UN Women, IFAD, FAO, WFP
Expert Group Meeting
'Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls'

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Rome, Italy
20-22 September 2017

Do agricultural development projects reach, benefit, or empower women?

Expert paper prepared by

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Introduction

As evidence is growing about the importance of women as key agents in agriculture, food security, and nutrition, more agricultural and rural development projects are striving to address gender, and some even include women's empowerment as a direct or indirect stated goal. Yet even projects with a stated goal of women's empowerment vary greatly in their specific objectives, activities, and ways of measuring their work.

How can we compare different approaches to gender in agricultural development activities? If we are interested in improving the evidence base on what works to advance women's empowerment, we need to be able to classify projects in order to compare like with like, and evaluate various approaches using the appropriate indicators to see which approach is most effective in achieving the projects' intended goals.

The most commonly used classifications of development projects tend to focus on identifying project goals related to advancing gender equality. UN Women, for example, defines gender integration along a spectrum for any given project, from gender-negative, to gender-neutral, -sensitive, -positive, and -transformative (UN Women, n.d.). The classification refers to how the project treats gender norms: in gender-negative and -neutral approaches, inequitable gender norms are exploited and reinforced for project outcomes (gender-negative), or considered irrelevant and ignored (gender-neutral). In contrast, gender-sensitive, -positive, and -transformative approaches all acknowledge that gender is essential for achieving positive project outcomes, and -positive and -transformative go further than project goals to promote more equitable gender relations, tackling structural dynamics and underlying power relations that reinforce gender inequality (Hillenbrand et al. 2015; see also Rao Gupta 2000).

There are several variations on this classification. Some use "gender-blind," instead of gender-neutral, to emphasize that no project is gender-neutral in practice; rather, the project is likely unaware of its impact on gender dynamics and ill-equipped to document how it is either reinforcing or shifting gender relations (UN Statistics, n.d.). Furthermore, these projects run the risk of exacerbating inequalities by ignoring gender, so the likelihood of "neutral" outcomes is low. Similarly, instead of gender-sensitive or gender-positive, some prefer using gender-responsive to show how the project understands and is responding to gender differences in needs and capabilities (e.g. Nelson 2016). Still others distinguish between projects that address practical needs versus strategic gender interests (Moser 1989), with practical needs those that benefit women in their current socially prescribed roles, whereas strategic interests shift power relations in a more systematic way, often over a longer-term horizon with less visible immediate benefits.

These terms help to differentiate projects based on the extent to which they seek to change gender relations. Yet in focusing on desired outcomes for gender equality, these common classifications leave aside how projects intend to create this change, and, importantly, how they will assess whether their approach succeeds in advancing these objectives. Although the relative attention to gender is implicit in the above classifications, we need a more explicit framework to assess how well projects align their goals with activities and monitoring. This would help us not only advance the evidence base but also encourage projects to critically assess whether they are taking the necessary steps to ensure their goals are met.

The remainder of this paper presents an alternative classification system that links objectives, tactics, and indicators.

Reach, Benefit, Empower

As part of the second phase of the Gender, Agriculture and Assets Project (GAAP2; see www.gaap.ifpri.info), we reviewed the gender strategies and component tactics for 13 agricultural development projects. Each had stated commitments to women's empowerment and diverse approaches to working towards this. However, even among those projects, it was sometimes difficult to identify which specific activities were intended to empower women.

In the process of reviewing these projects, we identified the need to distinguish between approaches to reach women as participants, those that benefit women, and, finally, those that empower women. Reach, benefit, and empower approaches are characterized not only by project objectives, but also by the set of activities the project undertakes (tactics) to meet the objectives, and the ways it measures its impact (indicators).

The distinction between reach, benefit, and empower points out that simply reaching women (e.g. by including them in meetings or trainings) does not ensure that they will benefit from a project. Even if women benefit (e.g. from increased income or better nutrition), that does not ensure that they will be empowered (e.g. in control over that income or making choices of foods for their households).

Reaching women involves including them as participants. There is an implicit assumption that they will benefit as a result of being involved in the program, but exactly how women will benefit is not specified. Reaching women may be a necessary first step to benefiting or empowering them, but by itself is usually insufficient. It commonly involves targeting women explicitly to be program participants, as in quotas for women's participation in projects, community meetings, or training programs, or even in credit programs. Indicators for reaching women may include number (or proportion) of women attending meetings, registered in groups, or receiving extension advice. Yet the effects of this participation - for example, what women do with the knowledge received at a meeting - is not explicitly anticipated or measured.

Some projects struggle with simply reaching women when they design groups, meetings, or trainings with men's needs in mind from the outset, choosing certain locations, times of day, and settings that are not culturally appropriate for women to attend or feasible given their schedule and workload. While reaching women is a basic measure of whether a project offers gender equitable opportunities to participate, the ability of men and women to take advantage of this opportunity is not equivalent.

Benefiting women requires that the project will deliver benefits to women. This aligns with Moser's (1989) practical needs. In projects with objectives to benefit women, program design and implementation would address women's needs and constraints. Outcome indicators, in turn, should measure those benefits, such as improved productivity, income, or nutrition. Benefit indicators may be specific to women (such as increased hemoglobin levels), or, if collected for households or the population at large (such as income), should be sex disaggregated. Being able to track benefits at the individual level is a crucial step toward

ensuring that they occur. While it is generally recognized that projects designed with women's needs and constraints in mind may be more effective at benefiting women, projects focused exclusively on women may fail to consider appropriate roles and benefits for men, thus risking backlash in the household or community.

Empowering women involves strengthening their ability to make strategic life choices and to put those choices into action. Indicators of empowerment tend to focus on women's role relative to men's – for example their control over resources, participation in decision making, or individual agency. Empowerment indicators can also include reduction in outcomes associated with disempowerment, such as gender-based violence.

The following table and graphic, taken from Johnson et al. (2017), summarizes these three types of approaches including their associated tactics and indicators. Tactics are broad project design and implementation approaches that can be used across sectors. We use "indicators" here to refer broadly to categories of topics that are systematically recorded and can include both quantitative and qualitative variables. These kinds of indicators can be employed to measure change while the project is on-going as a process evaluation or for adaptive management as well as a post-project assessment. They can also be explored during gender analysis, needs assessment, and participatory planning approaches to inform project design.

Table 1: Reach, benefit, empower: Objectives, tactics, indicators

Reach	Benefit	Empower
Objective Include women in program activities	**Objective** Increase women's well-being (e.g. food security, income, health)	**Objective** Strengthen ability of women to make strategic life choices and to put those choices into action
Tactics Inviting women as participants; seeking to reduce barriers to participation; implementing a quota system for participation in training events	**Tactics** Designing project to consider gendered needs, preferences, and constraints to ensure that women benefit from project activities	**Tactics** Enhancing women's decision making power in households and communities; addressing key areas of disempowerment
Indicators Number or proportion of women participating in a project activity, e.g. attending training, joining a group, receiving extension advice, etc.	**Indicators** Sex-disaggregated data for positive and negative outcome indicators such as productivity, income, assets, nutrition, time use, etc.	**Indicators** Women's decision making power e.g. over agricultural production, income, or household food consumption; reduction of outcomes associated with disempowerment, e.g. gender-based violence, time burden, restricted mobility

Source: Adapted from Johnson et al. 2017.

Applying this classification, we frequently see projects with objectives of empowerment coupled with tactics and indicators at the benefit or reach level. Empowerment tactics and indicators are often missing in projects that state that empowerment is their goal. Our effort to distinguish between reach, benefit, and empower is not to say that all projects need to strive for empowerment. However, those that state that they do have an objective of empowering women should follow through on that with tactics and indicators of empowerment, not only of reach or benefit. To say that a project aims to empower women, but then only have tactics that invite women's participation in meetings and indicators of number of women "trained" or attending meetings will not necessarily lead to empowerment and furthermore, will not provide sufficient information to assess whether the project has delivered on its stated goals.

We recognize that there is some overlap and interdependency between these categories. Reaching women is usually a necessary first step to benefits or empowerment. For example, a legal change to give women inheritance rights could be empowering, but it will not be effective if it does not reach women with the information about the change. Reach objectives, tactics, and indicators are focused on the exposure of women to project activities, which may contribute to benefits or even empowerment. Including women in training events may lead to benefits in terms of improved productivity in agriculture; as women are seen to be contributing more to household agricultural productivity, it may even empower them within the households. Or participating in project meetings may allow women to meet others and form social networks that are empowering. However, this chain of events cannot be assumed. The training, if not designed to meet women's needs, may be a waste of their time and contribute to neither benefits nor empowerment. While projects may develop a theory of change that translates participation into increased benefits and empowerment for women, they fall in the "reach" category if they have neither explicit tactics nor indicators to test this expected chain of events.

Projects often seek to both benefit and empower women, because these objectives may be mutually reinforcing. Benefits to women may not be sustainable without changing the underlying balance of power between men and women, and changing the balance of power may be easier and less prone to backlash against women if it is accompanied by material benefits that can be shared by other members of the household.

Benefit and empowerment approaches are sometimes, but not always, complementary. The first Gender, Agriculture, and Assets Project (GAAP1) showed that even where projects succeeded in increasing the earnings women generated, they did not always increase women's control of those earnings, and rarely increased women's control of overall household income (Santos et al. 2013; Quisumbing et al. 2013; Roy et al. 2016).

Table 2 lists some common categories of tactics identified in our review of the GAAP2 projects (Johnson et al. 2017). The first three broad categories—strengthening organizations, building knowledge and skills, and provision of goods and services—can both benefit and empower. Influencing gender norms is more explicitly associated with empowerment objectives.

Table 2: Sample benefit and empowerment tactics and activities from gender strategies

Category of tactic	Specific activity
Strengthen organizations	Form/strengthen groups, value chains, or other organizations (such as enterprises)
	Form/strengthen platforms or networks that link organizations to each other or to state, market, or other service providers
Build knowledge and skills	Agricultural training and extension
	Business and finance training
	Nutrition education
	Other training
Provide goods and services	Direct provision of goods/assets/cash to beneficiaries
	Direct provision of services to beneficiaries
	Indirect provision by supporting availability, quality, or access
Influence gender norms	Awareness raising about gender issues and their implications, in household or community settings
	Community conversations to identify community solutions to gender issues

Source: Adapted from Johnson et al. 2017.

Applying Reach, Benefit, Empower to Specific Tactics

Strengthening organizations

Group-based approaches are an increasingly popular mechanism for reaching, benefitting, and empowering women. Organizing groups allow projects to reach larger numbers of people than approaching each individually, and the groups themselves can provide benefits through mutual support, and even empowerment, such as when groups of farmers can negotiate better prices. Further activities to link groups to broader networks of service providers. The question of whether such tactics reach, benefit, or empower depends largely on how far they go down this path, both in designing the activities to meet women's needs and in identifying indicators of the outcomes. Counting women's formal membership or participation in meetings, trainings, and groups is perhaps the most common indicator for projects oriented towards improving social inclusion. However, we consider this a reach indicator, rather than benefit or empowerment, for several reasons. First, for tactics focused on strengthening groups, if we only count attendance, we do not know whether the organizations provide services that are useful to women (benefit) or the degree of influence of women's participation on the group in question (empowerment). The latter would call for attention to women's ability to voice their preferences and concerns in the meetings, shape the way services are provided, or influence community-level rules or decisions. Women's influence could be strengthened through tactics

for specific, tailored capacity strengthening and measures to raise self-esteem, or through changes to group structure or format, and indicators oriented towards outcomes like changes to group decisions or rules or women's perception of influence in the organization.

Build knowledge and skills

Tactics like agricultural extension training, intended to transfer information or strengthen skills, can also be associated with reach, benefit, or empower. The most common indicators are of reach: attendance in trainings. These tell us little about whether the trainings were useful. Tactics that provide information that is useful for women, teach and convey information effectively in a way that is retained, plus appropriate indicators of women's increased knowledge and their perceptions of relevance and utility of the information, would move this approach from reach to benefit. Empowering tactics would ensure women have the means to take action with this knowledge. For example, in Malawi, women expressed frustration at attending agricultural trainings since their husbands were mistrustful or reluctant to allow them to apply what they had learned (Ragasa et al. 2017). Empowerment indicators would ideally capture whether the trainees have the agency and resources to apply what they have learned.

Providing goods and services

Providing goods and services would very likely benefit women, provided the goods or services are appropriate to meet women's needs and priorities. For example, if safe and highly effective vaccines are provided, then reaching women with those vaccines would provide a health benefit. In such cases, delivery of the vaccine, which would normally be a reach indicator, could be a sufficient indicator of benefit, without incurring the additional cost of testing women for antibodies or monitoring reductions in diseases. Similarly, providing effective birth control that does not require negotiations with sexual partners can empower women who wish to reduce pregnancies. However, providing condoms or a portfolio of birth control with mixed effectiveness in practice would not as automatically translate into benefits or empowerment. In those cases, additional indicators beyond number of women reached would be needed to measure empowerment effects.

If assets are transferred to women who are able to maintain control over the assets, such direct provision can also be empowering. However, women do not necessarily retain control of the assets within the household. For example, if a woman participates in a livestock transfer program, she may be counted by the project as a livestock owner, but when she takes the livestock home, it is an empirical question whether she or her husband decides whether to sell the cow, or sell its milk, and who controls the resulting income. Roy et al. (2015) explored the so-called "flypaper effects" in asset transfers to the ultra-poor in Bangladesh, noting that women largely retain ownership over the transferred livestock, but that new investments and income were controlled by men.

Analyzing a project that distributed irrigation pumps to women farmers, Theis et al. (2017) found that the project counted a certain number of women as technology adopters. The project believed they effectively met their intended targets for percent women reached, and expected the benefits of irrigation technology to flow to women. However, further qualitative research revealed that when women brought the pumps into their dual-adult households, they were only able to maintain control over certain aspects of the technology. Theis et al. offer a

framework for identifying specific intrahousehold "rights" to an asset like agricultural technology (Table 3) including the right to use the asset, to manage and make decisions about its use, to control the revenues and products generated by the asset (fructus), and to decide whether to sell or give away the asset (alienation). This framework can be applied to many agricultural assets, including not only other technology but also land and livestock. It provides more clarity than assuming either that the person targeted holds all rights to the asset or, conversely, that all rights are shared equally within the household. Rather than simply documenting who received the asset, indicators associated with empowerment are also required in order to capture these issues of intrahousehold resource control.

Table 3: Intrahousehold distribution of rights to an asset

Intrahousehold "right" to an asset	Definition	Specific example
Use right	The right to physically operate the asset	Carry and lay out the pipes of the pump, operate the motor, secure the water source
Management right	The right to make decisions on the use of the asset (where, when it is used)	Decide to use the irrigation pump on family and women-managed plots of land
Fructus right	The right to control the profits and products generated by the asset	Control the proceeds from sales of the irrigated crop
Alienation right	The right to sell, lease out, or give away the asset	Lease out the pump to a neighbor for revenue without needing to ask for permission

Source: Theis et al. 2017

Another aspect that "reach" indicators do not capture are the labor implications of projects. In evaluating eight agricultural development projects, Johnson et al. (2016) found that all of the asset-transfer projects had impacts on women's time. Livestock transfer projects increased women's labor in caring for livestock, especially improved or exotic breeds. Treadle pumps increased women's labor requirements for irrigation, but could reduce labor required for collecting domestic water. Recording the intrahousehold distribution of rights helps to show that when women only have use rights to the asset it draws on their labor without guaranteeing rights over the benefits generated by the asset. Reaching or benefiting women cannot be interpreted as empowerment without investigating the costs and benefits from women's perspective within the household. For example, Johnson et al. (2016) report that in the agricultural projects they reviewed, many women are willing to make sacrifices in terms of increased labor burdens because they value the benefits of the project.

Influence gender norms

While empowerment ultimately requires changes in gender norms, many project tactics do not address normative change directly, focusing instead on strengthening organizations, skills, or assets. However, some projects focus directly on changing gender norms and attitudes, such as those that aim to change attitudes towards gender-based violence, household decision making and division of labor. Such tactics may not go via reaching women directly, but may be targeted to the community, particularly influential community members, or to men rather than women. The goal of directly changing gender norms would typically be considered gender-transformative. These tactics can certainly empower, and adopting appropriate indicators to measure intended empowerment outcomes would facilitate learning in contrast to only measuring who is reached.

Implications

The "Reach/Benefit/Empower" framework presented here leads to a series of questions that project designers, funders, implementers, and evaluators can ask.

1. How will the project reach women? This may be through direct measures or via community leaders or men.
2. Will reaching women automatically translate into benefits? If so, "reach" indicators may be sufficient to estimate benefits as well. If not, then additional tactics and indicators would be needed for projects that claim objectives related to benefitting women.
3. Will reaching or benefitting women automatically translate into empowerment? If not, what other measures (tactics and indicators) are needed for women's empowerment projects?

"Reach" activities – including and counting women – can be a powerful way to increase women's access to information, form new networks, and strengthen confidence. However, to be able to test a project's theory of change, project objectives, strategies, and indicators need to be aligned. As the vaccine and birth control examples above indicate, there may be tradeoffs between the reliability of "reach" indicators as proxies for benefits or empowerment, compared to the additional cost of benefit or empowerment indicators. Unfortunately, most tactics for benefitting or empowering women do not (yet) have a well-known probability of effectiveness on a par with vaccines. While counting and facilitating women's participation is important, programs that only record the number of female participants may miss important intrahousehold and community dynamics that might dilute or redistribute program benefits away from women.

Collecting indicators on benefits and on empowerment is also important because the distribution of project *costs* within the household may tell an unexpected story. Indicators that look at potential unintended consequences, including increases in time burden, threat of violence, or restricted mobility, can offset gains in other benefits or other domains of empowerment.

The agricultural development community and the nutrition community have used different entry points for reaching, benefiting, and empowering women. Agricultural development projects have traditionally targeted men, despite evidence that women are heavily involved in agriculture. Nutrition programs, on the other hand, have typically targeted women, even if they may not have the bargaining power to control the resources needed for their families' food and nutrition security, or want to be the only ones providing care for children.

More recently, agricultural development projects are trying to empower women, in addition to reaching and benefiting them, while nutrition projects are also aiming to involve men more in nutrition messaging and changing household norms around decision making. This attention to gender has been reinforced by the evidence on gendered agriculture to nutrition pathways, which indicate how increasing women's control over income, household expenditures, and crop choice can influence household nutrition (Kadiyala et al. 2014; SPRING 2014). Paying closer attention to gender dynamics has also meant recognizing the potentially detrimental impact of women's time burden on nutrition through reduced capacity to provide quality care to infants and young children, as well as on women's own health (Komatsu et al. 2015; Johnston 2015).

Many nutrition-sensitive agriculture projects are now coupling traditional agricultural capacity and asset building with dialogues that engage men and women on social norms and household decision-making. A pilot project of the Ministry of Agriculture in Bangladesh, for example, is testing an approach that would provide agricultural extension messages to women as well as men, behavior change communication related to nutrition to men as well as women, as well as gender sensitization activities that attempt to change gender norms that are barriers to achieving good health and nutrition. The gender sensitization activities consist of dialogues that engage community leaders, men, and women on social norms and household decision-making. One could interpret the provision of agricultural extension messages as a "reach" approach, the behavior change communication to improve nutrition as a "benefit" approach, and the gender sensitization activities as examples of the "empower" approach, using our framework. An ongoing randomized control trial is testing these three approaches as separate treatment arms.

To be able to monitor whether projects reach, benefit, and empower women, project-level indicators need to be simple, feasible to measure, and cost-effective. There is a persistent assumption that it is challenging and costly to measure women's empowerment. Although it is easier to count participation indicators, there are practical ways to measure changes in control and decision making. Women's ownership of key assets has been integrated into nationally representative household surveys, and measures of women's participation in decision-making are regularly collected in Demographic and Health Surveys. The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) has 10 indicators in five domains, including involvement in productive decision-making, control over resources and income, leadership, and time (Alkire et al. 2013).[1]

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[1] Note, however, that the leadership domain's main indicator, group membership, could be considered a reach indicator, because it does not capture the degree to which women have influence in groups. Empowerment is

This has been included in population-based surveys in 19 countries, and in at least 50 studies total. IFPRI is working with a portfolio of 13 agricultural development projects to adapt the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) for project use, going beyond the five domains of empowerment in the WEAI to include, for example, intrahousehold relationships and mobility. Projects may wish to target a narrower set of indicators related to empowerment, but if they claim to be empowering women, they should have at least some indicators of empowerment.

The current emphasis on women's empowerment, particularly by a number of influential donor organizations, is creating welcome attention to this issue in development projects. However, unless there is a clear understanding of what empowerment means, and of the strategies and tactics that are effective in achieving it, we risk having a bandwagon effect: a bandwagon with no motor to actually move toward empowerment. For "reach" to translate into benefits and empowerment for women, we need to pay explicit attention to how the particular tactics can contribute, and use indicators that measure how women benefit, and are empowered by these projects.

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captured, to some extent, by the indicator of whether women feel comfortable speaking in public, but that indicator has proved problematic to collect in many countries.

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