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Full length Research

New Approaches and Methods for Addressing Gender Gaps in Extension Services: Experiences and Lessons from LIVES Project in Ethiopia

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In Ethiopia, the public sector and NGOs have been exerting efforts to mainstreaming gender in different sectorial programs and projects over the decades. The level of the gender mainstreaming endeavors ranges from national policies to grassroots development interventions. In recent decades, the Ethiopian government has given much emphasis on gender inclusive moves into policy and development interventions by creating appropriate structures in government institutions and sectoral offices. As a solid instrument, the government has put in place policy and legislative measures that help empower women so that they are able to access productive assets, mainly land, credit facilities, extension services, and improved agricultural technologies. However, despite the political commitment concretized by legal support and institutional arrangements, gender norms, socio-cultural structures, customary rules and capacity factors continue to constrain an effective implementation of gender inclusive extension service delivery in the agricultural sector. In addition to the influence of social norms and customary practices, there is limited capacity of experts to mainstream gender and to see extension delivery with a transformative gender lens. Thus, a lot more effort is needed to identify and fill gender equality gaps in extension programs. In this paper, we present the experience of the Livestock and Irrigation Value Chains for Ethiopian Smallholders (LIVES) project in reaching out to women in male and female-headed households and the efforts made to influence the public extension service to adopt gender transformative extension delivery approaches. The paper is based on information drawn from project reports, field based case studies and key informant interviews with project staff, development agents, and male and female smallholders. The paper finds that couples training and household coaching and mentoring increase women's access to extension services. Finally, it concludes that adoption of innovative methods that create more opportunities for women farmers requires working on the broader institutional context of extension services to address gender capacity gaps in policy and programs.

Keywords: Couples training, household coaching and mentoring, value chain, Ethiopia.

INTRODUCTION

Women play vital roles in agriculture and rural development. However, agricultural extension services have traditionally overlooked their specific farming needs (Buchy and Felekech, 2005; Benson and Jafry, 2013; Mbo'o-Tchouawou and Colverson, 2014). Traditionally women are not considered as "farmers" and have limited access to training and information and other extension services. The bias that "women are not farmers" is a predominant problem in many developing countries (World Bank, 2010; Cohen and

Lemma, 2011; FAO, 2011; Umeta *et al*., 2011). The plough occupies a pivotal and privileged place in the history of farming in Ethiopia, resulting in the construction of androcentric notion of what it means to be a farmer (Alesina, Giuliano and Nunn, 2011a and b; Ayalew and Tadele, 2014).

Opportunities availed to facilitate access to innovations, new knowledge, skills and technologies play a pivotal role mainly to the best advantage of male household members. More often than not, gender norms negatively influence interactions between male development agents and women farmers (Bassazinew, 2008; Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2010). Consequently, male development agents provide information and training services mostly to male household members on the assumption that the message will trickle down to their wives or the female members of households (Kassa and Abebaw, 2004; Fletscher and Mesbah, 2011). In reality, agricultural knowledge and information is inefficiently transferred from husbands to wives and other female members of households. The consequence of this is that the yields of women farmers are less than male farmers by thirty percent due to unequal access to input, extension advice, innovations and training (FAO, 2011; AFAAS, 2011; Gebremedhin *et al*., 2015).

Agricultural extension services need to take account of the different roles and responsibilities of men and women and the constraints they face in agriculture (Mogues *et al*., 2009; Cohen and Lemma, 2010). The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in agricultural extension can narrow the gender disparities in terms of access to agricultural information and knowledge. Communication channels commonly used by women, such as social gatherings and market places, can also be used to share production and market information. The promotion of women-friendly value chains (such as poultry, dairy, vegetable and fruit nurseries) with lower cultural barriers to entry can create opportunities for women groups to participate in markets.

Farmers' contact with development agents usually depends on accessibility and social position of the farmers. In Ethiopia, development agents work through a network of farmer development groups, where model farmers demonstrate improved production practices and techniques to other group members. Rather than having development agents advise individual farmers or members of farmer development groups on agricultural techniques, the model farmers report to the groups what they have learned from development agents. However, women in male-headed households or even female-headed households may not be members of farmer development groups or may not get the time to participate in farmer development groups, resulting in their limited access to knowledge and information on production and marketing of specific commodities.

To address such challenges, the LIVES project has tested innovative approaches to increase the participation of women in value chain development interventions and to capacitate the public extension service to mainstream gender transformative approaches in the planning and delivery of extension programs in Ethiopia.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The paper is based on review of project reports, evaluation reports, and individual interviews with regional project teams, male and female producers, and public extension staff. During monitoring field visits, the authors held series of discussions with male and female producers and public extension staff to understand their views about the effects of the approaches the LIVES project has used to address gender gaps in access to extension and advisory services within rural households.

Approaches and methods to address gender gaps in extension services

Given the institutional framework under which extension services are provided, extension delivery approaches can have different impacts on men and women farmers. LIVES employs innovative approaches to motivate public extension staff to reach out to women farmers both in male and female-headed households.

Couples training

Training enables women farmers to manage and market farm products more effectively and take advantage of new agricultural opportunities. However, women face significant barriers in accessing trainings, mainly due to low literacy levels, time poverty due to domestic obligations, and inappropriateness of content, time and venue of trainings that primarily target men (Collett and Gale, 2009). In addition, husbands may not allow their wives to participate in trainings that involve overnight stay outside of the household. They neither do share knowledge and skills gained from training events with their wives.

To address this gap, the LIVES project adopts couples training to increase women's access to training services in male-headed households. It is often implemented in a mixed group training

environment where farmers are trained together with development agents, who help better articulate farmers' practical problems and contextualize learning activities to suit to their situations. Couples training can offer husbands and wives the chance to reflect on and re-evaluate their value chain activities, encouraging them to think more entrepreneurially, analyzing their situation, and identifying value chain activities they might be able to take on successfully.

Aregu *et al.* (2011) stated that couples training can help create equal opportunities for male and female smallholders, as "it widens opportunities for women to get the necessary information, skills and knowledge". They argue that the approach can help couples better understand, assist and appreciate each other technically so that they gradually build up their knowledge together, thereby overcoming the weakness of relying on husbands to pass on information to their wives after learning events. It also helps women strengthen their roles and position in household decision making regarding which technologies to use and which marketable commodities to produce and how much to produce, contributing to the breaking away of taboos about the traditional gender division of labor and to bringing about gender equality outcomes.

Couples training improves information up-take and collective household decision, as it increases women's ability to better share information within the household as well as with neighbors. Experiences of households who have participated in couples training showed that the approach improves joint household decision, thereby increasing women's involvement in agricultural value chain activities, as they learn and work together. For example, in Lume district of East Shoa zone, a wife involved in a couples training stated that she had previously made suggestions for improving milk production but her husband did not pay attention to her. After his involvement in the couples training, however, he appreciated the benefits of enhanced collaboration through information sharing and joint action in improving their dairy enterprise.

Experience also shows that couples training can increase training application since the couples have shared understanding, make informed and collective decision, and better mobilize family labor to adopt improved production practices. It can also improve the position of women in the household since they become motivated, incentivized, confident and forward-looking to actively engage in family owned businesses with improved skills to bring about value addition, leading to increased incomes. It is expected that the resulting social and economic empowerment of women would give them more recognition as equal partners in the household and in the community as well.

For example, in Dugda district of East Shoa zone, a couple has received training in improved poultry and dairy management. After learning the potential income from improved poultry production, the couple got linked up with a poultry input supplier and purchased a locally made chicken coop, feeders and water dispensers. The woman was already raising chickens prior to participating in the training, but after her involvement in the training, she has improved both the birds' nutrition and hygiene. Previously she ground up maize to feed her flock but now she purchases supplements to add to the maize. The woman considered the couples training to be of benefit because if she did not understand something, her husband could help out and vice versa. Her husband now has more knowledge of poultry rearing, which is traditionally considered a woman's responsibility. The couples training helped the household have shared understanding, appreciation of one other's roles, and motivation and collaboration in managing their specific value chain enterprises.

Similarly, after the dairy training, the couple have started to improve their cattle feed, and the woman has noted that production has gone up from 2.5 liters to around 5 to 6 liters per day. In addition to selling fresh milk, she produces butter and cheese for home consumption. The husband also had cattle fattening training. Although traditionally a man's job, when her husband is away, she does the feeding and watering. She is of the opinion that she does all the cattle fattening activities. When asked to comment on the benefits of the couples training approach, the husband responded, "Having my wife also trained with me is good as she can now earn more money mainly from the dairy and also look after the animals when I am away" (Clements, 2015).

On another discussion session regarding the benefits of couples training, a farmer from Meta Robi district of West Shao zone, Oromia region, stated that "When I told her (his wife) to perform certain activities, she used to consider it as an order and was not motivated to improve her management practices. If she would have participated in the training with me, she would understand it better, have a shared understanding, and motivation for collaborative action".

Couples training does not necessarily mean training the couples together, as it may be difficult for the couples to leave the home at the same time, particularly when there are no other family members to take care of the household responsibilities. The husband and wife can attend the same training in

different times and places, allowing one of them to take care of the household responsibilities.

In addition to addressing gaps in knowledge and collaborative capacity of couples, the couples training approach can help male development agents mitigate cultural constraints to serve women farmers better, since husbands are trained with their wives and with other female farmers. Women in male-headed households who have participated in couples training tend to actively interact with male and female development agents and visitors as well. Husbands are also willing to invite their wives to household coaching and mentoring events, since couples training positively influence their attitudes, leading to increased appreciation of joint learning and action. The women also tend to get actively involved in value chain activities and explain their innovations to other men and women farmers. Often neighbors gather when a household who has introduced improved production practices is visited by outside visitors and service providers. Women also get support from husbands and other household members.

The experience of LIVES project shows that the couples training approach can be effective in contexts where the socio-cultural setting allows women's involvement and decision-making in production and marketing of value chain commodities and where farmers are better integrated into the market with an appreciation of women's economic role. It also shows that the time and venue of training is an important factor that influences the success of couples training. However, it is only one way to empower women in male-headed households. To be effective, it has to be complemented with other interventions such as household coaching and mentoring, field days and working with public extension staff to influence the thinking and practice at the institutional level that would create an environment that is conducive to increase women's visibility and recognition.

Household Coaching and Mentoring

Common extension methods that have been used by extension agents are individual, group and mass communication methods. Extension agents usually approach individual men farmers in their farms or contact groups when there are field visits, which usually exclude women. Traditionally, training is also used as a learning activity to transfer knowledge and skills. However, there is a gap between learning skills and knowledge in a formal training environment and actually applying it in the workplace.

To address such methodological and learning transfer gaps, the LIVES project introduced a household coaching and mentoring approach, which helps address the needs of both household members, rather than focusing only on household heads, who are usually men. The approach aims to address the knowledge and technology needs of women and the youth within households, as they are the future agricultural workers, entrepreneurs and farm planners.

Household coaching and mentoring is a learning activity that facilitates development of new insights, learning and transformation among household members through practice and feedback. Through this learning activity, potential is identified, possibilities become reality, and tangible results are delivered. Coaching is well guided learning through practice, and it provides an opportunity to apply knowledge and skills gained in a formal training session in the workplace. Coaching consists of asking open-ended questions and offering encouragement. Mentoring involves sharing one's own experiences and life learning. Unlike coaching, mentoring is more about directing or telling a person what to do rather than creating a space for the individual to discover solutions for him or herself (Lemma *et al*., 2015).

Coaching and mentoring is usually used in combination with training, study tour or demonstration as a learning transfer strategy. The practical application of acquired skills and knowledge from such learning events requires regular coaching and mentoring support, which facilitates learning transfer by creating opportunities for practice and feedback. LIVES and partner staff are hands-on with a few intervention households who have introduced improved value chain development interventions. Trained intervention households are coached and mentored to apply knowledge and skills gained from a formal training environment.

Even though few farmers are reached with this approach, LIVES hands-on interventions with intervention households supposedly have a multiplier effect, since innovations are assumed to diffuse through local channels of communication (Rogers, 2003). Coached and mentored intervention households can set an example and provide assistance to other farmers in acquiring new knowledge and skills.

In addition to improving knowledge sharing and collaborative learning among household members, the household coaching and mentoring approach can help male development agents reduce cultural constraints to reaching women farmers, since local customs may prevent married women from interacting with men

other than their husbands and close kins. In line with this, Cohen and Lemma (2011) found out that development agents employ various approaches, such as getting a husband's consent to talk to his wife, working with local women's organizations to arrange group extension meetings with women, and meeting with women during coffee ceremonies and other community gatherings.

In situations where socio-cultural factors inhibit contact between female farmers and male extension agents, LIVES and partner staff also try to convince husbands about the importance of involving their wives in coaching and mentoring activities. In some cases, LIVES staff try to bring women from intervention households into a group structure to ease the cultural barrier as well as facilitate peer learning and sharing among women, who would then communicate and share knowledge and skills to other women.

In West Shoa zone, for example, when LIVES team visited an intervention household, the woman was proudly explaining the activities the household was involved in. When asked to share her views on the advantages of the household coaching and mentoring approach, she said that, "Let alone for us (husband and wife), it is even more important for the children, who do a lot of activities particularly when we are on social obligations or away from home".

The training and coaching of intervention households was associated with a number of improvements in existing livestock and crop production and marketing practices. For example, in poultry and dairy value chains, trained and coached households were able to improve their dairy management practices, such as dairy and poultry housing, cleaning of barns, conservation of locally available feed resources, and feeding and watering practices. Improved housing and feeding were commonly observed applied improvements at the farm level. Women who have received training and coaching were involved in day old chicks and pullet production, milk processing and butter selling, harvesting and processing of forage crops, and feeding and watering of animals, leading to increased quantity and quality of milk production. Most of the time, trained and coached households reported that they were able to increase their milk production by 2-3 liters of milk per day from local cows as a result of improved management practices, such as watering a cow up to 40 liters per day, improving the hygiene of the udder and using cow mats.

LIVES experience shows that the coaching and mentoring needs of households are not always limited to production issues. They also need to be coached and mentored on input supply and processing and market issues. It also shows that household coaching and mentoring cannot be provided to all producers as not all of them adopt a market-orientated approach to production.

Challenges Faced and Lessons Learned in Mainstreaming Gender in Value Chains

Women farmers who are tied to regular, daily tasks such as providing and cooking food for the family and carrying out other domestic duties as well as looking after children have difficulty finding time to participate in trainings and study tours, particularly if they take more days (Cohen and Lemma, 2011). Women who are heads of households will have even greater difficulty in attending trainings and study tours, since their workloads are heavier and they do not have access to additional family labor to perform agricultural tasks in their absence (Berger, DeLancey and Mellencamp, 1984). This is particularly true if the learning events are not in a location where women farmers may return home each night, especially when there is no extended family system to assist with the domestic duties. Therefore, location and timing can pose a major barrier to women's access to training services (Collett and Gale, 2009).

In addition, husbands may not allow their wives to travel alone for trainings and study tours that are conducted outside of the community and take more than a day. In this case, husbands need to be consulted and made part of the discussion while their wives are selected to participate in trainings and study tours. Development agents need to engage with couples regarding their training needs, training goals, preferred training methods, and expected utility of the training. They should also ensure that the venue and duration of the training considers women's schedules. This could help convince husbands to allow their wives for trainings as well as develop understanding about the added value of the trainings, leading to increased chance of training application. Couples with a clear purpose for a training, a high level of motivation for learning, and confidence to make changes are more likely to apply trained knowledge and skills and accordingly improve performance.

Culturally, the man is the head of the household and is assumed to be primarily responsible for all the agricultural activities. Also in a household set-up, the man would come forward to receive training and coaching support from extension agents even if the wife may have played a major role in specific commodity development activities. For example, in Dugda district of East Shoa zone, interviewed

households responded that women had never received any training although they indicated that the women are normally responsible for dairy operation (Clements, 2015).

Usually women in male-headed households are shy and may prefer to have their value chain activities recognized as that of their husbands' (Abay *et al*., 2001). This may be because women have limited exposure than men through travel, interaction or otherwise, and therefore are likely to be shy to meet extension agents or to explain value chain activities in which they have played a major role.

Women's involvement in value chains is also constrained by their low literacy levels and absence of conducive conditions to them to gear towards entrepreneurial mindsets. Low literacy levels limit women's ability to access written information and realize the full benefits of training. Women with low literacy levels may not also feel confident to participate in training or may not be actively engaged in learning activities. Training facilitators may not also sufficiently encourage them to feel confident, participate actively, and share their experiences during the learning process.

LIVES experience shows that women have less cultural and domestic barriers to participate in day-long trainings and study tours that take place in nearby community centers, which are close enough so that they could come home in the evenings.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Traditionally, women remain marginalized with limited access to information services and decision-making. Extension services are not reaching women for a number of reasons, such as there are too few female extension agents involved in agriculture, male extension agents fail to communicate with women farmers, and agricultural extension messages are not spread from husbands to wives and other female household members.

Addressing gender issues in extension services is a complex and challenging process. It takes time for extension staff to understand and appreciate the relevance of addressing gender in increasing agricultural production and promoting equitable development that benefits both men and women, including the youth.

Making training relevant and applicable to women can be challenging. It is important that extension staff have a good understanding of gender issues and the position of women to increase their involvement in value chains. They also need to understand the training needs of women and properly tailor training content and methodology to suit to their needs and learning styles.

The experience of LIVES in addressing gender issues in extension services is exemplary on how to develop institutional capacity to plan and deliver gender transformative agricultural extension programs. Development agents can organize women focused study tours and field days to link women groups with support structures and business networks that build their social capital and confidence. Alongside this, couples training and household coaching and mentoring can be used to increase the knowledge, skills and confidence of women in male-headed households to actively engage in the production and marketing of specific value chain commodities.

However, for agricultural extension services to adopt more innovative and flexible approaches that create more opportunities for women farmers, it requires working on the broader institutional context of extension services to address gender capacity gaps in policy and programs.

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