

Women's Collective Action in Agricultural Markets

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Since 2012 I have been absorbed by a new line of research, which explores the extent to which African women farmers can gain from participating in agricultural markets through collective action – defined as any action by a group of people intended to promote the group's interests. Collective action, both as formal cooperatives and informal groups (self-help groups, rotating savings and credit associations, etc.), holds substantial promise for enhancing women's productivity, access to markets, bargaining power and economic empowerment.

I joined in the last phase of an exciting collaborative research project managed by Oxfam UK (with Thalia Kidder as project manager and Sally Baden as research manager), titled "Researching Women's Collective Action (RWCA): Empowering Women in Agricultural Markets in sub-Saharan Africa." Covering three countries (Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania), the aim of the research (2009-12) was to investigate the role of collective action in enabling women smallholders to enhance their income, improve access to markets, and become more economically empowered. My role as research adviser was to help the team carry out a quantitative analysis of the data already collected, and contribute to three

country reports plus an overall comparative report. To enhance collaboration during the writing process, Sally Baden visited the Center for African Studies during Fall 2012.

Fieldwork in the last phase had focused on one sub-sector in each country: honey in Ethiopia, Shea butter in Mali and vegetables in Tanzania. These sectors were chosen due to their market potential, their large or increasing presence of women small-scale farmers, and high incidence of collective action groups. The quantitative data included a survey of individual women farmers, both members of groups and non-members; and a survey of groups. The quantitative research component was complemented by qualitative data collection and analysis, stakeholder workshops, national and regional seminars, intense blog postings, debates and exchanges on the wiki page.

The research found that women members of collective action groups derive significantly higher economic benefits than comparable women non-members, in terms of higher sales, greater productivity or better price. Women members of groups are also better able to overcome constraints to market access than women non-members, for instance have better access to credit. The findings on women's

empowerment, however, are less stark; and causation links more difficult to infer. While women members of groups appear to be more economically empowered in some aspects, the reverse is true in others. Moreover, there does not seem to be much difference between women group members and non-group members in terms of their ability to control assets and property within the household.

This calls for further research. With other team members, we have thus written a follow-up research proposal for which we hope to obtain funding sometimes in 2014. The objective is to gather more and better quantitative and qualitative data, and adopt more appropriate research methods, to investigate higher levels questions that have remained unaddressed. These include exploring the interaction between women's role in agricultural markets and gender issues within the household (intra-household bargaining); and analyze the relationship (and causality link) between women's market involvement and empowerment.

Since the end of the research, we have been disseminating the research results. I made a presentation at the First International Conference on Sustainable Development Practice, held at Columbia University and jointly organized by the Global Association of Master's in Development Practice Programs (MDP) and the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN). Final reports and other outputs from the RCWA project are available from <http://womenscollective-action.com>.

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