

WOMEN HONEY PRODUCERS IN ETHIOPIA

Non-market interventions and market opportunities

There's a new local saying in Amhara, Ethiopia: 'Without a woman's hand in it, success in beekeeping is like a dream of a milking cow in the sky.'

Until recently, beekeeping and honey production in Amhara region of Ethiopia were largely male occupations, partly because harvesting honey from traditional hives requires climbing trees, which is not socially acceptable for women. However, availability of a standard modern hive has helped to overcome this social barrier. Moreover, many women were illiterate, they comprised less than 10 per cent of the membership of cooperatives and often lacked finance, assets and technical training.

The initiative for women's economic empowerment through beekeeping and honey production, with support from Oxfam, SOS Sahel, the Ethiopian government's district and zonal government agencies and local and international food and drinks companies, has built on existing, favourable government policies, employed innovative non-market interventions and taken advantage of growing commercial opportunities. The primary market is local honey-beer breweries, but globally demand is increasing for honey and other bee products. Ethiopia is the largest producer of honey in Africa, yet the quality and yield of honey from traditional hives are low. The economic potential of the honey sector has facilitated investment, and this has been used to open dialogue and leverage change in women's roles in markets.

Existing Ethiopian government policies have played a vital role. National asset transfer (social protection) programmes have included giving modern beehives to marginalized families to improve food security. Modern hives are kept at ground level and close to houses, and market demand is such that low-income, land-poor and time-poor rural families can invest in honey production. For women it is important to have a non-perishable, high-value product, moving beyond 'female crops' that often have low margins and face saturated markets.

A key barrier identified for both men and women was literacy, and this was addressed by adapting the government's Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) programme and integrating this into agricultural extension training initially in the coffee, and then honey sector. After initial high levels of interest but consequent low female participation, women-only training spaces were offered. Around 86 per cent of participants gained functional literacy and numeracy, and the initial pilot in three districts, delivered through almost 100 government extension

officers, is being extended. Recently, the regional government has also contributed to the honey project with an environmental programme aimed at rejuvenating flowering plants to encourage bees to forage.

Women producers derive significant benefits from being members of an agricultural cooperative. For example, women members surveyed in Dangila and Mecha *woredas* (districts) earned 81 per cent more for their produce, compared with women honey producers outside cooperative groups, who received 20 per cent higher prices. Cooperative members also increased the quantity of honey they produced and enjoyed increased control over credit and income.¹

The initiative needed to overcome structural barriers to women's participation in producer cooperatives. Previously, only one family member per household was allowed to join a cooperative. However, with the support of Oxfam, the honey groups successfully lobbied district offices of the Cooperative Promotion Agency to allow dual membership of husbands and wives in groups, and married women became members in their own right. After this change in legislation, the number of women members in the Agunta cooperative grew from just one in 2006 to 197 in 2007, and thousands more women have joined groups in the region, comprising up to 49 per cent of the membership in some cooperatives.

SOS Sahel involved men at the start of the honey project, consulting with the husbands of the women selected – which was a critical factor in sustaining women's leadership over time. Training and the formation of informal women's self-help groups, which have often become formal savings groups, have helped to build women's skills and confidence. One purchasing company was also persuaded to provide women with equipment and training. A policy of rotational leadership in groups has allowed more women to exercise their leadership skills, rather than creating a few exceptional women leaders.

Leveraging the market opportunity in a growing sector, utilizing new technology and influencing and collaborating with buyers and regional and national policy-makers, the 42 honey cooperatives in Amhara have been able to drive positive change in the economic position of women farmers.

¹ Oxfam Involved marginalized women in collective action in February 2013: <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/womens-collective-action-in-the-honey-sector-in-ethiopia-275773>

© Oxfam International October 2014

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail Thomas Tichar, ttichar@oxfam.org.uk.

This publication is copyright but the text may be used free of charge for the purposes of advocacy, campaigning, education, and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full. The copyright holder requests that all such use be registered with them for impact assessment purposes. For copying in any other circumstances, or for re-use in other publications, or for translation or adaptation, permission must be secured and a fee may be charged. E-mail policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk.

The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-1-78077-743-6 in October 2014.

Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.