SYNTHESIS REPORT FOR FEMALE FOOD HEROES (FFH) ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY IN NIGERIA & ETHIOPIA

Image credit: Mark Kinuthia

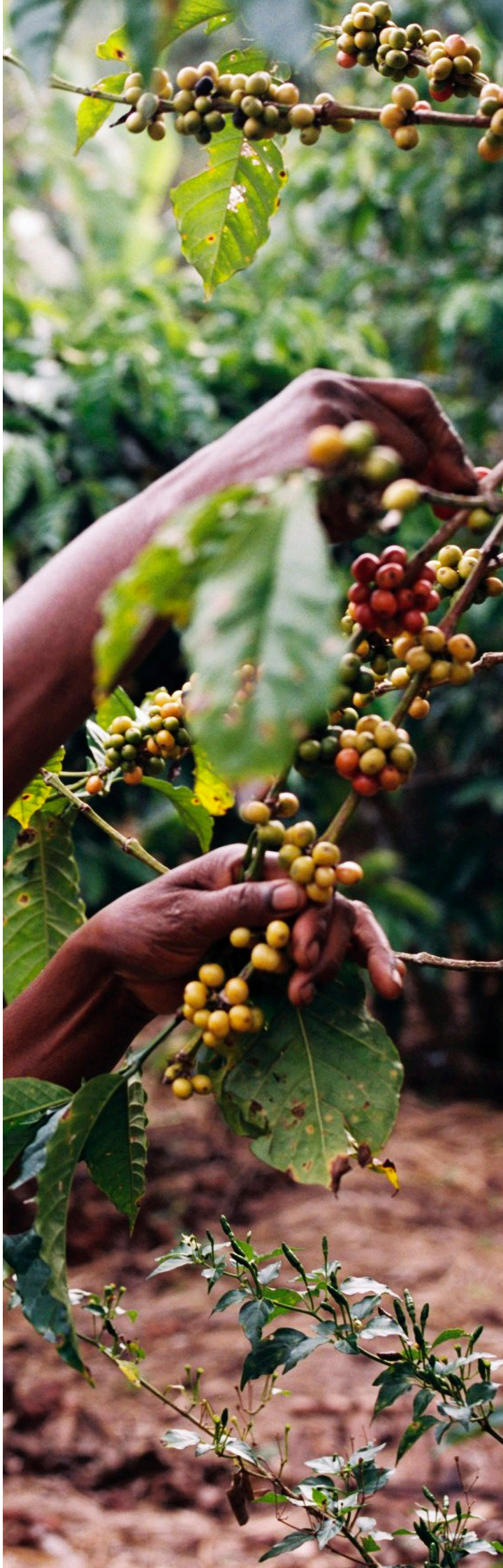
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This synthesis report presents key findings, lessons learned, and strategic recommendations from evaluative studies conducted in 2024–2025 on Oxfam's Female Food Heros (FFH) initiative in Nigeria and Ethiopia. Launched in 2012, the FFH program recognizes and empowers women smallholder farmers as champions of food security, gender justice, and community leadership. Over the years, FFH has enhanced women's confidence, skills, and visibility, but persistent challenges limit its long-term impact.

Key challenges include:

- Alumni Engagement Gaps: Weak post-award engagement structures hinder mentorship, peer learning, and collective advocacy.
- Staffing and Resource Constraints: Limited staff, over-reliance on volunteers, and inconsistent funding restrict program scale and continuity.
- Weak MEL Systems: The absence of a robust monitoring and learning framework undermines the ability to track progress, showcase outcomes, and inform adaptive management.
- Structural Barriers: Deeply entrenched gender norms and systemic inequalities continue to limit women's leadership in agriculture.
- The report recommends a revitalized FFH model that includes:
- Establishing formal regional and national levels alumni networks/platforms for sustained engagement.
- Embedding gender-transformative strategies across all program levels.
- Scaling up media engagement to amplify women's voices and policy influence.
- Developing a comprehensive MEL framework to capture outcomes and drive learning.

This approach is essential to foster collective action, policy advocacy, and lasting change for women farmers across Africa.



Introduction and Purpose

As part of the Together Against Poverty Phase II (TAP2) project, Oxfam has implemented the Female Food Heros (FFH) initiative in Nigeria and Ethiopia. The FFH program is an annual award scheme designed to celebrate and empower female smallholder farmers, recognizing their critical contributions to food security and rural economies while supporting their leadership in community and policy spaces.
Since its inception in 2012, the FFH initiative has positively impacted awardees by enhancing their livelihoods, building leadership capacity, and inspiring collective action for gender justice. However, in recent years, Oxfam's sustained engagement with FFH alumni has declined, raising questions about the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of the initiative.
In response, Oxfam commissioned two external evaluative studies in 2024–2025 (Nigeria and Ethiopia) to:

- Assess the status of the FFH program.
- Examine the outcomes and limitations of past strategies.
- Explore opportunities for revitalizing the FFH model in alignment with Oxfam's broader goals of gender justice, accountability, and participatory governance.

This report synthesizes the findings from both studies, based on qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, document reviews, and consultations with key stakeholders, including FFH alumni, Oxfam staff, and partners. By comparing insights across the two countries, the report identifies shared challenges, lessons learned, and actionable recommendations for strengthening gender-transformative programming under TAP2 and beyond.

COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

Nigeria: The Ogbonge Women Program

Launched in 2012, the ***FFH Nigeria initiative***, locally known as the Ogbonge Women program, aimed to recognize and empower small-scale women farmers through a structured process of nominations, capacity-building training, award ceremonies, and post-award support. The program also leveraged extensive media engagement and public events to challenge stereotypes about women in agriculture and advocate for gender-equitable agricultural policies through direct dialogue with government.
The Nigeria case study highlights the initiative's notable contributions:

- ***Enhanced leadership and economic empowerment:*** Through Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) training, many women gained entrepreneurial skills, started small businesses, and became trainers for other farmers.
- ***Increased visibility:*** Alumni reported greater confidence, stronger networks, and recognition in local and national forums.

However, challenges persist:

- ***Limited staffing and inconsistent funding*** constrained program delivery.
- ***Weak MEL systems*** hindered the ability to track progress and demonstrate impact.
- ***Declining alumni engagement*** points to a need for formalized networks and post-award support structures.

The Nigeria study recommends revitalizing program coordination, improving communication with

Ethiopia: From Awards to Advocacy

The FFH Ethiopia initiative, launched in 2012 under Oxfam's broader GROW Campaign program, was implemented in partnership with Sustainable Environment and Development Action (SEDA) and the Ministry of Agriculture in collaboration with national media and other local Civil Society Organizations.
The program combined an annual recognition and award with leadership development, capacity building, and evidence-based advocacy to address structural barriers limiting women's participation in agriculture.

Findings from the Ethiopia case study include:
- ***Empowerment outcomes:*** Alumni reported increased self-confidence, higher incomes, and greater leadership roles.
- ***Policy engagement:*** The program contributed to the creation of regional and national alumni platforms for advocacy and generated research that influenced agricultural policy.

Despite these gains, challenges mirror those in Nigeria:
- Alumni platforms remain ***underdeveloped*** and lack dedicated facilitation.
- Engagement has declined due to limited staffing, resource constraints, and cultural barriers.

Both case studies underscore the need for systematic alumni engagement, gender-transformative strategies, and a robust monitoring and learning system to sustain and amplify the FFH initiative's impact.

FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The evaluative studies in Nigeria and Ethiopia engaged over 50 stakeholders, including FFH alumni, Oxfam staff, and partners. While tracking of alumni outcomes has been limited, qualitative feedback suggests that over 70% of respondents continue to demonstrate leadership within their communities, training other farmers, advocating at local forums, or participating in cooperatives. However, less than 30% maintain sustained engagement with Oxfam beyond their award year, exposing critical gaps in long-term support and network building.

This section outlines the key findings, grouped into thematic areas.

1. Regional and National Alumni Platforms: Underdeveloped and Fragmented.

The studies found that the regional and national alumni platforms, originally envisioned as spaces for collective action, peer learning, and advocacy, remain largely inactive and fragmented. These platforms were intended to sustain engagement beyond individual award cycles, serving as networks for leadership development, market access, and policy influence. However, several factors contributed to their underdevelopment:

- Insufficient resourcing: There were no dedicated staff or budget lines for managing and facilitating alumni networks.
- Over-reliance on government structures: Focal points with competing priorities were tasked with alumni engagement, limiting consistent follow-up.
- Lack of facilitation: Without convenors or dedicated facilitators, the platforms struggled to organize meaningful activities, maintain momentum, or support alumni.

2. Program Design and Alumni Engagement: Gaps in Post-Award Support

The FFH engagement model lacked a consistent strategy to maintain alumni participation beyond the award year. In Nigeria, gaps were observed in post-award activities such as refresher trainings, mentorship opportunities, and inclusion in subsequent program cycles. Communication between Oxfam and alumni often dwindled after the award ceremony, leaving many women without ongoing support or connection to the program. Ethiopia mirrored these challenges, with alumni platforms envisioned in the design but never fully operationalized or resourced.
The absence of a clear, systematic alumni engagement strategy weakened the program's ability to foster long-term empowerment, collective learning, and sustained advocacy.

3. Staffing Models and Implementation Approaches: Limited Capacity and Trade-offs

Staffing limitations consistently undermined program delivery in both countries:
In Nigeria, the program relied on a single program manager, supported by non-specialist volunteers. This constrained the capacity to scale activities and sustain alumni engagement.
In Ethiopia, Oxfam also had only one staff member dedicated to the program. The local CSO partner, SEDA, operated with limited staffing, relying on the local government employees as focal points.

While Ethiopia's partnership model enhanced community access, it diluted ownership and reduced direct oversight. Conversely, Nigeria's direct implementation model provided greater control but lacked grassroots reach and long-term sustainability. Neither model, in its current form, fully supports effective and sustained alumni engagement.

4. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL): Weak Systems Limit Impact

A major limitation in both programs was the lack of systematic monitoring and reporting mechanisms. While donor reports were produced, these were often focused on compliance rather than comprehensive program learning or impact storytelling. In Nigeria, for instance, only two annual reports (2014 and 2022) were available for review, and in both countries, there was no centralized system for tracking alumni engagement or measuring long-term impact.
This lack of robust monitoring and evaluation (MEL) systems resulted in an over-reliance on staff members' institutional memory, with key insights and outcomes held informally rather than captured systematically. It also meant that the programs missed opportunities to communicate a cohesive, evolving narrative of change to stakeholders.
Put simply: while donor reports fulfilled contractual requirements, they did not consistently tell an annual story—one that tracked progress from the beginning of each program cycle through to

5. Financial and Operational Resourcing: Constrained and Inflexible

Funding constrains significantly shaped program delivery. In Nigeria, limited and irregular funding hindered the ability to hire specialized staff, scale training modules, and maintain ongoing alumni engagement.

Ethiopia faced more acute constraints, especially the local CSO partner (SEDA) citing stringent budget lines that limited flexibility, and lack of funding to support staff time. Practical challenges of maintaining engagement with the FFH across geographically dispersed regions was also mentioned in both Nigeria and Ethiopia. Both studies underscore the need for consistent, flexible funding streams to stabilize operations and ensure program sustainability.

6. Socio-Cultural and Structural Barriers: Deeply Entrenched Challenges

While the FFH program in both countries aimed to challenge gender norms, deeply rooted cultural expectations continue to limit women's full participation in agriculture and leadership. Both case studies identified the persistence of patriarchal norms as a major barrier to scaling women's leadership and advocacy efforts. In Nigeria, alumni noted that the trainings provided through the FFH initiative were valuable in increasing their awareness and confidence to navigate cultural challenges, such as land ownership and household gender dynamics. However, while individual women gained knowledge and skills, these interventions alone were insufficient to dismantle the systemic and deeply entrenched barriers that restrict women's agency in agriculture.

This raises important questions about the program's design and underlying theory of change. The FFH model, which emphasizes individual women as agents of change, may not be enough to shift structural gender norms without complementary, gender-transformative strategies that engage broader societal systems. While recognizing and celebrating women farmers is a critical step, it must be paired with systemic interventions, including community education, economic empowerment initiatives, robust media strategies and policy reforms, to create the enabling environment necessary for lasting change.

In other words, it is important to ask: was it realistic to expect that spotlighting individual women, without sustained collective action and societal-level engagement, could meaningfully challenge the entrenched patriarchy that shapes agricultural systems and community expectations? The findings reinforce the need for gender-transformative programming that goes beyond individual recognition to actively dismantle systemic barriers and create space for collective, sustainable change.

7. Comparative Insight: Balancing Local Partnerships and Centralized Implementation

The studies offer instructive contrasts in implementation strategy. Ethiopia's partnership with a local NGO and the Ministry of Agriculture provided deep community access but came with trade-offs in accountability and continuity. Nigeria's direct implementation model delivered streamlined decision-making but lacked grassroots presence and sustainability. These insights suggest that a hybrid model, blending local partnerships with centralized coordination and investment in alumni infrastructure, may offer a more sustainable path forward.

A network of Obonge women actively engaged in fish farming as part of their livelihood and food security initiatives under the TAP2 project. Credit | Eric Onduru, Oxfam

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Female Food Heroes (FFH) initiative remains a powerful platform for elevating women's leadership in agriculture, challenging gender norms, and influencing food security and gender equality agendas across Nigeria and Ethiopia. The program's impact is evident in the individual stories of transformation—women who have gained confidence, improved their livelihoods, and emerged as community leaders. However, these achievements are fragile without a more intentional, well-resourced, and systemic approach.

The evaluation findings reveal that while the FFH model has successfully spotlighted individual champions, it has not yet built the sustained networks, systems, and structures needed for long-term support of FFH awardees and deeper transformation. Without dedicated alumni networks, robust monitoring and learning systems, and strategies that address structural barriers, the program risks losing momentum and failing to translate individual empowerment into collective action and policy influence.
Moving forward, a revitalized FFH strategy must focus on five key areas:

A. Strengthen Post-Award Engagement

Establish formal FFH alumni networks to enable peer learning, enhance organization, improve communication and encourage collective advocacy. The networks can also foster a sense of community and ongoing commitment among the alumni. In Nigeria, more consistent engagement and follow-up after the award year, such as mentorship, refresher trainings, and community forums, is needed to maintain momentum and ensure long-term impact. Efforts should be made to leverage existing government programs by connecting FFH with available support. Alumni networks can also serve as a resource for continued advocacy efforts and policy engagement, ensuring that the experience and insights of the FFH contribute to Oxfam's broader advocacy and policy goals, and that FFH feel equipped and empowered to lead their own initiatives.

B. Improve Internal Coordination, Staffing, and Financial Resources

Assign full-time program staff to oversee FFH implementation year-round and establish robust communication strategies that can amplify reach of key messages, support shifts in narratives regarding women food producers and maintain support for alumni during periods of staffing changes or funding gaps. Dedicated roles should include technical specialists for training, MEL, and gender engagement. A clearly defined coordination structure will help improve institutional memory, prevent disruptions due to staff turnover, and ensure consistency in engagement across implementation cycles. Participatory program approaches are also recommended, as direct involvement of FFH alumni in the program planning and implementation can also help with sustainability. To help address resource constraints and uncertain donor funding streams, innovative funding strategies, such as partnership and investment with government entities and the private sector, could provide more stable and continuous support.

C. Institutionalize MEL and Knowledge Sharing

Develop and roll out a standardized MEL framework that includes key indicators on leadership, income, visibility, and policy influence. Build and maintain alumni databases to track engagement, capture success stories, and assess long-term outcomes. MEL systems should include structured feedback mechanisms to enhance engagement and offer continuous support to FFH and FFH alumni. Strengthening MEL systems will also support evidence-based learning and enable Oxfam to adaptively manage and report progress to donors and stakeholders more effectively.

D. Deepen Gender-Transformative Approaches

Go beyond individual empowerment by strengthening strategies to address underlying gender norms. This includes integrating training modules on gender equity, supporting male allyship, and facilitating dialogue at community and policy levels. Embedding gender-transformative frameworks across all phases of the program will contribute to more equitable power dynamics and help shift social norms in the long term.

E. Enhance Visibility and Policy Influence

Scale up media engagement, especially coverage that spotlights FFH alumni achievements and elevate women's voices in agriculture. Use storytelling, radio, TV, and social media to amplify impact and foster wider recognition. Strategic communications should be linked to policy engagement timelines to ensure that media advocacy also feeds into policy dialogues and budget cycles where women farmers' voices can shape agricultural priorities.

Proposed Timeline for Addressing Identified Gaps

The Female Food Hero initiative has the potential to be a transformational model for women's empowerment in agriculture, but only if it evolves to address the challenges identified in this report. By investing in alumni networks, strengthening systems for monitoring and learning, embedding gender-transformative strategies, and amplifying policy influence, Oxfam can build a more resilient, scalable, and impactful FFH model. This will not only honor the legacy of past FFH champions but also ensure that future generations of women farmers can lead and thrive in their communities and beyond.

A learning session with the Obonge women's network, where a member shared her experiences in fish farming—from the initial stages of pond preparation and fingerling rearing to feeding, pond management, and eventual harvesting.
Credit | Eric Onduru, Oxfam

The table below presents a suggested timeline for addressing the gaps identified in the studies, outlining priority actions, and indicative timeframes for implementation.

Priority Level	Action	Timeline
Short-Term	Map and re-establish contact with FFH alumni across both countries	Within 3 months
Short-Term	Assign FFH focal points in Nigeria and Ethiopia	Within 3 months
Short-Term	Reactivate alumni check-ins, assign FFH focal staff	Within 6 months
Short-Term	Design a standardized MEL framework and alumni tracking template	Within 6 months
Short-Term	Pilot quarterly virtual check-ins with selected FFH alumni	Within 6 months
Short-Term	Refresh FFH media strategy and relaunch digital storytelling campaign	Within 6 months
Medium-Term	Develop standard MEL system, expand media advocacy	6–12 months
Medium-Term	Hire full-time FFH program officers in both country offices	Within 9–12 months
Medium-Term	Develop and pilot post-award training modules (e.g., refresher workshops, mentorship)	Within 12 months
Medium-Term	Initiate collaborative partnerships with feminist/women-led CSOs for advocacy and training	Within 12 months
Medium-Term	Launch basic alumni database and begin collecting outcome data	Within 12 months
Long-Term	Build formal partnerships, embed FFH in policy platforms	12+ months
Long-Term	Establish regional FFH alumni platforms and mentorship networks	Within 18–24 months
Long-Term	Institutionalize MEL reporting (biannual reports, learning briefs, case studies)	Within 24 months
Long-Term	Support FFH alumni participation in national and regional agricultural policy platforms	Within 24–36 months
Long-Term	Integrate FFH into broader gender justice and food systems programming	Within 36 months

Table 1. Proposed Timeline for Addressing Identified Gaps

Oxfam Learning Reports

Oxfam Learning Reports are written to share lessons and to contribute to public debate and to invite feedback on development and humanitarian policy and practice. They do not necessarily reflect Oxfam policy positions. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of Oxfam.

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