

# Agricultural cooperatives and gender equality



Agriculture is the main source of employment and income in rural areas of developing countries, where the majority of the world's poor and hungry people live. Rural women play crucial roles in agricultural activities and in increasing food and nutrition security, as farmers/producers, workers and entrepreneurs. However, **rural women have less access than men to the resources and opportunities** they need to be fully productive in agriculture and to ensure the food security, nutrition and well-being of their families and future generations. For example, because of legal and cultural constraints affecting land inheritance, ownership and use, worldwide, fewer than 20 percent of landholders are women.<sup>1</sup> In every Millennium Development Goal (MDG) indicator for which data are available, rural women fare worse than rural men and worse than urban women and men (Inter-Agency Task Force on Rural Women, 2012: 36).

Compared with rural men, rural women have:

- greater workloads and time constraints in both productive and domestic activities: collectively, women from sub-Saharan Africa spend about 40 billion hours a year collecting water (UNIFEM, 2009);
- greater socio-cultural and physical isolation, resulting in poor access to information, communications, infrastructure and markets;
- reduced access to training and education: household data from 42 countries show that rural girls are more likely to be out of school than rural boys, and twice as likely to be out of school than urban girls (UN, 2010);

<sup>1</sup> [www.fao.org/gender/landrights/en/](http://www.fao.org/gender/landrights/en/)

- less access to knowledge, skills, technological innovations, entrepreneurship, leadership and decision-making;
- greater constraints in access to decent employment and productive work: women are more likely than men to be engaged in low-wage, part-time, seasonal and vulnerable employment (FAO, 2011b).

Gender inequality in food production has costs for developing countries in both economic and social terms and at the household, community and national levels. If women had the same opportunities as men, they could increase the yields on their farms. This would raise total agricultural output in developing countries and reduce the number of hungry people in the world (FAO, 2011b: 5).

**Cooperatives can play important roles** in overcoming the barriers faced by women and in supporting small agricultural producers. Evidence shows that efficient cooperatives have the capacity to empower their members economically and socially and to create sustainable employment through equitable and inclusive business models that are more resilient to shocks. Cooperatives offer small producers a range of services, aimed at improving:



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## CASE STUDY

# The SEWA model for promoting women's social and economic empowerment in India

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was founded in 1972 as a trade union for poor self-employed women from the informal sector. SEWA combines a women's trade union with cooperative organizations and support services. SEWA began among the urban poor in the city of Ahmedabad in Gujarat State, India, and then extended its activities into rural areas. Over the last three decades, SEWA has evolved into a network of women's organizations that brings together 1.24 million women from 17 districts in Gujarat and nine other Indian states; 75 percent of the current membership is in rural areas. SEWA's approach includes different entry points and multiple interventions that provide women with the tools for changing and leading their own lives. This process

involves organizing women into groups; helping them to identify and address their needs and obtain access to productive assets; and building their capacities to own and manage their organizations and be self-reliant. SEWA has links to women's organizations and to public and private service providers. When necessary public services are not available locally, SEWA helps women to create organizations to provide these services. SEWA also facilitates partnerships with local, state and national governments to ensure that women benefit from government schemes, and lobbies at the local, state and national levels to promote policies and rules that recognize women workers and take their needs and concerns into account (FAO, 2011a).



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- access to and management of natural resources;
- access to productive resources, technology and infrastructure to increase small producers' productivity and income generation;
- access to markets for goods and food distribution;
- access to information, knowledge and skills development to improve self-confidence and human capital;

## Savings and credit cooperatives provide new opportunities for women farmers through the Purchase for Progress initiative in the United Republic of Tanzania

Purchase for Progress (P4P) is a five-year pilot initiative led by the World Food Programme (WFP) and involving public–private partnerships in connecting smallholder producers, mainly in organizations, to markets. P4P is being implemented in 20 countries. WFP's partners – such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and national governments – support smallholder farmers in increasing their production, with WFP buying the surpluses and connecting the farmers to other buyers.

In the United Republic of Tanzania, for example, P4P is working with savings and credit cooperatives (SACCOs) to connect

smallholder farmers to markets. SACCOs are microfinance organizations set up to provide their members with access to credit, and they are often the only functioning organizations at the village level. In the 2012 harvesting season, WFP contracted 50 tonnes of maize from local SACCOs.

Felista Thomas, a 57-year-old Tanzanian farmer who has benefited from the programme, reports that “P4P is a good market” that has enabled her to improve and increase her production. She is keen to continue collaborating with the programme as it has enabled her to rent an additional hectare of land and to use government vouchers to buy improved seeds.

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- collective bargaining power in input and output markets;
- active participation in decision-making, from the grassroots to policy formulation.

The services provided by cooperatives enable women and men smallholders to secure their needs and entitlements and to leverage market opportunities more effectively, thus contributing to poverty alleviation and the eradication of hunger.

**However, gender equality within cooperatives remains a challenge.** Obstacles to women's active participation are often structural and most are rooted in socio-cultural norms at the community and household levels. In the overwhelming majority of cases, men are the nominal owners of household assets, and are recognized as such by both law and custom. As a consequence, women do not have equal access to benefits and income. This lack of access further weakens women's self-confidence, resulting in women seldom reaching prominent positions in mixed cooperatives and market-based agriculture.

Numerous examples from around the world show how rural women can be socially and economically empowered and their status significantly improved by taking part in producer organizations and cooperatives.



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## Recommendations

### Measures at the policy level

**Governments and international organizations should:**

- **increase understanding of the importance of equitable gender relations within households and cooperatives**, to address one of the main structural problems identified – the widespread acceptance of women's unequal position at the community and household levels and their social and cultural subjugation;
- **facilitate and increase rural women's access to, control over and management of productive resources and agricultural services**, to remove one of the major hindrances to women's full socio-economic empowerment – their lack of ownership and control of productive resources;
- **diversify employment and income-generating opportunities for rural women**, in response to one of the major needs of rural women – diversified livelihood strategies through greater opportunities for decent employment and enhanced income-generating activities. Women tend to be more risk-averse than men and demonstrate greater concern about their households' possible reliance on just one economic activity. Women therefore often engage in multiple activities in addition to farming, such as weaving, soap production and other small-scale income-generating activities. While women may still support their husbands' production of particular cash crops, they should be assisted in diversifying their own agricultural production and improving their access to markets for the products they are responsible for;
- **implement policies that foresee quotas or targets for women's participation** in cooperative boards, and government incentives for women producers to increase their membership in producer organizations;



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- **Promote and facilitate collective action** to enable smallholders, particularly women and youth, to engage effectively in high-value agricultural value chains in local and global markets, by promoting capacity development on quality assurance and standards, and labour-saving technologies that include tools for reducing women's domestic labour burden.

### Measures at the cooperative level

Governments and international organizations should assist cooperatives in:

- **increasing and creating opportunities for rural women to participate in mixed and women-only cooperatives:** group participation provides women with self-confidence, enhanced skills and improved access to productive resources such as land and capital, and to services such as entrepreneurial skills training. Women often feel more comfortable, confident and safe in women-only groups where there is a tacit shared understanding of women's difficulties, grievances and strengths, but it is also important to strengthen gender equality and women's active participation in mixed cooperatives;
- **facilitating women's leadership in producer organizations and cooperatives** to raise their voice and influence within organizations and ensure better responsiveness to their specific needs and priorities; marginalized women – the young or poor – should be empowered to take part in decision-making processes;
- **linking women to markets:** women can gain access to markets and improve their income through value addition and processing activities such as pre-cooking vegetables or parboiling rice; training on issues such as business procedures or management can enhance women's access to markets and commercialization;
- **strengthening gender roles and relations** within cooperatives to ensure that women and men have equal voices and that their opinions command equal respect; these improvements can act as a catalyst for behaviour change at the household level;
- **putting in place measures such as graduated membership fees,** to ensure gender parity in membership within producer organizations.



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International Year of Cooperatives website  
<http://social.un.org/coopsyear/>

