Overview

- In Limu, Ethiopia, Oxfam worked with partners and local government to develop a Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) programme for smallholders to enhance women’s economic leadership, increase production and improve the quality of organic coffee.

- The programme combined literacy classes with training on agricultural and financial capacity-building. This approach increased attendance and improved smallholders’ skills across several areas.

- To increase attendance among women smallholders, women-only groups were established and class content was adapted to cover their specific needs and areas of interest and influence.

- Providing local-government development officers with the required training skills enhanced the sustainability and cost-effectiveness of the programme.

Oxfam’s approach

One of the strategies used to increase capacity was the Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) programme. Oxfam worked on this programme together with its partner, the Adult and Non-Formal Education Association in Ethiopia (ANFEA-E), which developed learning materials and trained local-government development officers to run the programme to ensure long-term sustainability. Unlike the government adult-literacy programme, FAL relates teaching on reading and writing skills to agricultural and economic issues which farmers commonly face. It also integrates learning on how these skills can be applied to improve and increase coffee production.
In Limu, ANFEA-E worked with institutes of higher learning, international experts and a local extension-officer agronomist in order to aggregate knowledge around high-quality coffee production for the FAL training guide. The guide combined pictures and writing to convey information on simple techniques for improved coffee production. With the assistance of the local-government office, local-government development officers were selected to be trained in delivering FAL and were supplied with the required materials.

Adapting FAL for women smallholders

In general, the groups were highly successful in training men farmers in new production and processing techniques. The content and structure of the training encouraged beneficiaries to attend, reduced dropout rates, and increased capacity on a range of skills in a time-effective way. However, a mid-term evaluation showed that women’s group attendance was minimal, and even decreasing. The evaluation discovered two reasons for this: firstly, although women were extensively involved in coffee production and processing, they had limited decision-making power in the sector, and were therefore less interested in the content of the coffee lessons. Secondly, some women were not comfortable sharing classes with men as they lacked confidence to discuss the topic and share their opinions.

In order to resolve the issue, the programme began women-only classes. These included teaching around coffee production, but also covered topics which addressed women’s specific needs and areas of interest or influence, such as honey production, saving and lending, and family health and hygiene. The development of these women’s groups significantly increased female participation in the project. In addition, some beneficiaries and class facilitators found that women’s involvement in the programme has increased their social status and visibility. FAL has further focused on women’s empowerment by serving as a forum to discuss gender relations, household dynamics, and decision-making between men and women.

Conclusion

In a country such as Ethiopia where the adult-literacy rate is low and progressing at a slow pace, the introduction of FAL can be a highly effective tool to improve capacity-building. The project in Limu shows that it is particularly important to adapt FAL learning techniques and processes for women, who have long been marginalised from the benefits of education.

As a result of Oxfam’s project, coffee quality has dramatically increased, and farmers are reporting increased yields due to the application of simple coffee production techniques such as pruning, fertilisation and crop protection. Coffee farmers have learned to read and write while increasing their knowledge on how to improve coffee production, processing, and storage practices.

In addition to increasing knowledge and capacity among farmers, important lessons can be learned from ANFEA-E’s approach to organising training. The association has improved the cost-effectiveness of the programme by training local-government development officers to deliver classes to smallholders. This method has also increased long-term sustainability, as these agents will continue to provide classes to the farmers beyond completion of the project. Furthermore, Oxfam and ANFEA-E have improved the local government’s approach to providing adult literacy training in the district, as the Oxfam model has been adapted for introduction in other areas of the district.