



Road Map for Mainstreaming Gender into Rural Agricultural Services for Poverty Reduction in Africa¹

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¹ This brief is a summarized version of a scoping study on "Mainstreaming Gender into Rural Advisory Services for Poverty Reduction in Africa"

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A Policy Brief



Introduction

This report synthesizes findings from seven country scoping studies on gender-responsive approaches to rural advisory services (RAS) in Africa. The studies, which were conducted in Benin, Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, Sudan, and Uganda, were meant to identify existing policies, programmes, approaches, and tools into which gender considerations had been injected, and then to provide them as RAS to farmers, with specific focus on women and youth. The goal was to propose a road map for mainstreaming RAS to promote sustainable agriculture in Africa.

Gender, smallholder agriculture, and RAS in sub-Saharan Africa

Gender, the social construction of masculine and feminine identities, distinguishes and structures roles, rights and responsibilities of household members in smallholder agriculture. Access to and control of land, labour, and income are socio-culturally defined. Men, especially heads of household, make the broad management decisions of land allocation, labour organisation, cropping/animal rearing patterns, and income expenditure. Men also provide labour for certain crops and at certain stages of the production cycle such as land preparation. Women's labour obligations in food crop production, household management and child rearing roles are similarly determined. Depending on age, gender, and whether school-going or not, children too have defined roles in smallholder agricultural households.

Smallholder agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa has two key roles: nutrition and food security, which are largely attributed to females; and income generation, mostly attributed to males. This status quo is rarely questioned even by women themselves even though earning income bestows higher individual and household social status compared to nutrition and food security. Even governmental and non-governmental agricultural development policies and projects have fallen prey to the higher social status associated with income.

Yet the nutrition and food security (women's responsibilities) and income earning (men's responsibilities) roles are both of significance. That the income earning function is accorded higher status, priority and resources is because of gender; masculinity is accorded higher status than femininity in society. Thus, gender is not only a fundamental principle governing social organisation, it also, consciously or subconsciously, informs the formulation of policies targeting smallholder agriculture.

RAS therefore has considerable scope for addressing gender inequalities within the context of improving livelihoods. RAS acts as the link between agricultural organisations, including governments and research institutions, and smallholder farmers. Simultaneously, it is within the smallholder agricultural sub-sector that gender inequalities are most entrenched and legitimised through interlinked household management and farming norms and practices. Therefore, if RAS is to address gender inequalities, it must become gender-responsive, thereby transforming into gender-responsive rural advisory services (GRRAS).

The road map

This proposed road map for mainstreaming gender-sensitive approaches, tools, and practices into RAS with a view toward promoting sustainable agriculture in Africa is based on the identified key innovations that have helped to improve the productivity of women and youth; the documented the best practices of gender-responsive approaches to RAS; and the identified drivers and challenges/constraints that may facilitate or hinder scaling up and scaling out of gender-responsive RAS practices in Africa.

Getting off the policy tables

The scoping studies revealed that Benin, Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, and Uganda have gender-responsive national development and agricultural sector policies and strategies. Malawi, Nigeria, and Uganda have national gender policies too. However, most of these policies and strategies have not been operationalised, and specific plans of action within government documentation for addressing gender disparities within the smallholder agricultural sub-sector is lacking (Malindi 2015). Gender in most sub-Saharan African countries seems to be stuck on the tables where policies are formulated. There is need to breathe life into these policies to translate them into measurable actions.

Need for shared understanding of gender equality

Policy makers and agricultural institutions need to be engaged in dialogue to build a shared understanding of gender equality and why it is important, especially as regards RAS. Some organisations such as FARA, CARE, and Action Aid have the requisite expertise needed to guide policy makers and implementers in designing actions for promoting gender equality in RAS at ideological, organisational, budgetary, and logistical levels, and to become accountable to gender in their work.

Gender budgeting

Introduction to the theory and practice of gender budgeting would allay the unease of policymakers and implementers about extra costs for promoting GRRAS. Resources could be obtained from existing budgetary allocations through re-adjustments and re-allocations therein, and at higher effectiveness of outcomes.

Promoting gender-responsive innovations

The scoping studies identified several gender-responsive technologies and innovations that reduced drudgery while simultaneously enhancing productivity along the agricultural value chain. These could be adopted, promoted, and up-scaled.

For example, Ghana's Youth and Agriculture Project (YIAP) concept of the block farm reduced drudgery through provision on credit, of subsidised and interest free tractor services to youth farmers to plough the land. Drudgery is one of the key turn-offs for youths in agriculture (Quaye 2015). The agribusiness component of the project trained youth in agricultural processing and marketing. Simple processing equipment was provided on credit too. Youth farmers were able to pay off the services received on credit after selling their produce, and a market was guaranteed by the Buffer Stock Company established by the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, although they also had the option to target other markets of their choice. For working capital, youth farmers who were weaned off the project were introduced to appropriate institutions for financial support (Quaye 2015). YIAP implementation mechanisms were adopted for promoting and up-scaling gender-responsive technologies that reduce drudgery while simultaneously enhancing productivity along the agricultural value chain.

The *Projet de Productivité Agricole en Afrique de l'Ouest* (PPAAO) rice project in Benin introduced rice parboiling technology and the electric sorter, which not only reduced women's labour time in processing rice but also added value to paddy rice before it was marketed (Babadankpodji 2015). Improved production and processing technology increased women's income and improved food and nutrition security of their households (Quaye 2015). These technologies should be promoted and up-scaled among rice producers throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

Promotion of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that empower women and youth

The implementation mechanisms of Ghana's YIAP could be adopted to promote and facilitate SMEs that empower women and youth. Because one of YIAD's objectives is to make youths perceive farming as a business, the project has an agribusiness component that trains youth in processing and marketing agricultural products and in offering consultancy services in agriculture (Quaye 2015).

Another example is Ghana's Northern Rural Growth Programme (NRGP) which works with the poor to undertake income-generating agricultural projects and marketing of their products in southern Ghana and abroad. NRGF is driven by the value chain approach in four commodity windows:

- industrial crops (maize, soya, sorghum)
- fruits and vegetables (papaya, okra, chili)
- women's crops (shea, sesame, moringa)
- animals (guinea fowl and small ruminants)

In each of these commodity windows, the programme intends to develop efficient, transparent, and sustainable contractual business relationships between and amongst the value chain actors and service providers. The critical actors in these chains are the farmers, input dealers, agricultural mechanization service providers, aggregators/buyers, agro-processors/industries, and consumers. Other essential service providers that support the process are financial institutions and technical service providers.

One of the key achievements of the programme was to increase women's access to land and other productive resources, which enabled some participants to triple their incomes as a result of direct linkages to international markets. Through the activities of the programme, women are now represented on district-level value chain committees and strongly articulate their concerns (Quaye 2015).

The implementation mechanisms of an Ethiopian project called Empowering New Generations with Improved Nutrition and Economic Opportunities (ENGINE) are other ways of promoting and facilitating SMEs that empower women and youth. The ENGINE project actively involves farmers in development, verification, transfer, and adoption of improved agricultural technologies (Belay 2015). The approach helps in developing and adopting appropriate agricultural technologies that meet farmers' needs, refines available technologies to fit actual farmers' situations, and develops problem-solving capacities among farmers. The approaches further promote gender equality and women's empowerment through involving both women and men in all the project's activities. Many farmer groups have evolved into business entities, especially in local seed (Belay 2015).

Integration of health and nutrition into the agricultural value chain

Ethiopia's ENGINE project, a good example of how health and nutrition can be integrated into the agricultural value chain, provides us with lessons that can be learnt for up and out scaling. The project is unique in that it is implemented jointly by two Ethiopian Ministries (Agriculture and Health) and targets poor farmers faced with food and nutritional insecurity (Belay 2015). The main interventions focus on vegetable production, rearing of shoats, proper feeding practices, and fostering a savings culture through introduction to saving through formal banks. The approach has exhibited considerable improvement in agricultural production, household nutrition, and income in Ethiopia (Belay 2015).

Developing and disseminating bio-fortified crops

Uganda's project on developing and disseminating bio-fortified crops is another project that integrates health and nutrition. The project aims at improving vitamin A and iron nutrition among young children and women of child-bearing age (Mangheni 2015). It promotes growth and utilisation of bio-fortified

crops like orange-fleshed sweet potato and iron-rich beans. It also trains farmers in agronomy and seed systems of the two crops and utilisation/nutrition education that includes essential nutrition actions and value addition. The project targets farmer groups and over 70% of the group composition consists of women. The project has improved the nutrition knowledge of female farmers, the nutrition status of participating households, and enabled female farmers to improve their leadership skills while improving their incomes from sale of fresh tubers, beans, and the products made from sweet potato flour (Mangheni 2015).

Enhancing participation of women, men and youth

Explicitly stating the proportions of men, women and youths that will benefit within agricultural development policy or project documentation forestalls exclusion of some categories in society. This was the practice in the Ethiopia Growth and Transformation Plan 2011–2015, which explicitly stated that women will constitute 30% of the beneficiaries of agricultural extension services (Belay 2015). This ensures gender consciousness and promotes accountability to gender. In addition, there is need for awareness of the heterogeneity of women. Another Ethiopian project, the Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to End Poverty exhibited this by deliberately reaching out to 100% of women in female-headed households and 30% of women in male-headed households as beneficiaries of agricultural extension services (Belay 2015).

Ethiopia's Agricultural Growth Programme further stated that of the total common interest groups that were planned to be established, 32% were women only, 34% were youths only, and 34% were mixed. Similarly, of the innovation groups that were planned, 40% were women only, 40% were youths only, and 20% were mixed. Such gender and youth conscious planning ensures participation of all.

Inclusion beyond participation

Village savings and loans (VSL) models foster financial inclusion since most rural farmers, including women and youths, are excluded from formal financial institutions. They are also self-sustaining models that generate own financial resources without getting encumbered by external borrowing. They further empower the rural poor, particularly women, to build their own financial bases in addition to enabling them to adopt savings skills and practices. In Malawi, the model has helped the poor to diversify their activities by planting new crops and to engage in new income-generating activities (Malindi 2015) and is also being implemented by CARE International in Ghana (Quaye 2015).

The Organization Béninoise pour la Promotion de l'Agriculture Biologique (OBEPAB) project in Benin demonstrated inclusion by promoting organic cotton production on small plots of land, to which most women have access. Due to this inclusion, organic cotton production heightened women's participation from 2% before the project to 40% at present (Babadankpodji 2015).

Empowerment of women

Women and youths may participate and be included by GRRAS, but on unfavourable terms compared with men due to their subordination to men. The structural environment within which women and youths operate is also male-dominated. GRRAS should therefore not be content with heightened participation and inclusion only, but should have empowerment as its main goal.

A good example of empowerment potential of GGRAS is Care Malawi's Empowerment Framework, which stresses the structural, relational, and agency dimensions of empowerment (Malindi 2014). The framework aims at enabling women and youths to become conscious of their internalised subordination and exclusion, hence to question their status and ultimately to change it, thus changing the structural environment within which women and youth operate to become responsive to their own needs and interests.

The holistic Gender, HIV and AIDS Household Approach of Malawi's Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development empowers all productive members of the household to have better gender and power relations that enable equitable access to and control over resources, assets, and benefits in order to improve the livelihoods of all household members whilst simultaneously addressing HIV issues (Malindi 2015). In addition, integrating functional literacy programmes in RAS would not only play a role in improving women's access to and utilisation of RAS, but also in fostering self-awareness and awareness of their social environment, both of which are prerequisites for empowerment. Another inclusion approach is cultivating female farmers' leadership skills as done by the Women of Uganda Network project. As a result of acquiring leadership skills, some female farmer group leaders contested with men in male-dominated mainstream politics and defeated them. An example is one member of a women's group who was elected chairperson of the overall farmers' group (Mangheni 2015).

Transformational GRRAS

Transforming the unequal gender status quo within sub-Saharan Africa smallholder agriculture should be the ultimate goal of GRRAS. For it is within this sub-sector that gender inequalities are most entrenched and legitimised through interlinked discriminatory household management and farming practices. GRRAS therefore have considerable scope for addressing gender inequalities within the context of improving livelihoods. Examples of transformational GRRAS include the male championship model used by Malawi's Mponela AIDS Information and Counseling Centre and Care Malawi. The model recognises male custodianship of culture and customs in every society and the influence men have on decision making at household and community levels.

The model organizes men into groups and sensitises them in basic gender knowledge and skills, gender mainstreaming, gender-based violence, and shared responsibilities as a theory of change (Malindi 2014). These groups debate issues that promote aspirations of women to freely participate in decision making and economic activities. The groups engage fellow men to work towards modification of cultural norms, leading by example. Men help their spouses to participate in high-profit economic activities, jointly making decisions regarding household management, family planning, and community leadership. This development has also seen drastic reduction of gender-based violence in the area, as women are treated with dignity (Malindi 2014).

Another example is the farmer group in Ethiopia that included both husbands and wives, thereby placing greater emphasis on intra-household gender relations. As a result, husbands developed confidence in their wives by shedding off the gender stereotypes that denigrate women. In turn, women gained confidence to try out new technologies, others registered high productivity and earned additional income by selling produce which further improved their savings. Some women saved money in banks by themselves (Belay 2015). This approach has been widely adopted in Ethiopia as it has allowed not only farmers but also non-farm women to question the unequal gender status quo. This is an example of transformational best practice whereby there are noticeable changes in gender relations, women's empowerment, change in men's attitudes towards their wives, and improved productivity, earnings and savings. GRRAS should aim at such holistic outcomes. This is a wonderful best practice that is recommended for up and out scaling in Africa.

The COS Sis Project in Benin

The COS Sis project in Benin was so transformational that women not only extended neem production skills within Benin but also abroad. They went further to negotiate with the mayor of a municipality to acquire land for establishment of their own neem plantations (Babadankpodji 2015). This is evidence of activation of a women's agency to circumvent traditional constraints accounting for women's lack of access to land by engaging those in control of land for the benefit of women. The Women Rice

Producers' project, also in Benin, was so transformative that some women participants got registered onto the electoral registers so that they could get elected to participate more actively in the management of their communities. Other groups of women rice farmers also negotiated with the local authorities for larger pieces of land for higher rice production and to reduce dependence (Babadankpodji 2015). Lessons can be drawn from these projects for adoption into other RAS projects in Africa.

Conclusions

For GRRAS to be realised, it is imperative that national gender-responsive policies and strategies are operationalised. This requires conviction of policy makers and implementers about the significance of pursuing gender equality goals within smallholder agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa. Technical expertise for designing and promoting GRRAS exists in some universities and amongst international NGOs, who could equip national governments and agricultural institutions with the requisite skills. There are also a host of key innovations that have helped to improve the productivity of women and youths and best practices of gender-responsive approaches to RAS that could be scaled up and out for promotion of GRRAS to reduce poverty and gender inequalities in smallholder agriculture in Africa.

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