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PRACTICAL NOTE

The situation of women in the agribusiness sector in Africa

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ABSTRACT
This practical note syntheses the proceedings of a gender forum on women in agribusiness, which took place in Nairobi, Kenya in April 2015. The workshop session of the forum focused on two themes: financing options and entrepreneurship capacities. The public session covered six main areas: (1) post-harvest food management, (2) policies to enhance affirmative action, (3) regional integration and international trade, (4) technologies, (5) land and water management for agriculture, and (6) the next generation of agribusiness entrepreneurs. The multi-sectoral forum brought together some key stakeholders across East Africa to share experiences and best practices, increase mutual learning, and expand public discourse on the subject.

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Introduction
Agriculture is the principal source of livelihoods for about two-thirds of the population in sub-Saharan Africa, the majority of whom are women (FAO 2011). Although women play a major role in agriculture and in smallholder farming in particular, they remain largely marginalised in post-production downstream supply chain activities. Women face many challenges that hinder their effective participation...
in agribusiness. These include lack of access to productive resources such as land and livestock, extension services, credit, inputs (seeds and fertilisers), and insecure land tenure. This is made worse by existing inequalities affecting women relative to men, in terms of access to education, healthcare, and other forms of social and cultural services (Meinzen-Dick et al. 2010; Quisumbing and Pandolfelli 2010).

In Africa, both public and private institutions are increasing their support for women’s involvement in agricultural value chains. The African Union’s (AU) June 2014 Malabo Declaration on Accelerated Agricultural Growth and Transformation includes a commitment to reduce poverty in Africa by 50% by 2025 though, among other measures, supporting and facilitating the preferential entry and participation of women and youth in gainful and attractive agribusiness opportunities. Moreover, the 24th Ordinary Session of the AU Assembly held in January 2015, chose “Women Empowerment and Development towards Africa Agenda 2063” as the continent’s development theme for 2015, enhancing the political attention to women in development, including women’s participation in agribusiness.

A key factor that impedes the effective participation of women in agribusiness in Africa is the lack of a multi-sectoral platform that brings together key stakeholders to share experiences and best practices, increase mutual learning, and expand public discourse on the issue. Such a platform can serve to bring together the different stakeholders to identify promising interventions and co-create solutions for enhancing opportunities for women in agribusiness. Against this background, a gender forum on women in agribusiness was held on 30 April 2015 in Nairobi, Kenya (Heinrich Boll Stiftung 2015). The forum was convened by Rahma Adam as part of a World Bank Group Fellowship, and hosted by the Heinrich Boll Stiftung Regional Office for East and Horn of Africa. Additional funding was provided by the African Union Commission, Department of Rural Economy and Agriculture. The forum was organised into two sessions. The first involved a half-day multi-stakeholder technical workshop that brought together 68 selected experts and practitioners from different sectors, including farmer organisations and networks, government agencies, research organisations, the private sector (agribusiness companies and commercial banks), NGOs, development partners, and inter-governmental agencies. This session aimed to identify and review promising financing and entrepreneurial capacity interventions for empowering women in agribusiness. The second session consisted of a two-hour public moderated panel discussion with five panellists, followed by questions and answers with the audience.

**Session 1: multi-stakeholder technical workshop**

The workshop’s objective was to enable a selected group of stakeholders to share experiences and best practices (including tools, approaches, and case studies), facilitate mutual learning, and identify gaps and priority interventions for implementation, focusing on financing options, and entrepreneurial capacities for women farmers and entrepreneurs in agricultural value chains. It also covered cross-cutting issues of knowledge management and policy. The workshop included plenary remarks, input presentations, and break-out sessions on the themes of financing and entrepreneurial capacities. After opening remarks by Joan Birika, Gender Coordinator at Heinrich Boll Stiftung, there were keynote statements on “Women empowerment in the Emerging Sustainable Development Goals” by Maria-Threase Keating, Kenya Country Director of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and “Women Empowerment in Agriculture: World Bank Experience on Best Practices” by G.N.V. Ramana, the World Bank’s Lead Health Specialist and Program Leader at the Country Office for Kenya, Rwanda, and Eritrea. The proceedings are summarised below.

**Innovative financing options for women in agribusiness**

The workshop identified a few promising models for financing women in agribusiness across Africa, including the use of moveable assets as collateral; contract farming; training women on enterprise
management; and group savings (through savings and credit societies, table banking, and revolving funds). These models have had some success but their wider adoption is limited, especially due to high transaction costs, arising from intermediaries (common in publicly funded programmes), which are transferred to and absorbed by the fund recipients, and the high cost of credit (including high interest rates charged by commercial banks).

The following action points were proposed for follow up by stakeholders:

1. Promote the devolution of services by financial providers to rural areas, and especially at grassroots level, accompanied by capacity building programmes to support farmers and women to be involved in agribusiness locally.
2. Adopt and tailor financial service approaches that embed sustainability strategies (for example, through farmer cooperatives and women groups).
3. Promote financing together with training on proper and responsible use of credit. In addition, provide specialised support tailored to women entrepreneurs who have previously attempted and failed in agribusiness ventures. Need to help them overcome bad experiences and encourage them to continue investing in agribusiness.
4. Encourage and work with commercial banks and other financial services providers to increase financing for women in agribusiness, support the scaling up of viable women-led businesses and develop products for managing business risks.
5. Use ICT platforms, such as mobile money transfer, to access a wider pool of women fund recipients, and also limit the use of intermediaries to lower transaction costs.
6. Adopt all-inclusive gender approaches to target both men and women in project implementation.

Building business and entrepreneurial capacities and skills

The workshop reviewed the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches for enhancing entrepreneurial capacities and skills for agribusiness. These include classroom teaching, voucher training, extension worker approach (for farmers), business incubation, and the cluster approach. The cluster approach was singled out as being very promising, in view of the successful experience of using the approach in western Kenya, where it has stimulated heterogeneous value addition, generating new products and services for food, feed, fuel, and fertilisers.

The workshop highlighted three major gaps: (i) limited production capacity for farmers, in terms of access to seeds, choice of crops suitable for specific agroecosystems, and the poor or lack of weather and climate information systems to inform farmers’ crop planting decisions; (ii) weak value chain linkages, especially market limitations affecting smallholder women farmers whose subsistence production orientation limits market competitiveness; and (iii) the poor linkages between farmers, researchers, and extension agents, which calls for more participatory research processes based on identified needs, and dissemination of research results to farmers in user-friendly formats. The following action points were proposed:

(1) Create awareness and highlight success stories of women in agribusiness using media (radio, print, and online) and in local languages.
(2) Disseminate information on the opportunities for capacity building in agribusiness and entrepreneurship targeting women. An example is the Women Enterprise Fund set up by the government of Kenya to provide loans, other financial products, and training to women-led business enterprises.
(3) Develop projects that support women and youth engagement in agribusiness at the local level, following a cluster model approach, and focusing on comparative value chain commodities.
(4) Strengthen value chain linkages through the provision of training and development of policies and interventions to promote market access, including support for value addition, food quality
monitoring systems, and the strengthening of the policy lobbying capacity of women in agribusiness.

(5) Promote entrepreneurship education especially targeting the early childhood development teachers that can in turn stimulate interest and nurture entrepreneurial skills among children, and also women entrepreneurs (both farmers and those participating in downstream agro-supply chain) to equip them with both technical and soft skills (i.e. in costing, production management, planning, quality control, understanding markets, value addition, and negotiation skills).

(6) Strengthen agricultural extension services targeting rural women farmers and also support farmer organisations and agribusiness groups to access and provide extension information in locally appropriate languages.

The proposed action areas for policy and knowledge management to support women in agribusiness are presented in Table 1.

**Session 2: public session**

This session was attended by over 200 participants. The purpose of the interactive session was to provide an opportunity for the audience to engage with experts and practitioners in gender and agribusiness. The panellists included Elizabeth Thande, an entrepreneur in the horticulture industry; Jemimah Njuki, scientist and expert in gender and agriculture; Isaiah Okeyo, an official at the State Department of Agriculture in Kenya; Taluma Banda, a social development expert at COMESA, and Judy Pareno, a member of parliament in the EALA. The key action areas from the session are below.

**Post-harvest food management**

Women are actively engaged in agricultural production especially in smallholder farming, but their engagement diminishes in the post-production downstream stages of the agricultural supply chain. Thus, opportunities for women to be involved in the downstream supply chain stages should be promoted, targeting food storage, processing, packaging, transportation, and marketing. The interventions to redress this imbalance should also involve men to ensure mutual benefit for both genders.

| Table 1. Proposed action for cross-cutting themes, policy and knowledge management action areas. |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| **Policy action areas** | **Knowledge management action areas** |
| 2. Work and liaise with government at both the county and national levels in the agri-food sector. | 2. Consolidate credit information and devolve information provision services to the local (county) levels. |
| 3. Inclusion of women in policy organs and structures, and processes in the agricultural and associated sectors. | 3. Support the use of multiple information dissemination tools, including community coaches, radio, and new media tools (e.g. ICT). |
| 4. The government should review the approach of using intermediaries for the Women Enterprise Fund (WEF); intermediaries increase the interest rates to the borrowers to recover the associated transaction costs. | 4. Ensure quality control in information services, to avoid misinformation spreading to farmers and agri-entrepreneurs. |
| 5. Develop institutional support infrastructure to ease credit provision and access by both lenders and borrowers. | 5. Educate borrowers to risks and the various alternative financing options. |
| 6. Tailor interventions and programmatic support to meet the specific and unique challenges faced by the different categories of women farmers (e.g. smallholders vs large scale) and entrepreneurs (small, medium, and large enterprises in different commodity value chains). | |
Policies to promote affirmative action

Provide information and support to smallholder women farmers and women-owned micro-enterprises to access and benefit from affirmative action policies and programmes. For example, the government of Kenya has committed to preferentially award 30% of tenders in all government ministries and agencies to women-owned businesses. This policy targets women across all categories but its implementation is hampered by “elite capture”; only educated and urban-based women seem to be benefiting from the policy as poor and rural-based smallholder women farmers and micro-enterprises (“mama mboga”) are excluded due to lack of appropriate information, means, and capacity to access the government tenders.

Regional integration and international trade

(1) Gender issues should be mainstreamed across all organs and programmes of the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), including the EAC, EALA, and COMESA. EALA is developing a gender bill, and also seeks to end the existing bias against women in representation to ensure gender parity in the EALA membership.

(2) Promote cross-border and transboundary trade in agricultural goods and services. The process to expand regional trade is being accelerated by RECs, and this could potentially benefit women through expansion of trade and market opportunities within the region due to faster movement of goods and people. The EAC has developed a Non-Tariff Barriers Bill which is awaiting approval by the Assembly of the Heads of State. The Bill includes penalties against member states for non-compliance.

(3) Promote opportunities for women to benefit from an expanding fair trade market. A key enabler of fair trade is traceability, yet there is limited capacity for ensuring product traceability across East Africa. Interventions are required to develop and strengthen fair trade markets, including supporting data and information collection about the produce, labelling, labour standards (including fair wages for workers), and environmental standards.

(4) The Comprehensive African Agricultural Programme (CAADP) requires African Union member countries to allocate 10% of annual national budget to agriculture as per the 2003AU Maputo declaration on agriculture (African Union 2003). Implementation of CAADP can facilitate increased opportunities for women’s engagement in agribusiness, but the actual impact of CAADP implementation on women’s participation in agribusiness remains to be fully assessed.

Technologies

(1) Enhance technology mediated information, education and communication for agribusiness development. This would ensure a continuous process of dissemination of information and education to women agribusiness entrepreneurs and smallholder farmers using various technologies, including mobile phones, radio, TV and other audio-visual technologies. Initiatives supported by the International Development Research Center (IDRC) that involve the use of interactive radio programmes to reach women smallholder farmers and small-scale traders through radio listening groups are showing some success.

(2) The potential for adopting genetic modification (GM) technologies in agriculture was debated, and the potential impact on women farmers. This is a wider ongoing debate across Africa. The Kenya Government is yet to state a specific policy position on GM technologies, but the Cabinet put a temporary ban on GM food products imports into the country in 2012.
Attracting the next generation of entrepreneurs to agribusiness

(1) Establish a mentoring initiative through which emerging women and youth entrepreneurs in agribusiness can be linked to established and successful entrepreneurs for mentorship. An example could be through the 4 K Club movement, an initiative that has been successful in attracting primary school pupils to agriculture in Kenya and which should be revived by county governments. The 4 K Clubs can also be a best practice to be shared among the countries within the EAC, as the EAC Secretariat is currently working with the member states to standardise certification and harmonisation of education curricula, which provides an opportunity to integrate the 4 K Club approach into the EAC regional educational curricular.

(2) Information, communication, and technology (ICT) can also be used to provide platforms for attracting youth into agriculture and agribusiness. An example of an online group is the Young Professional for Agriculture Development (YPARD: www.ypard.net) which is attracting and supporting youth with information to practise farming as a business.

Land and water for agriculture

(1) The issue of land grabs and the conversion of agricultural land in peri-urban areas to non-agricultural uses were noted as issues of major concern, and the latter was noted to be increasingly rapidly around Nairobi. The government of Kenya is in the process of developing a National Land Use Master Plan which will address this challenge. At the regional level EALA has formulated guidelines that stipulate how citizens of EAC can benefit from investments in agricultural and non-agricultural land by foreigners.

(2) Although both men and women are entitled to legal land rights, women tend to be more marginalised in terms of land appropriation and use. Some studies in East Africa have shown that agricultural productivity increases where both men and women have jointly invested in land compared to situations where only one gender is involved. Also, land is in many cases used as insurance and collateral for accessing loans from commercial banks. Thus, lack of access to land by women remains a major barrier to access to credit and invest in farming and agribusiness.

(3) Managing water for agriculture is also a critical issue in agricultural development, especially affecting smallholder farmers who depend on rain-fed agriculture. Irrigation opportunities should be expanded, in tandem with availing more resources and training to women farmers, to increase food production and ensure food security. Kenya, however, is a water-deficit country and water resources need to be properly allocated to different uses, including for agricultural purposes such as irrigation. Promoting effective water use for agriculture and access opportunities for women farmers is therefore critical and can be achieved through low-cost measures, such as water harvesting, runoff harvesting, and other agricultural water management technologies that also protect soil for increased agricultural productivity.

Conclusion

Women play a major role in agriculture, especially in smallholder farming in Africa, but have limited participation in the post-production downstream supply chain activities in agricultural value chains. Consequently, public and private organisations are providing support to increase women’s involvement in agribusiness in Africa. The multi-sectoral forum discussed here brought together some key stakeholders across East Africa to share experiences and best practices, increase mutual learning, and expand public discourse. The forum discussed and proposed actions on financing options, building
business and entrepreneurial capacities and skills, and policy and knowledge management to support women in agribusiness. It outlined specific recommendations for actions covering: post-harvest food management; policies to promote affirmative action; regional integration and international trade; technologies; land and water management for agriculture; and attracting the next generation of women entrepreneurs to agribusiness. These outcomes have been shared with key stakeholders for follow up.

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