



Women from the Gulobod women's producer group receive expert agronomist support at Oxfam's village-based demonstration plot , 2014.
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SUPPORTING SMALLHOLDER LIVELIHOODS IN TAJIKISTAN

Working with women farmers to build new forms of collective action

Oxfam and its partners are working to support economic justice and livelihoods improvements for disadvantaged women smallholders in Tajikistan. The programme promotes the development of producer groups and other forms of organization among women farmers to enable them to lobby collectively for access to land, means of production and markets. The programme is designed to support increased efficiency and productivity at the farm level. This case study explores what Oxfam has learned through the implementation of the programme to date.

INTRODUCTION

In rural Tajikistan, men traditionally migrate to Russia for work during the agricultural planting, growing and harvesting season. As a result, women are both the primary caregivers and income earners for many households during much of the year. Based on Oxfam's experience, working with women in these areas to support improvements in their livelihoods can also support household resilience against loss of income and resulting poverty.

The road to and from collective action is unique in the Tajikistan context. During Soviet times, the country was part of a wider regional planned economy. Agriculture was promoted through collective farming, which was managed by a central government body. During this period, agriculture in Tajikistan was focused on large-scale cotton cultivation in 126 large collective farms. Farm management, irrigation structures, input supply and marketing were all developed to support cotton production.

When Tajikistan shifted to a market-led economy in the early 1990s, central agricultural planning ended and the collective farms were dismantled. The traditional planned outlets for production ceased to exist, and the cotton industry was unable to compete internationally due to high labour costs and low productivity. As a result, the large collective farms were divided into 150,000 small farm plots for private cultivation, but without the agricultural extension required to support the new farmers.

Many smallholders had previously only worked on large farms or in factories. They did not have the right experience, knowledge or support structures to enable efficient management of their own farms. In response to this, Oxfam has developed a programme to work with vulnerable smallholders – in particular women – to teach them farming skills; to support the aggregation of production; and to support smallholder market access.

This project is building on the learning of a previous project that Oxfam implemented in 2012, and is now one of three working with different partners on how to implement sustainable changes in the value chain in Tajikistan. The theory of change behind the project looked at in this case study is that supporting the collective action of women farmers will enable them to develop economies of scale, and will support their access to the training and inputs they need to develop as businesses and leaders. This in turn will result in livelihoods improvements for the women, their households and their communities.

ABOUT OXFAM'S PROGRAMME

As part of its livelihoods and economic justice programme, Oxfam and its partner organizations are working with women smallholders farming plots of less than 0.5 hectares in Khatlon Province, Tajikistan. The programme promotes the development of producer groups and other forms of organization among women farmers, to enable them to lobby collectively for access to land, means of production and markets. The programme also supports increased efficiency and productivity at the farm level. Oxfam has worked with women's groups in 78 villages. This includes support for both formal producer groups and less formal community-based organizations (CBOs). 24 formal producer groups have been established.

The programme also works to influence national and local policy and legislation, in order to create a more enabling environment for the development of producer organizations, and the development of more gender-sensitive agricultural policy in Tajikistan. The Tajikistan government is represented or involved at many levels in the programme interventions, and influencing government and other actors has been an important focus for Oxfam's work. At the national level, Oxfam has worked closely with the Committee of Women and Family Affairs through roundtables and other events, which is a Presidential-level advisory committee. To date Oxfam has had success enlarging the dialogue as it relates to Community-based Organisations (CBO) development. CBOs are unpaid actors within the community, and their connection with municipal level government can be unclear. Through this dialogue, Oxfam is aiming to help the Government of Tajikistan recognize the value of CBOs, as Oxfam has good evidence of their value at the community level. Regionally, Oxfam is active in roundtables covering a wide range of topics including barriers to the economic activity of women's producer groups, and CBO taxation law.

The women's producer groups were provided with support to develop their organizations and take advantage of market opportunities. They lacked sufficient land, capital, production knowledge or skills to manage their activities. They also lacked effective ways of working together. This limited their ability to become effective market actors. Oxfam's initial interventions supplied the women producer groups with basic inputs, such as seeds and greenhouses, combined with training focusing on agricultural techniques (using a demonstration plot) and value chain negotiations. Responding to a lack of extension support for farmers in many of the target villages, Oxfam put in place a village advisory model (VAM) where the women's groups and others could benefit from dedicated one-on-one support from an experienced agronomist.

Giving basic inputs, such as seeds, free of charge to the groups created an opportunity for them to capitalise their operations. Oxfam worked with the groups to agree on a good process to capitalise their operations that would work for them, and so it was agreed so some of the profits from the harvest would be used to establish savings funds to provide capital for their future operations.

The most successful producer group was located in the village of Gulobod. Following Oxfam's support, the women's group in Gulobod sold significant quantities of potatoes, cucumbers and tomatoes locally. Some of the profits went also into fed their savings fund, allowing them to purchase mechanized services to till their land and prepare it for winter. It will also provide them with the means to buy seeds in the next growing season. Based on this progress, Oxfam's programme is able to move from input support to more market-oriented development activities, which will support greater improvements in livelihoods and sustainability, as well as more systematic change.

WHAT DID OXFAM LEARN?

Creating an enabling environment for project success – organizing for local representation

The Gulobod village women's producer group started without access to any land or irrigation. It was evident that an informal group of under-resourced women stood little chance of approaching regional authorities for access to public lands. They did not even have a tax status as an organization, or understand which agency to approach.

At the same time as the formation of the women's producer groups was underway, Oxfam organized CBOs in 35 different villages, including one in Gulobod village.. The CBOs were designed to provide non-government representation for the local population by creating an enabling environment for the development of other community organizations, such as the women's producer groups, as well as supporting other local development activities. The CBO membership is made up of men and women from the same village, and a volunteer council elected by the community. A CBO council consists of a leader, a deputy and an accountant. The CBOs are able to gain access to land, represent sub-groups and seek development funding for the community. They also have a voice in the municipal (Jamoat) and regional (Hukomat) government bodies. The Gulobod CBO has been very effective as a support mechanism for the community. Oxfam, together with the CBO and other partners, was successful in negotiating access to land for the women's producer group.

Learning about collective action and producer organization formation

The Gulobod women were successful in growing and selling their crops; however, when the time came to use some of the profits to feed into their saving funds, the local CBO, which had supported the women's group, demanded a significant portion of their proceeds. This was unforeseen by the programme staff, the partners or the women themselves, and almost resulted in conflict. Oxfam GB stepped in to provide mediation, but it was clear that a more formal agreement between the women's producer group and the CBO was needed. The women needed a more formal legal status as well as the skills and confidence to be able to negotiate more formally with partners.

Oxfam and its local partner developed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) training module. This was designed to build the capacity of the women's groups to negotiate with others, and to instil in them the importance of keeping a written record of their agreements. Oxfam and its partners delivered this training to all the women's producer groups and CBOs, in order to provide them with these key skills. As a result, the women's producer groups are now more aware of their rights as entities,

and understand the importance and power of written agreements. These are essential skills for building a strong business.

Oxfam found that their programming experience supported the assumption that collective action was important for both the project and the communities we work with. Beyond this, Oxfam's experience also suggested that informal groups should try to become legal entities over time. Tajikistan law allows the formation of producer groups, associations and unions. While Oxfam does not 'force' producer groups to formalize, the programme staff found that informal groups tended to arrive at this conclusion the more they worked together because they could see the benefits that would result from legalization. The initial informal activities are important for forming the social trust that is needed to pursue more formal organizational structures. An initial interest in working together builds trust, and trust becomes the foundation for collective action.

The village advisory model

Larger farms and cooperatives with larger plots of land and comparatively high revenues are in better shape to engage with a wide range of service providers within and beyond their operating locations. In this project Oxfam implemented a new model called Village Advisory Model (VAM,). The VAM was implemented in recognition of the gap in extension services being provided at village level and to smallholder women farmers in particular. A VAM enables smallholder farmers to access extension service providers and input suppliers. This unique model considers the particular needs of smallholder and women farmers in terms of their land availability, lower revenue during harvesting, and the additional guidance needed on crop planning and marketing. As of now, the VAM service package includes agricultural advice, input supply (high quality seeds and fertilizers) and rental services for small machinery and equipment. Oxfam's initial experiences of using VAM have been very positive. VAM services will be improved and adjusted based on demand and feedback from the farmers.

The role of influencing and advocacy

Influencing government and other actors has been an important focus of Oxfam's work. At the national level, Oxfam has worked closely with the Committee of Women and Family Affairs, a Presidential-level advisory committee, to try to develop more recognition at government level of the role and value of CBOs. At the regional level, Oxfam works with the Committee of Women and Family affairs, the Presidential office, as well as various national and local authorities across Tajikistan on issues such as barriers to economic activity for women's producer groups and CBO taxation law. At the local level, Oxfam works closely with CBOs and Jamoats to highlight women's empowerment challenges. Oxfam provides proposal and project development training so that CBOs can take a greater role in their community's development. Lastly, Oxfam attends Donor Coordination Council meetings in order to advocate for women's producer groups and smallholders as a focus for other donors.

Learning through failure

Following a single season of Oxfam's support the women's producer group in Gulobod appeared to be at the point of producing enough surplus to be able to start marketing their produce to a high-value market. Oxfam attempted to link the Gulobod producer group with a high-end hotel to which they hoped to sell tomatoes. Oxfam negotiated the deal, supported the transport of the tomatoes and played a key brokering role between the producer group and the hotel. However, the negotiation failed when the producer group instead decided to sell the produce to the local market. The women didn't value the potential new market opportunity. As Oxfam had led the development of the deal, with limited direct participation from the women themselves, they had not become sufficiently involved in the negotiation process and the relationship with the hotel. They did not fully understand the value of the client relationship. Additionally, Oxfam met significant unforeseen hurdles in developing a market relationship with a high-end buyer, including requirements relating to certification for quality and food safety, the tax status of the women's group, unclear buyer requirements and unclear profitability. Oxfam had failed to fully understand the capacity of the women's producer groups, and did not have enough knowledge about the market that was being targeted. Oxfam concluded that the women's producer groups that were selected were too 'young' in their development and capacity to be able to organize the entire value chain.

Trying again – supporting women's producer groups to take the lead

Oxfam's second attempt to build high-value market access for the women's producer groups began in the second year of the programme. This time, Oxfam worked with an empowered group of women leaders from several different women's producer groups. Working with several groups increased the potential stock of produce that the women could supply. The women selected a leader who was keen to organize and undertake several essential activities, including aggregation (the joint collection, selling, transportation and storage of the crops), finance, logistics, customer care and quality. Instead of taking the lead in negotiations, this time Oxfam supported the women by linking them to market actors and providing capacity building. The women made a very successful initial test of their model by delivering high-quality vegetables directly to Oxfam's offices in Dushanbe. The test used similar pricing to a nearby high-end hotel and the profitability of the deal was around 12 percent higher than the equivalent sale in the women producers' local market would have been. The quality of the produce was also higher than that of the other suppliers that supply the target hotel. The test showed that the initial marketing concept could work. The next step will be for Oxfam to facilitate the process of negotiation with the hotel, to work on capacity building with the women's producer groups, and to support them with small-scale equipment.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Going forward, a priority for the programme is to support the women's producer groups to move to a different model of production, based on crop rotation. Sequentially planting beans, peppers and greens, in addition to tomatoes, will allow the farmers to harvest crops two or three times per year, instead of just once. Oxfam is developing these new production models with the producer groups, and will support this using targeted training, demonstration and extension services.

However, for the women's producer groups to become more sustainable over the longer term, it is necessary to build higher levels of cooperation between the groups. Creating a union, association or another means of organizing beyond village-level producer groups could create a range of benefits for the women's groups. It would allow them to benefit from larger economies of scale in terms of group discounts for inputs, cost savings for aggregation operations and guaranteeing sufficient volumes for buyers.

However, the women in the producer groups do not currently see the advantage of creating an umbrella organization to link their individual village groups. Oxfam's experience in the programme to date shows that the added value this would bring must be realized by the groups themselves before they will commit to a larger association. Moreover, trust needs to be established between the producer groups – based on capability and results – in order for this to occur. Farmers have been working alone for 20 years since the collapse of the Soviet system; it will take time and experience to build the trust and knowledge that are needed to support the development of larger-scale producer groups in Tajikistan.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail programme learning team at programmelearning@oxfam.org.uk

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