be able to read and write English to access services;
- the Public Order Management Bill which restricts the right to public assembly and thus women's ability to organise; and
- cultural factors such as bride price that block women from owning land and making decisions about income.

Women farmers participating in the project produced vegetables including tomatoes, onions, cabbage, carrots, potatoes, beans, cauliflower, lettuce and greens. Production was small scale, but increasing, and women were beginning to work collectively to farm and to add value to produce through drying and processing.

Study results: Power and value chains

Chain empowerment and 'power within'

An important dimension of chain empowerment occurs when producers gain capacities to add value to their activities and become engaged in managing or controlling the chain. This matches ActionAid's strategy to strengthen women's 'power within' as the first step in moving towards the ability to identify goals and take action for change.

Across the three projects, women reported increased knowledge and skills, confidence, assertiveness and access to information and resources. This is identified as greater 'power within'. From the perspective of chain empowerment, women reported now having the skills to take on new activities that reduce transaction costs and add value to their products. Women in Cambodia and Uganda valued the capacities they gained above other benefits. Women unanimously saw the value in taking on new tasks that reduced their reliance on middle people, and actively wanted to take on these roles.

In Uganda, training in agri-business, record keeping, and savings and credit management enabled women to move into new roles across the value chain, such as packaging and marketing. Women were conducting activities to a higher standard than before the project. Previously, women were confined to producing goods and were reliant on others (chain actors or supporters) for transportation and marketing.

Women experienced positive changes in terms of increased knowledge and skills, and access to information as the following survey results indicate. Women stated that:

- they had more access to information on vegetable growing (31 of total responses), women's rights (27 per cent) and access to credit (25 per cent);
- they had increased input into household level decisions, particularly in relation to schooling but also on household expenditures;
- domestic violence had decreased and that they now owned more small livestock; and
- they had increased their income (75 per cent) and increased food availability at household level (85 per cent).

In Cambodia, women were trained in sustainable agriculture techniques and identifying inefficiencies across their value chain, and received inputs such as seeds and tools. This enabled them to take on tasks related to transportation and marketing, including running a market stall in the district capital of Samrong. Across the project, 80 per cent of farmers reported increased income.

Women vegetable farmers stated that they were involved in all stages of the value chain—input, planting, harvesting, transporting, processing and marketing, sometimes with assistance from husbands and other family members. Among the nine women in this group, two specialised as collectors who gathered products from other women and traded with external buyers who then sold the products at markets or in shops.

Women involved in the NTFP value chain still focused their activities on production rather than seeking to increase profits or upgrade by transporting and selling at larger markets, such as the nearby Thai border. However NTFP collection was critical for women and the elderly, as there was no cost required and it occurred close to home.

In Palestine, prior to the project, women worked alone on livelihood activities such as knitting, sewing and weaving for friends and acquaintances. They stated that they had limited capacity to negotiate prices with suppliers for raw materials because of a lack of confidence and expectations about appropriate behaviour for women interacting with men outside the family. Due to isolation as a result of the political situation and traditional values, they had extremely limited access to traders or markets. In terms of value chain processes, the women operated only as processors, dependent on others for sales, with little incentive to go further.

Learning from each other and through experimentation, women gained knowledge, skills and confidence to add value to their work. They tested a number of livelihood activities and selected embroidery, vine leaf packaging and loafah production. The women reported that they joined the

project to ease the financial situation for their families and to meet other women to overcome their isolation. They also valued the opportunity to learn production and management skills. All reported an increased sense of satisfaction in being able to market their products to people and places previously inaccessible to them.

The women had not thought about their work in terms of a 'value chain' before the study introduced them to the concept. However, they reflected that they had experienced 'chain empowerment' as they had gained knowledge and power in relationships affecting their profits, which resulted in them becoming more active and earning more. Nevertheless, in the constrained financial context of the West Bank it remains difficult to develop secure value chains, particularly for women. Security concerns and traditional values, which relegate women to their home, combine to reduce women's capacity to travel to meetings with other value chain actors (distributors, traders, suppliers) or markets outside of their community.

The role of solidarity in economic empowerment: 'Power with'

Each of ActionAid's projects used groups to build women's capacities as individuals and to assist them to work better collectively to increase profits. This represents 'power with' in action. The strategy of building solidarity is integral to ActionAid's theory of change and collective action is also identified as an important element in the Agri-ProFocus chain empowerment approach.

The significance of the group was strongly evident in Palestine, where the women stated that this was the most valuable element of the project. Beyond capital for the group, solidarity was the women's only resource. Women spoke of feeling 'relieved' and 'engaged' to be working together. All the women reported that they would not have the confidence to market their products alone. They learned from each other and felt they gained power by standing together.

Movement within the occupied Palestinian territory is severely restricted by permanent and fly-in or impromptu check points, which can cause significant delays for people to reach their destination and inevitably personal safety becomes an issue. For this reason, many men are reluctant to let their women family members travel alone. Despite this, the women from the Savings and Loans Group decided to attend a regional festival held in another village. They were able to do so because they could travel together in the group. They were also able to ask their families for money for transportation because they knew they would be able to pay their families back or that their families acknowledged the financial contribution they were making.

In the case of Najah (see case study) the group was able to convince a reluctant husband to support his wife's participation which she had been unable and even unwilling to negotiate without their support.

Women in Cambodia did not report the same level of isolation and exclusion as women interviewed in Palestine and Uganda. Participation in the farmers' collective selling vegetables nevertheless enabled the women to build their control over the value chain processes of packaging, transportation and marketing.

CASE STUDY

Najah is 58, married, with 11 children. Six live at home, while five are married and live separately. Najah cares for her husband, who suffered from a stroke eight years ago, as well as two sons who have disabilities.

When Najah joined the women's savings and lending group, her husband complained. Najah quit the group. 'I was working hard outside and then coming back home tired to hear his ongoing nagging and complaints... I couldn't take it anymore', she recalls.

The other women in the group were not going to let Najah go so easily. They came to speak to her at her home. They suggested that she confront her husband and look for a compromise.

Najah agreed to try. She explained to her husband about her responsibilities in the group. She also explained how the group contributed to family income. He agreed.

Najah began waking early to undertake her household chores before meeting the group. Najah taught her husband how to take his own medication. Her daughters also helped by taking care of household chores while Najah was away. Now her daughters also assist her with leaf picking and processing of other products. Although working and caring for her family is a balancing act, Najah is willing to stay in the group because she values the friendship and company of other women as well as the income she can earn.

Najah says there has been a change in her husband's attitude. 'He values my role and knows that I work hard to secure family needs. He now prepares food for himself, does not wait for me or ask me to do it for him like before'.

Unable to own land, commonly regarded as chattels, none of the women in the Uganda group had experience of controlling their own resources before the project provided them a plot of land. During the evaluation, the women reported that it had been important to have training to develop the capacity to operate effectively in groups, to ensure that all participants have a voice, and to build relationships. Before this there had been no trust. The change is significant. Now women are working collectively to produce crops on their land, and to bulk and sell their produce, which gives them negotiating power. Women have opened a joint bank account for the proceeds from their collective vegetable sales and plan to use the funds for loans within the group to improve production.

Value chain analysis: 'power to' act

Value chain analysis requires assessment of the value chain context and the structural barriers to upgrading and value adding. Making use of this knowledge, however, requires power and capacity. This study found that women across the projects, particularly in Uganda, were beginning to take action to challenge such barriers, demonstrating their power to act and campaign.

Women participating in the projects identified numerous barriers to engage effectively with the value chain to earn and control their income. They included:

- lack of transportation to market and poor road infrastructure;
- limited access to or ability to analyse or use market information;
- limited access to government agricultural extension services (Uganda, Cambodia);
- little power to negotiate better deals on raw materials and quality inputs;
- limited financial capital to upscale or expand economic activities;
- lack of facilities to store their agricultural produce (Uganda);
- limited knowledge of factors such as control of pests and diseases that affect production and of technologies to adapt to climate change;
- lack of ownership of land and land grabbing (Uganda and Cambodia);
- illegal logging of communal forest areas including by powerful people (Cambodia);
- labour and time associated with reproductive functions and a lack of official acknowledgement of this unpaid work (all, but particularly Uganda and Palestine);
- lack of mobility, which is related to customary functions and can affect women's ability to join a group or participate in training opportunities; and
- lack of mobility, isolation and political uncertainty related to military occupation, which severely limits access to markets within and beyond the West Bank (Palestine).

The survey undertaken in Uganda revealed that women participating in the project were beginning to engage in dialogue with decision makers to address factors restricting their economic empowerment as follows:

- women were starting to use their power as a group to influence government. Some of the issues had direct relevance to their engagement in value chains such as placement of a road near their field, and others indirectly such as schooling and health services. Thirty eight per cent of women in Uganda said that they could now better influence the delivery of quality services.
- Women have added their voice to other women farmers to influence the government around extension services that they have had little access to, often due to issues such as illiteracy. The government had promised reforms and there will be other opportunities for women to engage and influence the review process.
- Women also reported an increase in their status within the community through participating in women's groups. At the beginning of the project, only a handful of women were members of women's groups because they did not see any benefit from such groups. However, during the course of the project, women were supported to form pressure groups so they could collectively advocate for their needs to government authorities. Seventy two per cent of female respondents were now involved in women's groups in Kwasir and Kapretet.

In A'Samu in Palestine, women focused on power they had gained within their households, their community and in their immediate relationships with other chain actors. More

than half the women stated that they had experienced a change within their families and felt that they were now respected and important family members. Their achievements through the savings and loan group have given them greater influence in family decision making. Their power to take action on structural or policy issues affecting their income-generating potential however remains severely restricted by the economic and security situation, which continues to compound restrictions on women in line with traditional, unequal gender relations.

Growth in women's 'power within' and the positive impacts of solidarity through participation in livelihood activities were not sufficient to act as a catalyst for the women to take action to address these underlying barriers, but established conditions where action could be possible in future. The Cambodia and Palestinian groups demonstrated positive change against empowerment indicators related to their visibility and respect within the community. For example, in Cambodia, eight out of nine women vegetable producers stated that their husbands appreciated them more than before and supported women to make their own decisions. Women NTFP collectors indicated that they felt more valued by village heads, and they expressed a sense of empowerment in having money to contribute towards community projects. These views were validated through consumer interviews carried out in the villages and in the market town of Samraong. Two male consumers explained they chose to buy NTFP from the women involved in ActionAid's livelihoods because they were 'supporting women in their community'. One consumer explained:

The project is good because it gives women jobs and it has increased their knowledge. Women have also organised groups that benefit the community and they have improved relationships in the community'.

Women were inspired by economically empowered women. In Cambodia women consumers stated that they wanted to be like women involved in the livelihood project because they were more economically active, confident and in control of their production, processing and marketing activities; and in Palestine, all women in the discussion stated that they felt their position within the household was transformed now that they were contributing financially.

Conclusion: Value chains and ActionAid's rights-based approach

The study confirmed that changes in women's empowerment were occurring through participation in income-generating activities, even on a small scale as in A'Samu, Palestine. Income was increasing and giving women power to strengthen their positions within the household. The women participating in the study also valued aspects of economic participation beyond purchasing power. They also valued knowledge, relationships and support from other women, as well as greater freedom to travel and negotiate with others. In the case of Uganda, they were confident and knowledgeable enough to demand stronger services from government.

Value chain analysis, chain empowerment and a focus on power can be mutually reinforcing. Women need to build their 'power within' in order to make changes in terms of the activities they undertake in a value chain. For women to change the level of control they have in a value chain, they need to be able to take a more dominant role in relationships with other chain actors, and gain 'power to take action'. 'Power with' has been shown to be a great enabler for the women in this study. Without changes to women's capacities and the strength gained through solidarity and collective action, women cannot begin the journey towards economic empowerment, nor will increased income automatically lead women to seek to overturn unjust policies and practices. The study highlights that chain empowerment cannot take place without the focus on power articulated in ActionAid's program approach.

It is clear that economic empowerment and social justice outcomes are highly complementary, but the link is not automatic. Economic empowerment initiatives need to be set within a broader human rights framework to build a link to social justice goals and outcomes, including women's empowerment, and transformational change that goes beyond the individual.

Reference

KIT, Faida MaLi and IIRR 2006, 'Chain Empowerment: Supporting African farmers to develop markets', Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam; Faida Market Link, Arusha and International Institute of Rural Reconstruction, Nairobi.