

# Researching women's collective action

## Findings and recommendations

February 2013

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### Welcome

The Researching Women's Collective Action (WCA) project was launched in December 2009 by Oxfam, with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The research was conducted in three phases, and gathered much-needed evidence on how collective action can improve women smallholders' incomes, strengthen their assets and increase their empowerment. The project also convened key stakeholders in dialogues to improve strategies and policies to support effective WCA in agricultural markets.

In this final briefing, we highlight key findings and recommendations from Phase III of the research, and share information on stakeholder events in the three focus countries. Quantitative and qualitative analysis was undertaken in one sub-sector per country: honey in Ethiopia, vegetables in Tanzania and shea butter in Mali. The findings provide answers to some important questions: How do women smallholders benefit from collective action? How do groups help women overcome market barriers? Which women participate in collective action and who is excluded? Which strategies are most helpful to ensure benefits to women farmers? The findings will help development practitioners to improve strategies of support to smallholder farmers and to influence others.



## Highlights of findings on women's collective action

### Economic benefits and barriers

#### **WCA members receive more income than women trading alone.**

The research found significant economic benefits for women who join collective action groups. Group members are more productive and their products are higher quality, so they receive more income from what they sell. In Tanzania, women members earn almost 70 per cent more than comparable women not in groups; in Mali and Ethiopia, group members earn 80 per cent more.

#### **Key barriers still limit WCA members' engagement in markets.**

Collective action improves women smallholders' access to credit and market information, while training and improved technology raise quality and productivity. However, time poverty, limited mobility outside their village and restrictive social norms still significantly limit women's access to agricultural markets. Groups seldom address these issues, and support women more in production and finance than market engagement.

### Empowerment

#### **WCA members have increased control over decisions in some domains.**

Across all three countries, women in groups have more decision-making power on use of credit; this impact is significant

when they are also members of informal groups. Otherwise, changes in empowerment vary considerably as gender norms differ. In Tanzania and Mali, women members benefit from increased freedom of movement; in Ethiopia, from enhanced control of household expenditure. In Mali, WCA members have gained greater autonomy over the use of agricultural incomes, and are now consulted more on community and organizational decision-making.

#### **Income gains from markets don't translate into broad-based empowerment.**

WCA members earn more than non-members. However, in only between one and three of the eight dimensions used to assess changes to control over decisions (see *Methodology* on p.2) are women members significantly more empowered than non-members.

#### **Group membership has little impact on rights over assets.**

Being a group member doesn't systematically strengthen women's decision-making power over asset ownership. However, some women gain access to individual or community assets: in Tanzania, men registered land in women's names for vegetable production and in Mali, women acquired land to plant shea trees.

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## Effective group models

### Informal and formal groups are both important.

Links between formal and informal groups play a significant role in women's engagement in WCA. Informal groups help women develop leadership skills and build savings, while formal group members have greater access to inputs and services, and engage more effectively in markets. Informal groups sometimes evolve into successful formal groups, and simultaneous membership of informal groups can enhance the benefits of formal collective action. No one group type benefits women most; women experience empowerment in different areas, from different kinds of groups, and empowerment impacts are often greater from the combined effect of membership of more than one group.

### Women-only groups enable effective participation in mixed groups.

While economic benefits are often higher in mixed groups due to greater resources, networks and access to transport, women-only groups allow women to develop skills and confidence, and participate effectively in mixed groups. Women-only or women-led groups can avoid appropriation of benefits by men (not uncommon in mixed groups where men dominate leadership roles). Transparent group governance and

gender-responsive leadership are critical for equitable distribution of the benefits of collective action in both group types.

## Group membership

### Wealthier women are more likely to join groups.

WCA members tend to be older, married, and from wealthier households, as they have fewer household responsibilities, more time, and better access to assets and resources. An exception is in Ethiopia, where unmarried women are more likely to join groups.

For more information on Phase III findings, download the Oxfam International Research Report at:

<http://womenscollectiveaction.com/Phase+III>

## Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative analysis was undertaken during Phase III of the research.

The qualitative research used a case study approach to identify 'positive exceptions', and analyzed fourteen cases of WCA in-depth across the three countries.

The quantitative analysis was based on surveys of at least 300 WCA members and 600 non-members per country comparing economic and empowerment benefits between those participating in groups and individual women trading in the same sectors. The research looked at women's control over decisions in eight dimensions.<sup>1</sup>

For more information on the research methodology for Phase III visit:

<http://womenscollectiveaction.com/Phase+III>



(Left to right): Treasurer, Secretary and Chairperson of *Matumaini A* vegetable group in Lushoto district, Tanzania. Credit: Martin Walsh

## Benefits of membership for women smallholders who join collective action groups

### Women smallholders in collective action groups *do...*

- ✓ Have higher-quality products or are more productive
- ✓ Receive more income from sales of their products
- ✓ Have more decision-making power on use of credit
- ✓ Have increased visibility as economic actors and, sometimes, increased influence in communities
- ✓ Gain increased (though still limited) access to markets



### But joining groups *doesn't* necessarily help women to...

- ✗ Experience broad-based empowerment
- ✗ Have strengthened rights over assets
- ✗ Secure higher prices for their products
- ✗ Gain significant market power (due to a focus on production)
- ✗ Reduce time poverty and mobility constraints to market engagement

<sup>1</sup> The methodology adopted was informed by the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) developed by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI). See <http://www.ophi.org.uk/policy/national-policy/the-women%E2%80%99s-empowerment-in-agriculture-index/> for further details.

## Recommendations from the research

### Recommendations for practitioners

**Focus on high-value products, and women-friendly sub-sectors and technologies.** Supporting women's engagement in high-value sub-sectors, which do not require land resources (e.g. tree products, dairy, etc.), is a promising entry point for effective collective action for women farmers. Providing access to new, women-friendly technologies, combined with relevant training, can facilitate women joining groups and add value through improved product quality. Support for improving production and value addition must be coupled with support for groups to gain access to markets for these products.

**Analyze the market, farming and household systems.** Practitioners should analyze gender roles in the marketing of specific products, market channels and functions, along with the location of existing collective action groups in the value chain. Gendered farming systems and intra-household relations also need to be analyzed, as this affects which strategies and types of group will be most appropriate. Ideally, support to WCA should be part of a wider strategy for changing gender relations in a sub-sector.

**Support women's engagement in diverse markets.** To reduce risk and allow for greater flexibility, it is important that groups have links to different markets rather than relying on a single buyer. Local markets are often as important for poor women farmers as national or international ones. Producer unions or umbrella groups play a key role in aggregating products and negotiating with buyers. Practitioners should also seek opportunities to promote an active role for women group leaders and members in developing marketing strategies and in negotiating with buyers.

**Build on existing informal collective action groups.** Traditional, as well as more recent savings and loans, groups are widespread among poor rural communities; informal labour groups are also common. Such groups can be effectively linked to existing mixed

marketing groups. Development actors can work with clusters of informal groups to develop economic activities or facilitate support for bringing products to market, such as providing transport.

**Be clear on the value-added of the WCA group or activity.** Collective action groups are effective delivery mechanisms for inputs, training and new technologies, but less tangible functions, such as pooling labour, sharing knowledge and information, reducing waste and costs, and managing risks, are also critical. When designing interventions, practitioners should establish what the specific value-added is of any new activity, what benefits this will deliver to members of the group, and how the costs in time and money weigh against these.

**Consider the gender implications of group characteristics.** In women-dominated sectors, or where women have little experience of organizations, especially mixed groups, women-only groups may be preferable. Age, marital status, existing livelihood activities, household responsibilities, and available time and mobility of participants are important factors to consider. Smaller, less dispersed groups facilitate women's effective participation. Flexible membership criteria are helpful to avoid directly or indirectly excluding women (e.g. via literacy or land requirements, or

prohibitive joining fees) or specific categories, such as those who are young or unmarried.

**Ensure buy-in from men.** Men's support to women's participation and leadership in market-oriented groups is crucial, for example by taking on household tasks or providing access to resources at household and community level. Awareness-raising with men is critical to convince them of the benefits of WCA, and to create the conditions for women's effective participation in groups.

**Support gender-equitable and accountable group leadership.** External actors should focus on developing women's leadership skills and promoting their leadership within mixed as well as women-only groups. Strong leadership should be counterbalanced with accountability mechanisms: development actors should closely monitor social dynamics in groups to minimize the risk of benefits being appropriated by men, or higher-status women.

**Ensure the sustainability of WCA.** External actors need to work with women group members to secure long-term, independent access to the natural and financial resources required to sustain their engagement in diverse markets, to ensure that gains cannot be easily reversed.



Left: Bosena Atnafu, a member of *Serto Madeg* group and *Meserethiwot* honey cooperative in Amhara region, Ethiopia. Credit: Tarekegn Garomsa. Right: Ramatou Couloubaly, Executive Secretary of *Jigisèmè* shea butter cooperative in Koutiala cercle, Mali. Credit: Edmond Dembele

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**Recommendations for policy makers**

**Improve national policies in support of WCA.** Explicit legal principles of equality of participation and benefits from cooperatives and other forms of association are needed to support effective WCA. Where these exist already, they need to be popularized nationally and locally among development actors. Where gender gaps persist in participation in formal marketing organizations, government agencies need to agree targets to redress these. Space must also be protected for informal organizations where women dominate, and mechanisms developed to strengthen informal-formal linkages. Policy makers also need to consider support to more flexible group structures, reductions to group registration costs and simplification of group procedures.

**Ensure local coordination of action and knowledge sharing.**

Sharing of information about existing organizations and the support they receive from different actors is important to create synergies and avoid duplication. District authorities, local cooperative agencies and gender equality offices can play important roles in promoting good practices for strengthening WCA.

**Review wider policies affecting women's participation in collective action and rural women's empowerment.**

Policy interventions also need to address deeply embedded attitudes and beliefs, as well as gender asset gaps, for example through strengthening women's land rights and joint/sole land registration, and reviewing family law and property rights.

**Regional and national seminars in Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania**

In September and October 2012, Oxfam and its partners convened national seminars in each of the three focus countries. Researchers presented the preliminary Phase III findings to a range of development actors, including government ministers, researchers, donors, NGO workers and Oxfam programme staff, while women smallholders were present to share their experiences of involvement in collective action groups. The project team collected feedback on the findings, as well as ideas and suggestions for further analysis, and participants discussed how the findings should influence development actor strategies and policy work going forward. Regional seminars also took place in Tanzania and Ethiopia, which shared the project's key messaging and collected feedback from important stakeholders in the areas where the research had been carried out. Over 200 participants from approximately 90 organizations took part in the seminars.

For more information on the national seminars visit:

<http://womenscollectiveaction.com/National+Seminars>



National seminar in Bamako, Mali

**Innovative strategies to maximize benefits for women farmers**

Development actors employ a number of effective strategies to engage women in collective action and increase the benefits which they can derive from WCA groups. Below, we highlight selected examples of promising interventions from Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania that led to positive outcomes for women through collective action in markets.

**Changing by-laws to increase membership**

Cooperative by-laws in some districts of Amhara region in Ethiopia now allow dual membership of husbands and wives rather than one member per household. This change, combined with other interventions, has dramatically increased women's membership of formal groups and shifted attitudes towards women's role in the honey sector.

**Securing community assets**

Through influencing local community leaders, women's groups marketing shea

butter in Mali have been able to secure access to key assets and resources to sustain their engagement in the sub-sector. Women have been allocated two to three hectare plots of land by community leaders for shea plantations and men are also planting trees in their fields.

**Linking to high-value domestic markets**

Affiliation to the umbrella Usambara Lishe Trust in Tanzania has enabled WCA groups to access more distant, higher-value markets through growing a different mix of vegetables, responding to changing demand. Securing contracts with urban supermarkets, and ensuring women members receive payments directly and are trained in marketing, have all been positive factors contributing.

More details on these and other strategies can be found in the country case studies, available to download at:

<http://womenscollectiveaction.com/Case+Studies>

**For more information about the project visit: [www.womenscollectiveaction.com](http://www.womenscollectiveaction.com)**

Downloadable resources include: the Oxfam International Research Report on findings and recommendations; country case studies; a presentation on key messages from the research; webinar recordings; project updates from Phases I and II.

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