
Working with Women: An Essential Component of Global Food Security and Agricultural Development

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Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, food insecurity and malnutrition remain major barriers to development. Hunger has risen at a steady 2 percent per year in sub-Saharan Africa since 2007,¹ and over 22.7 million people across the region are undernourished.^{2,3} Compounding the problem are population growth and urban migration, which are on the rise throughout the region. The population is expected to jump from just over 1 billion people to 1.6 billion by 2030,⁴ and, for the first time, Africa's urban population will be larger than its rural population. As the demand for food increases and people move out of the agricultural sector into the

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burgeoning economies of developing cities, the need for higher quality, more efficient, and increasingly productive agriculture will be more urgent than ever.

In sub-Saharan Africa, women produce between 60 and 80 percent of the food consumed,⁵ and this gender disparity will only increase as economic growth in urban areas drives men to seek higher-paying jobs outside their rural hometowns. Therefore, any effort to address these issues

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in a meaningful way must have a focus on women. The underlying causes of global hunger and food insecurity are complex and manifold. Access to agricultural information and education, high-quality inputs, reliable markets and supply chains, and a range of nutritious crops all play a major role in determining the overall food security of a region. Although women farm the majority of the land and make many essential household decisions around food security, they often do not enjoy the same rights and financial resources

as men. Less than 2 percent of women own land in Africa, and access to improved seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides is limited. Only 10 percent of credit allowances are extended to women, while just 5 percent of extension services have included women.⁵

Unequal access to resources, given the essential role that women play in food production, has hindered the overall progress in agricultural development in Sub-Saharan Africa, which remains far behind the rest of the world in terms of agricultural productivity. Indeed this gap has been widening: total factor productivity globally has been increasing at about twice the rate of sub-Saharan Africa.⁶ The negative consequences of this are far-reaching, affecting both the region's ability to feed itself and the economic implications of its unrealized potential as a bread basket for the world's growing population.

In addition, there are many higher-order benefits of empowering women. Women who are empowered to own their land or make significant investments in their farms are more likely to seek formal education or healthcare services. They are also more likely to contribute to the formal economy in ways other than agriculture, or to encourage their daughters to do so. It is no surprise then, that women have been a major focus of inter-

national development efforts in the past few years, especially with regard to agricultural development.

Providing women with essential tools and resources can have a significant impact on their agricultural productivity and it often does not require a major investment of resources. A micro-loan or a training course on better agricultural practices can have a huge impact. Broadly, these essential resources fall into three categories: access to finance, better quality technology and technical training, and quality information on land tenure and rights laws. Unfortunately, however, these issues have not all been addressed equally. Efforts have focused primarily on providing technical training and access to new technologies with a focus on increasing productivity, leaving gaps with regard to land tenure and agricultural financing. This article provides a comprehensive review of the best and most effective practices being developed today, as well as a framework to inform current thinking on effectively prioritizing both current needs and long-term objectives.

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EDUCATION AND TECHNICAL TRAINING

Estimates indicate that if women are able to receive high quality extension services that provid technical training, productivity could increase by up to 4 percent.⁷ In addition, with equal access to productive resources, women could increase their yields by 20 to 30 percent.⁸ These changes would have a major impact on the continent’s ability to feed itself. Women are currently less likely than their male counterparts to receive technical agricultural training or to interact with an extension agent, despite the fact that they do most of the farming. Men also generally make a majority of the major purchases, such as seeds, fertilizers, and farming equipment. Women need equal access to information about the differences among seeds varieties and crops, as well as the authority to make purchasing decisions for their farms. There is evidence that this trend is changing as more and more NGOs focus on women in an effort to close this gap.

The importance of agricultural training on new technology and extension cannot be overstated. Not only is education for women vital for crop productivity, but technical training also enables them to become leaders in

their communities and to form a support group among themselves. During field visits by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) to smallholder farmers in Africa, there has been consistent evidence for the substantial differences that access to information about basic farming techniques (e.g. fertilizer use, planting in rows rather than scattered seed, crop rotation) can make to a smallholder farmer's productivity. Sharing information is one of the simplest and most important ways to increase productivity for smallholder farmers.

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Technical training and extension are strengths of the U.S. government agricultural system, and they have always been a major focus of its development assistance efforts. Education and technical training is the single biggest component of United States Agency for International Development (USAID)'s Feed the Future (FtF) programming. In its first five years, FtF has helped 5,000 women, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, operate their family farms as for-profit agricultural businesses, by training them to measure inputs and outputs, use improved seeds, and apply modern technologies to increase crop yields. Women have become leaders in their communities and have gone on to form groups to share knowledge among other smallholder farmers. Their efforts have seen impressive results already, and as projects continue over the next few years, we will learn more about where efforts have been most effective and where new approaches are needed.

ACCESS TO FINANCE

For most farmers, the ability to reliably repay loans is contingent on predictable weather patterns, stable food prices, and consistent market access. Unfortunately, these factors are highly variable, which makes agricultural financing a high-risk investment for lenders. As a result, many loans for agriculture have high interest rates or require substantial collateral that is prohibitive to farmers. Creative financing schemes like microfinance or layaway models allow women to access financial resources by subsidizing or mitigating this risk. For example, MyAgro, a small NGO in West Africa, provides small-scale farmers with a package of high-quality inputs through a layaway model. Farmers can enroll and pay for the package in small increments via SMS months before it is ready, and are then notified by the village vendors when their package is ready for pick up.⁹

Although farmers are making a major investment in high-quality seeds, which are far more costly, they are able to spread payments out over a long period of time to minimize their risk without paying a predatory interest rate. Once the inputs have been fully paid for, MyAgro trains farmers on best practices for planting and harvesting, and ultimately buys the crops to sell to larger buyers and other local processing centers. This ensures farmers have access to both inputs and a resilient local market to sell their crops, with minimal risk exposure for MyAgro and their farmers. When these types of unconventional financing mechanisms are coupled with adherence to indigenous or cultural principles, and financial training, the resulting repayment rates have been quite high.¹⁰ Currently, banks are really only equipped to make traditional loans, which means that they do not often make loans to smallholder farmers. This gap is being addressed by creative NGOs and microfinance institutions. Banks can potentially make loans to farmer cooperatives, which can resolve some of the scale and risk issues typically associated with lending to smallholder farmers, but there is a real need for more flexible financing mechanisms from traditional lenders.

Beyond innovative financial mechanisms, basic access to credit can be a catalyst for smallholder farmers. In April 2013, USAID and Land O'Lakes International Development launched
 a two-year Innovations in Gender Equality (IGE) program to enhance Tanzanian women's participation in improving food security. The IGE program will offer twenty-one grants to scale up agricultural innovations that will enable women to get the most out of their time spent on certain agricultural tasks, while building leadership capacity and promoting policy change that encourages gender equality.¹¹ Grants like this help start a virtuous cycle whereby improving one aspect of agricultural life can empower women to think creatively about other ways to continue to innovate while simultaneously empowering them economically through the gains of their successful innovation.

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LAND TENURE RIGHTS

In many countries, land tenure regulatory systems are complex and antiquated bureaucracies. Modernizing traditional land ownership structures is a priority around the world. In some countries, even under the best circumstances, changing ownership of land can take years. As a result, many people, both men and women, do not fully understand the process and rights surrounding land tenure in their country. These issues are particularly problematic for women in sub-Saharan Africa, who often lack legal access to the land they have farmed for decades. This leaves them vulnerable to losing their land if predatory land-leasing schemes require that families produce paperwork they do not have, or about which they are not fully educated. In terms of global policy attention, there is a dearth of support for land tenure and agricultural financing work. Changing land tenure laws and distilling complicated bureaucracies to make them more publicly accessible is difficult, and progress is slow by nature.

International organizations with expertise in law and land reform have been making effective inroads providing technical assistance to governments who want to modernize their systems. Investment Climate Facility (ICF) for Africa and Landesa have both built and defined best practices in supporting land tenure reform by providing technical assistance either to governments who want to reform and modernize their laws or to landowners themselves who need help navigating complex bureaucracies. ICF recently partnered with the government of Sierra Leone to install an effective land administrative system to increase investment in the property sector. This project aims to reduce the time and cost associated with land registration and to create a reliable database for quicker verification of land titles. Landesa, a nonprofit that partners with farmers to secure rights to their land, launched the “Kenya Justice Project” to help Kenyan women in rural areas understand and become aware of their land rights and freedoms. Landesa created a curriculum to train teachers, youth, women, and elders in understanding land rights and facilitated conversations with community members to discuss concerns and benefits of women’s rights. Women reported that they now inherit land alongside their brothers and that they are working to be ensured a portion of the family’s land on which to live and farm. In addition, elders and chiefs drafted a community-level constitution requiring written consent of the spouses before the approval to sell or lease land.

These successes are having a major impact on the way farmers view their land. Farmers who own their land are more likely to view it as an asset,

and thus are more willing to make long-term investments to improve it. These investments can lead to economic growth for farmers and increased food security for the community that benefits from a more productive agriculture sector.

Although we have examined each of these three pillars of food security separately, they are all inextricably linked. Increasing access to financial resources, better inputs, farming technologies, and technical training is often cyclical: changes in any one area can catalyze broader changes and have long-term impacts. The growing pressures of demographic shifts, population growth, constraints on water and arable lands, and climate change will only continue to exacerbate the already acute need for more food production. Narrowing and eventually eliminating the pervasive agricultural labor gender disparity in sub-Saharan Africa is one of the most valuable tools we have to increase food security and economic growth in the region. Boosting the number of productive, successful members of society has enormous benefits, and the potential of sub-Saharan Africa relies on its ability to realize and achieve those goals.

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For example, One Acre Fund (OAF) is an NGO that helps small-scale farmers, especially women, through a holistic, sustainable, and profitable agricultural model. Their program consists of a comprehensive “market bundle,” which provides loan of USD 80 worth of basic seed and fertilizer, delivery of these inputs, training on correct usage of them, and access to markets and improved storage. The market bundle is provided as a micro-loan and farmers are responsible for paying for the inputs after the harvest. With this model, OAF enables farmers to increase their agricultural income by 50 to 100 percent. Their programming has seen rapid and impressive success, with some of the women going on to start small businesses, invest in their children’s education, and empower other women to become leaders in their community.

Access to increased technical training and technology, agricultural financing, and good quality information on land tenure and rights are the most important priorities to accomplishing real progress and change. Gaps remain concerning flexible and pragmatic agricultural financing mechanisms and land tenure reform, although there have been some successes

in these areas. However, there is a broad international consensus that this issue is one of the most important development challenges we face, and as a result there is both political will and substantial resources to address these issues. It is essential that we do not lose momentum, and that we continue to thoughtfully evaluate what is working to close the agricultural gender gap, which threatens global food security in both the short and long-term.^f

ENDNOTES

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