

Session Two Learner Worksheet 2A

What is WCA?

Women's Collective Action (WCA) is a term used to describe voluntary, ongoing action by a group to achieve common interests. For example, farmer unions and co-operatives (where farmers pool their resources in certain activities such as sharing machinery and tools or marketing their produce); savings and credit associations (these tend to be a group of people who save and borrow together, a form of peer-to-peer banking and lending); farmer extension groups (where farmers learn from a more experienced farmer or those who have expertise in particular areas).

The groups studied were both formal and informal, single-sex and mixed. Formal groups are legally registered and usually have written bye-laws. Informal groups by definition are not legally registered. Groups selling into specific markets are often formal because of the need to engage in contracts and financial liabilities.

The Impact of WCA Groups

There were important positive effects for women who were part of WCA (Women's Collective Action) groups. Women in WCA groups earned more than those not in groups because they produced more and better quality products, and were able to receive more income from the products they sold. Women in WCA groups were taking more decisions in their households and had more influence in their communities – these were the main, statistically significant conclusions of the study.

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.

Links between formal and informal groups play a significant role in women's engagement in WCA groups. Informal groups often help women develop leadership skills and build savings, while formal group members often have greater access to inputs (such as finances or equipment) and services, and engage more effectively in markets.

While economic benefits are often higher in mixed groups due to greater resources, networks and access to transport (it is usually men who have vehicles), women-only groups allow women to develop skills and confidence, and participate effectively in mixed groups. Women-only or women-led groups can avoid an issue which sometimes occurs in mixed groups where men tend to dominate leadership roles and use the accompanying power to benefit from new sales opportunities, better prices, new technology or more training opportunities



Shea production in Mali – an example of Women’s Collective Action.



Women from a village where one of the shea butter cooperatives operates. Credit: Edmond Dembele/Oxfam

As shea production, processing and marketing are almost entirely female-dominated activities in Mali, there are good opportunities for Women’s Collective Action (WCA). Indeed, in the four villages studied for the WCA research, the shea sector has always been exclusively female. Furthermore, it is an age-old tradition for women to work together to undertake a host of group activities in Mali, and more recently they have been helped by government policies that support women’s engagement in WCA groups.



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Background

Mali has one of the largest areas of shea trees in the 'shea belt' of western and central Africa. There may be as many as 408.6 million shea trees, and in 2012 national production of shea resources was approximately 80,000 tonnes per year, compared to an estimated annual global production of between 610,000 and 650,000 tonnes.ⁱ

Shea producers in Mali have tended to sell shea nuts either raw or processed as butter. Over the last 20 years, opportunities to sell to overseas markets and to create added-value have led to the production of improved butter, which sells for a higher price than the traditional product. Traditionally, WCA groups were only involved in the process of extracting the butter, but, as part of these innovations in the production and marketing of shea, groups are now involved in the purchase of the kernels, the extraction and preservation of the butter, and the handling and sale of the final product.

The WCA research was carried out in Koutiala district in Sikasso, a region in the south-east of the country near the border with Burkina Faso. Environmental conditions in this area are highly favourable for the growth of shea trees, and shea butter production is a well-established activity.



Members of a Malian shea butter cooperative show the group's containers of shea butter, which are waiting to be sold. Credit: Edmond Dembele/Oxfam



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Benefits of being in a WCA:

Women in the WCA groups surveyed earn approximately \$12 per year more from traditional butter sales than corresponding producers who are not members. Along with the sales of improved shea butter, this means earnings from shea products of 81 per cent more than women not in groups, translating to an increase in profit of \$20 per year. Furthermore, WCA members may also be able to transfer the techniques and skills they learn from improved shea butter production, processing and marketing to other income-generating activities such as in selling other agricultural products. This can mean WCA members can raise even more money.

The findings from Mali show that in the right conditions, individual members of WCA groups can increase their influence within both the household and the community, contributing to lasting changes in making life fairer for women.

(Extracts taken from: Women's Collective Action in the Shea Sector in Mali <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/womens-collective-action-in-the-shea-sector-in-mali-275772>)

ⁱ Ministry for the promotion of Women, Children and the Family (MPFEF) (2003) 'Stratégie de renforcement des capacités des femmes dans la filière de karité au Mali'.