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Enhancing Opportunities for Rural Women's Employment and Poverty Reduction

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Abstract

There is increasing evidence that an integrated approach to women's empowerment in development projects has multiplying effects, making the contribution to overall poverty reduction more sustainable. This is why FAO, IFAD, WFP and UN Women are, since 2014, implementing a Joint Programme on “Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women” (JP RWEE). The JP RWEE is addressing key structural barriers to gender equality and women's economic empowerment through an integrated, multidimensional approach aiming at addressing the multiple constraints they face that has led, among other achievements, to a conducive environment through which the productive activities of rural women are recognised and valued, and their rights to decent work met. This paper identifies the key factors that have contributed to these results, and their linkages with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in an effort to contribute to the policy dialogue around the “business case” for rural women's economic empowerment as a key strategy to achieve the Agenda 2030.

I. Introduction

Globally, only 50% of women aged 15 years and over are in paid employment compared to about 75% of men in the same category. Indeed, about 700 million fewer women than men of working age were in paid employment in 2016 — 1.27 billion women against 2 billion men. At the same time, women take on about three times more unpaid work than men¹.

In 2015, one fourth of all economically active women were engaged in agriculture. Although women's employment in this sector has decreased over the last twenty years, agriculture

¹ UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment 2016. The full report can be found at: www.WomensEconomicEmpowerment.org.

remains the most important source of employment for women in low-income and lower-middle-income countries.

Specifically, in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, over 60 per cent of working women remain in agriculture. In many developing economies, women are concentrated in time- and labour-intensive agricultural activities². Yet their potential as farmers, labourers and entrepreneurs is limited due to structural gender inequalities and discriminatory socio-cultural norms and practices; evident in, for example, less access to resources, including to quality seeds, fertilizers and tools, agricultural extension services, and to financial services. Moreover, rural women are often excluded from decision-making within their households and communities.

However, the gender productivity gap for female and male farmers disappear altogether when access to productive inputs is taken into account³ as Figure 1 below shows:

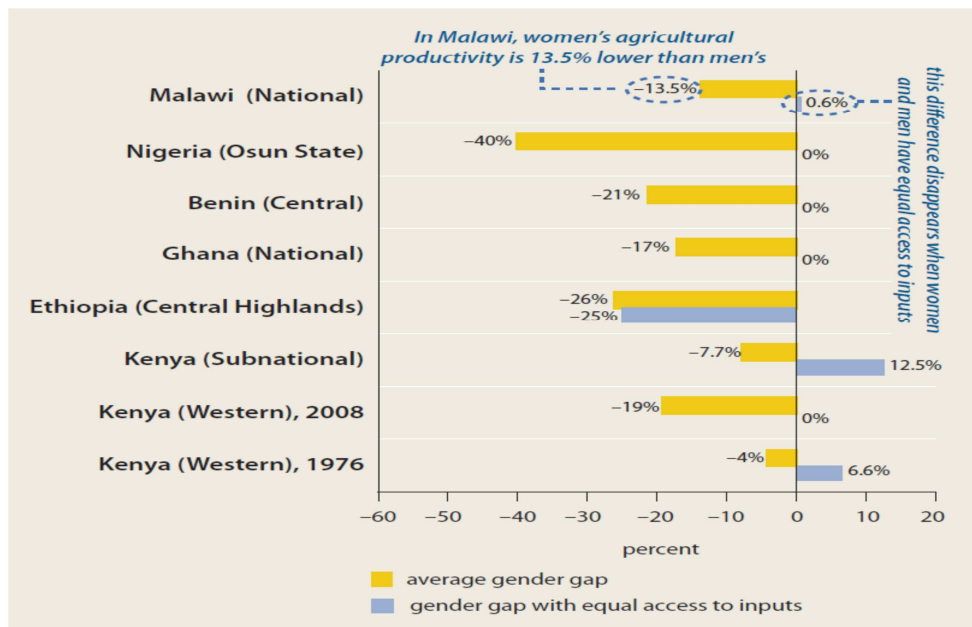


Figure 1: Gender differences in agricultural productivity disappear when access to and use of productive inputs are taken into account. Source: World Bank

The potential economic gains from reducing the gender gap in agriculture translate into significant poverty reduction and improved nutritional outcomes⁴, with significant multiplier effects in terms of reduced intergenerational transmission of hunger and malnutrition, as women tend to spend more of their income on children's health and education⁵. Indeed, there is increasing evidence that an integrated approach to women's empowerment in development projects has multiplying effects, making the outcomes of projects more far-reaching or sustainable, and this is for two main factors. First, women often have more to gain from these

² International Labour Organisations (2016). *Women at Work: Trends 2016*: Geneva p. 23.

³ The World Bank (2011). *World Development Report 2012. Gender Equality and Development*: Washington, p.19.

⁴ The UN Women/World Bank report called *The cost of gender gaps in agricultural productivity in Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda* (2015) demonstrates how closing the gender gap in agricultural productivity has the potential to lift as many as 238,000 people out of poverty in Malawi, approximately 80,000 people in Tanzania and 119,000 people in Uganda. In Tanzania, for example, this gain also translates into a 0.7 percent reduction in the incidence of undernourishment, which implies that roughly 80,000 people would be lifted out of malnourishment per year.

⁵ Black, RE, Victora, CG, Walker, SP, and the Maternal and Child Nutrition Study Group (2013). *Maternal and child undernutrition and overweight in low-income and middle-income countries*: Lancet.

approaches, which incorporate life skills such as nutrition education, literacy training, financial education, and social empowerment. Second, integrated projects tend to be more efficient, either using the same extension system and support network to deliver multiple trainings and inputs, or affecting several aspects of community life through a single intervention⁶.

Efforts by governments and the international community to achieve sustainable agricultural development, economic growth and food security will therefore be strengthened and accelerated if they actively promote the rights of women and build on the contributions that they make to the development of their communities and countries. These efforts should include the elimination of the gender-specific constraints that women face⁷.

Based on these premises, FAO, IFAD, WFP and UN Women decided to establish a results-oriented, collaborative programme to promote the economic empowerment of rural women, "Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women" (JP RWEE). The aim was to respond to the diversity of issues identified above that go beyond the mandate of any individual UN entity to tackle alone. By bringing together their expertise, resources, experiences and constituencies, the four entities have the potential to greatly enhance the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability of their work to make a higher impact on rural women's lives.

Implemented in seven countries to prevent fragmentation of efforts, the programme is enforcing a dual accountability framework for securing rural women's food and nutrition security, and their access to decent wage employment and other income opportunities. Therefore, the JP RWEE strengthens the capacity of rural women's constituencies to demand accountability for full access to productive resources, services, infrastructures, and decision making positions in producer organisations and local governance structures, while at the same time enhancing the capacity of government institutions, structures and systems to adequately respond to rural women's needs and priorities. By doing so, the JP RWEE is demonstrating that integration and cross-sectoral harmonization is fundamental to realizing the economic rights of rural women, including decent work, full and productive employment, and economic empowerment.

The JP is thus ensuring comprehensive progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which constitutes the most comprehensive, internationally agreed framework for achieving sustainable development. It is indeed widely acknowledged that, in order to deliver on the 2030 Agenda, comprehensive efforts should be made to promote rural women's work conditions by removing the structural barriers to women's economic empowerment at all levels.

In the following section, more information is provided on the approaches/sectoral activities that have been particularly successful to achieve the above-mentioned results and to contribute to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Main activities are outlined below through their linkage to the most relevant SDG, in order to present them in a systematic manner. However, it has to be noted that the key achievements of the JP RWEE are the results of an integrated approach to women's economic empowerment that cannot be attributed to a specific activity, but rather to a wide range of support impacting the different aspects of rural women's lives.

⁶ Doss, C., Z. Bockius-Suwyn, and S. D'Souza (2012). *Women's Economic Empowerment in Agriculture: Supporting Women Farmers*. Washington, DC: United Nations Foundation.

⁷ Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (2011). *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-11: Women in agriculture, Closing the gender gap for development*: Rome, p. 2.

II. A holistic response to women’s economic empowerment for employment creation and poverty reduction

Achieving SDG 17: A unique partnership for women’s empowerment

Achieving the ambitious targets of the 2030 Agenda requires a revitalized and enhanced global partnership that brings together Governments, civil society, the private sector, the United Nations system and other actors⁸. Since 2014, FAO, IFAD, WFP and UN Women have been implementing the JP RWEE, with the overall goal of improving rural women’s livelihoods and rights. The programme is piloted in seven countries: Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, Niger and Rwanda. It focuses on: (i) rural women’s improved food and nutrition security; (ii) increased rural women’s incomes to sustain their livelihoods; (iii) women’s enhanced leadership and participation in rural institutions and in shaping laws, policies and programmes; and (iv) enabling policy environment for the economic empowerment of rural women.

Currently the only initiative where these four agencies work together, the Joint Programme creates synergies that capitalize on each agency’s mandate, comparative advantage, and institutional strengths. Thus, the JP RWEE brings together FAO’s specialist technical knowledge and policy assistance on food and agriculture; IFAD’s expertise in co-financing of rural investment programmes and in improving gender relations through household methodologies; WFP’s food assistance innovations; and UN Women’s global championship for gender equality and strong links with women’s organizations.

At the country level, the Joint Programme aims to strengthen sustainable livelihoods by promoting a conducive environment through which productive activities of rural women are recognised and valued, and their rights to decent work upheld and met. This is achieved through four broad and interconnected interventions, outlined in the Theory of Change presented in [Figure 2](#):

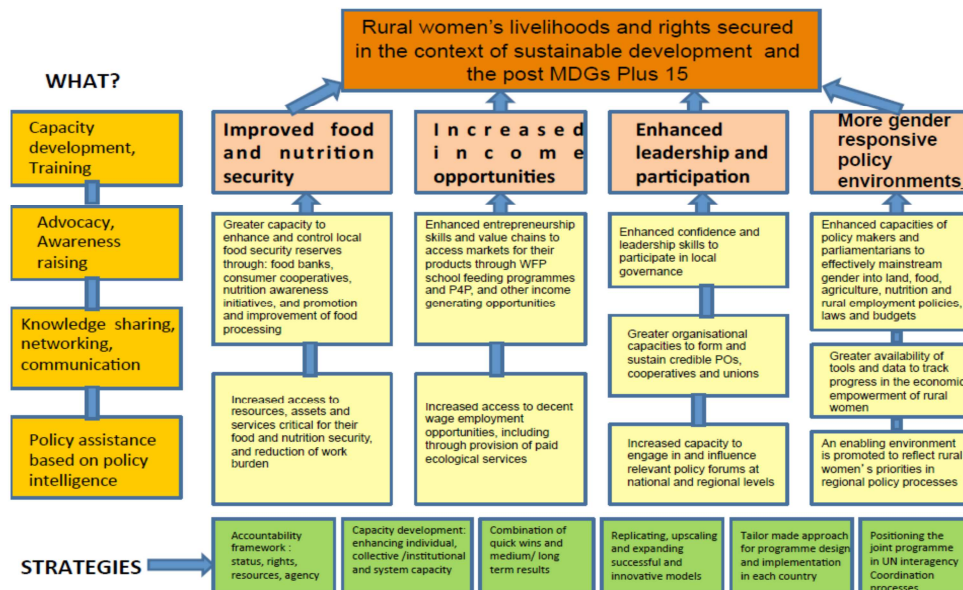


Figure 2: RWEE Theory of Change. Source: RWEE Programme Document

⁸ SDG 17, target 9 specifically looks at enhancing international support for implementing effective and targeted capacity-building in developing countries to support national plans to implement all the SDGs, including through North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation.

More specifically, the joint programme does the following:

- Improving food security and nutrition at the local level;
- Creating job opportunities to sustain women's livelihoods;
- Responding to rural women's identified social and economic needs and adding value to existing initiatives;
- Partnering with rural women's organizations to strengthen their capacities;
- Affirming rural women as leaders, decision-makers and agents of change for their individual and collective advancement;
- Helping governments to build more comprehensive national strategies for rural women's empowerment;
- Producing lessons that can strengthen the focus on rural women and girls in agricultural activities.

In addressing the barriers to gender equality in rural labour markets, the JP RWEE works to address the two components of systemic institutional gender inequalities: social norms and organisations (formal institutions, formal membership organisations, and informal institutions)⁹. This is done at the three interrelated levels in which those inequalities operate: household/community, labour market organisations, and the public sphere¹⁰.

A solid governance mechanism at global and national levels with the full participation of local governments (including, but not limited to, the respective Ministries of Agriculture) through National Steering Committees ensures smooth implementation, ownership, transparency in the allocation of available resources and alignment with national priorities and rural women's needs.

In each country, a lead agency¹¹ coordinates activities related to the consultative process for the roll out of the programme, including the engagement with the government and other relevant stakeholders.

Achieving SDG1: The importance of policy interventions

The Agenda 2030 acknowledges under SDG 1¹² the importance of creating sound policy frameworks based on pro-poor and gender-sensitive development strategies, to support accelerated investment in poverty eradication actions.

The key role of policy interventions for sustainable development is also recognised in the JP RWEE programme document, where one specific outcome (Outcome 4) is dedicated to securing a more gender responsive policy environment for the economic empowerment of rural women. This is in line with Article 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which calls for member states to respect and enforce the rights of rural women as they relate to access to productive resources and participation in decision-making processes¹³.

⁹ Quisumbing A. et al. (2014). *Gender in Agriculture: Closing the Knowledge Gap*, FAO and Springer Science + Business Media B.V, Dordrecht, p. 353.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 353.

¹¹ Ethiopia: UN Women/IFAD; Guatemala: WFP; Kyrgyzstan: UN Women; Liberia: UN Women; Nepal: UN Women; Niger: FAO; Rwanda: WFP.

¹² SDG 1, Target 1.b.

¹³ This provision was further strengthened by the technical support jointly provided by FAO, IFAD, WFP and UN Women that led to the formulation of CEDAW General Recommendation 34 on the rights of rural women, adopted in March 2016 and available at: http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/1_Global/INT_CEDAW_GEC_7933_E.pdf. This

Activities linked to this outcome have been particularly successful in all countries, where the existence of a National Steering Committee providing overall guidance on programme implementation and chaired by the Ministry of Agriculture has facilitated the collaboration and coordination with national governments. Some of the key results achieved, thanks to this collaboration, are listed below:

- In Ethiopia, the Gender Directorate of the Ministry of Agriculture and National Resources (MoANR) and of Women and Children Affairs created a National Network for Gender Equality in Agriculture in collaboration with the JP RWEE¹⁴. The Network is a functioning and enabling structure dedicated to creating gender-responsive agricultural sector policies, strategies and programmes. In addition, a Gender Equality Strategy for the Agricultural Sector was developed under the leadership of the Gender Directorate of MoANR. The Directorate is now being supported to prepare a dissemination and implementation plan for the strategy once it is finalized and endorsed.
- In Guatemala, following a specific request from the Government, the JP RWEE supported the development of the Policy for Gender Equality and Strategic Framework (2014–2023) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food. The policy, ratified in June 2015, takes into consideration the CEDAW Committee's latest recommendations to the Government of Guatemala and is being disseminated and implemented in the framework of the JP.
- In Nepal, the importance of ensuring rural women farmers' access and control over agricultural resources and services is now robustly presented in the draft Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) strategy of the Agriculture Development Strategy/ADS (2015-2035), developed with direct support from the JP RWEE. Furthermore, the JP RWEE was selected by the Ministry of Agricultural Development as one of the pilot initiatives for the implementation of the ADS, and is therefore an integral part of the country's identified priorities for agricultural development.

This high-level policy support is, in all countries, accompanied by an ongoing dialogue facilitated by the JP RWEE between targeted rural women and government institutions. In some cases, this has led to the development and approval of legislation directly responding to women's identified needs, as the following examples demonstrate:

- In Liberia, the National Rural Women Structure, a key partner of the JP RWEE, is advocating for the approval of the Land Rights Bill that is currently under review at the Liberian Legislature and has clear provisions on women's rights to own and inherit land¹⁵.
- In Kyrgyzstan, the JP conducted public hearings on the impact of the newly introduced legal amendments on the state pension social insurance and pension provision for rural women. Rural women activists participated in the hearings and voiced their concerns and

recommendation clarifies State obligations to recognize, protect and promote the rights of rural women and provides suggestions for practical policy and programmatic measures that can enhance women's rights in the field of food and agriculture.

¹⁴ Other international organizations members of the National Network for Gender Equality are: International Livestock Research Institute, International Water Management Institute, Livestock and Irrigation Value Chain for Ethiopian Smallholders Programme, Agriculture Knowledge Learning Documentation and Policy, DFATD/ Global Affairs Canada, Oxfam America, CARE, USAID, GIZ-SLM, Send a Cow, and The Ethiopian Horticulture Producers and Exporters Association.

¹⁵ In Liberia, widespread confusion exists on a range of legal, administrative, boundary, and ownership issues related to land, which are perhaps being stimulated by rising land value triggered by outside investors. As it often happens, when formal laws are silent or unclear, customary norms on marriage and property are typically used to fill the gaps, often to the disadvantage of women. A full brief on Women's Land Rights in Liberia is available at <http://www.focusonland.com/foia/en/countries/brief-womens-land-rights-in-liberia>.

recommendations to national decision makers. The discriminatory provisions proposed had a significantly higher burden of social tariff payment for rural smallholder farmers, compared to large landholders¹⁶. The recommendations were shared with the responsible Parliamentary committee and the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic. As a result, the draft law did not pass during the first hearing and has been sent back for improvements.

Achieving SDG 2: Sequenced package of interventions

Technological progress, globalization and rural transformation generate opportunities for economic growth, poverty reduction, employment, and food security. However, the same trends accelerate inequalities in access to assets and services – land, water, technology, innovation and credit, banking and financial services – and aggravate the conditions of rural women.

In this context, achieving SDG 2 to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture requires joint efforts and integrated interventions able to invest in the multi-faceted dimensions of sustainable development with a holistic approach to women's economic empowerment. The JP RWEE offers a comprehensive 'package' of carefully sequenced interventions to support women's economic and social empowerment, combining direct implementation and on-the-ground coordination with other community-level programming. Specifically, the focus is on: women's access to capacity development, productive assets, and technologies, finance, information and services, employment and market opportunities, and interventions aimed at promoting women's leadership within producer organizations and rural communities at large. This layering makes these interventions more complex to implement, therefore organizational capacity is crucial for project success.

▪ Capacity development

Capacity development starts from the principle that people are best empowered to realize their full potential when the means of development are sustainable – home-grown, long-term, and generated and managed collectively by those who stand to benefit. RWEE utilizes a wide array of participatory methods (for instance, Farmer Field Schools - FFS¹⁷), and other learning approaches (workshops, demonstration plots, women volunteers, ToT) to provide women participants with capacity development interventions designed to complement the other kind of support they are receiving at two levels: organizational and individual. This includes, but is not limited to: comprehensive programmes on how to improve the quantity and quality of agricultural production, nutritional information, value chain development, business development, financial literacy and marketing.

▪ Access to productive assets

Access to, control over, and ownership of assets including land, livestock, equipment and other resources enable rural households to create better livelihoods. Despite growing evidence that the distribution of these assets is critical for individual and family wellbeing, the gender asset gap is still a reality in many developing countries. In its countries of implementation, the JP

¹⁶ The calculation of the tariffs is based on average income of the region, and taking into consideration lower average earnings of men compared to women, the burden of payment is higher on women, without a parallel increase in the cumulative pension funds.

¹⁷ FFS offers space for hands-on group learning, enhancing skills for critical analysis and improved decision making by local people. In a typical FFS a group of 20-25 farmers meets once a week in a local field setting and under the guidance of a trained facilitator. In groups of five they observe and compare two plots over the course of an entire cropping season. One plot follows local conventional methods while the other is used to experiment with what could be considered "best practices"

RWEE is working to rectify this unequal distribution of assets at the level of households, Producer Organisations (POs), and communities. At the individual level, all targeted women have received improved seeds, fertilisers and agricultural tools to improve the quality and quantity of their production. In some of the countries (Guatemala, Nepal) this was accompanied by promotion of labour-saving technologies to reduce the drudgery associated with women's work. At the POs level, the focus has been on the provision of tools and technologies to enhance and control local food security reserves and respond to the current threat posed by climate change. This includes irrigation schemes, milling machines, solar bubble dryers, drying floors, and greenhouses.

Finally, some of the infrastructures identified as priority for targeted women were made available at the community level. This includes three Community Grain Reserves constructed in Liberia, and the multi-functional platforms¹⁸ distributed in ten villages in Niger. In Nepal, the programme facilitated the construction of three Community Agriculture Extension Service Centers (CAESC), built in the three programme districts of Nepal as an essential contribution to the implantation of the Agricultural Development Strategy. It is important to note that in Nepal, women already targeted by the JP RWEE built both irrigation infrastructures and CAESCs. This was made possible through provisions of Food Assistance for Assets (FFA)¹⁹, which created short-term employment opportunities and access to capital for income-generating activities for 1,837 Nepali women.

Preliminary findings on the effectiveness of this approach indicate promising results in both agricultural production (SDG 2.3) and dietary diversity (SDG 2.1).

Regarding food production, the combination of access to assets and capacity development led to an average increase of 60% per year in RWEE beneficiary districts in the seven country of implementation²⁰, peaking at 129% in the case of Nepal²¹. This increased availability is being used for both home consumption, thus contributing to food security, and as a means to increase income through selling surplus production.

Available assessments also show positive changes in household food consumption practices in all project countries. If we take the example of Kyrgyzstan, a recent study on "Monitoring Findings for Food Consumption" (August 2016) shows that in RWEE target areas the share of households having inadequate diet ('poor' or 'borderline' Food Consumption Score)²² has declined from 24% to 9% percent after participation in the project. This is a significant improvement compared to the pre-project status and much of it can be ascribed to increased consumption of vegetables, fruits, meat and milk products. Consumption of potato and sugar has also decreased as a result of a more diversified diet. Moreover, the Dietary Diversity

¹⁸ A multi-functional platform is built around a simple diesel engine, which can power various tools, such as a cereal mill, and can also generate electricity. It reduces many of the women's burdensome, exhausting and unproductive tasks (fetching water, grinding cereals, etc.).

¹⁹ FFA offers food or cash to people in exchange for their involvement in activities like building roads, dams or irrigation systems. These assets strengthen people's livelihoods, create healthier natural environments and reduce the risks from climate disasters by building resilience.

²⁰ Data calculated following the information provided by 6 out of 7 countries that compared the baseline data to the information collected one year after implementation started: Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, Niger and Rwanda.

²¹ The baseline figures of the agriculture production is in average 1,337 kg/Household (HH) for food crops and 234 kg/HH for vegetables in the three districts targeted by RWEE in Nepal (Sindhuli, Sarlahi and Rautahat). These figures were collected through the RWEE JP baseline survey conducted with selected HHs. In 2016, the agriculture yield with RWEE participants increased to 2,872 kg/HH for food crops (Paddy) and 574 kg/HH for vegetables.

²² The Food Consumption Score is a proxy indicator for household food access and food security. The FCS is a composite score based on dietary diversity, food frequency and relative nutrition importance of different food groups consumed during the last seven days.

Score²³ shows that after the JP interventions, the average frequencies are more equally distributed across the seven food types for which data were collected, reflecting a shift to a much more balanced diet. Increases in the consumption of fruits, vegetables and milk are particularly pronounced, and can be expected to strengthen health outcomes.

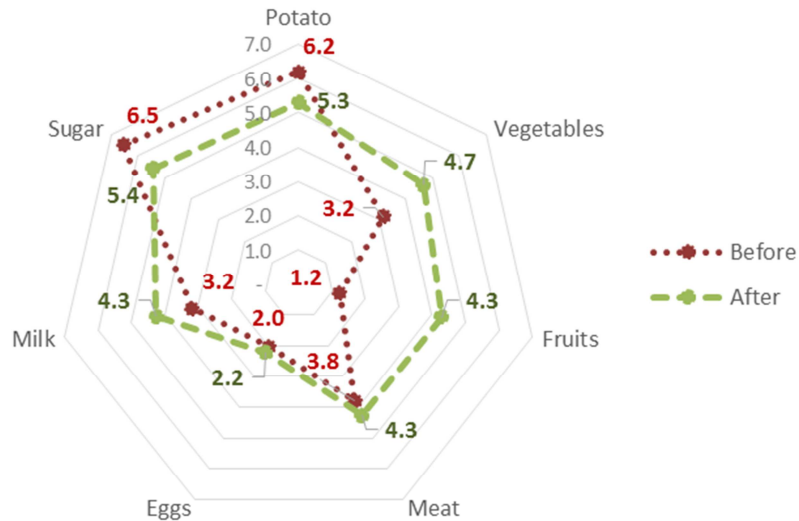


Figure 3: Average frequency of food consumption by type (days per week) in RWEE target areas in Kyrgyzstan

▪ **Access to markets**

Smallholder farmers often find it difficult to compete in formal markets, despite extensive development efforts to increase agricultural production and improve crop quality. Without the assurance that their efforts would pay off, farmers are unwilling to take risks of changing their production habits. In addition to that, rural women often lack timely market information, face challenges in negotiating prices with buyers and have difficulty physically accessing markets due to limited transport opportunities and restrictions on their mobility. To overcome these difficulties, the JP RWEE has used a pilot experience called “Purchase for Progress” (P4P), WFP’s main entry point in the initiative. Implemented since 2008, P4P uses WFP’s procurement footprint to provide smallholder farmers with an assured market, demonstrating that investments in pro-smallholder procurement, coupled with supply-side activities such as capacity building and input supply, can have a major positive effect on linking smallholder farmers to formal markets.

The power of P4P lies in its combination of providing women smallholder farmers – the primary target population of the JP RWEE - with an assured formal market, while improving their access to much-needed knowledge and resources that will promote sustainability even after support from P4P ends. In Ethiopia, Guatemala, Liberia and Rwanda this has meant:

²³ The Dietary Diversity Score is a proxy indicator of household food access and food security. It measures the number of individual foods or food groups consumed over a seven-day recall period.

- Providing women with labour-saving equipment (such as shellers, cleaning machines and other simple technologies) to enable them to complete farm work more efficiently and with less time and effort;
- Increasing the production and procurement of crops that could specifically be controlled by women for them to engage more in decision-making and marketing of their crops;
- Enhancing the quality of agricultural production for it to be marketed at a better price.

Interestingly, in Niger this approach was linked to the national school-feeding programme, so that the purchased production could be utilised to provide meals to primary education institutions. This is expected to create a “virtuous circle” as poor families are encouraged to send their children to school, where they will receive a nutritious meal.

While there is still work to be done to make those market linkages stronger and more sustainable, the income generated from sales of surplus production is promising: in 2016, in Liberia the cooperatives supported by RWEE (nine in total, with approx. 1,865 members) reported an average increase in incomes of 35%²⁴. In Guatemala, nine POs (approx. 400 women) formed with support from the JP earned a total of USD 48,220.00 from selling their surplus production through P4P.

▪ Access to finance

Ensuring that rural women have adequate access to financial resources is a key aspect of programmes aiming to economically empower women in a sustainable way. Conceiving appropriate financial products for women to be able to save, borrow and access insurance is essential to strengthen women's role as producers and widen the economic opportunities available to them²⁵. This is why, while access to finance is one key aspect of the JP RWE in all countries, each country team has designed specific products that are better suited to a given context. This “menu” that is made available for women takes into account the diversity of women's needs and constraints, and help women connect with agencies or other credit institutions (including banks) where they can obtain the support they need. Below are a few examples of those products:

- In Ethiopia, the JP is targeting existing women's Rural Saving and Credit Cooperatives (RUSACCOs) in two regions (Oromia and Afar). Specifically, RWEE is facilitating rural women's access to credit and loans, by strengthening RUSACCOs with provision of technical support and revolving fund; and by expanding microfinance repayment terms to preclude unfair payment periods and interest rates. In 2016 alone, all targeted women (2,347) received gender-sensitive financial services from ten RUSACCOs, while 26% of them (600) opened a bank account with saving balances ranging from 400 Birr (US\$17) to 3,000 Birr (US\$130). Moreover, 38% of participants (900 women) accessed credit specifically for their income-generating activities.
- In Kyrgyzstan, where Self-Help Groups (SHGs) of 5-8 women are the main entry point for the JP RWEE, access to finance has been a fundamental aspect of the sustainability strategy for programme interventions. At the community level, SHGs operate savings funds, which primarily serve as a social insurance scheme in cases of family emergencies, but can

²⁴ From USD 100 per week per cooperative to around USD 135 per week per cooperative.

²⁵ Quisumbing and al (2014). *Gender in Agriculture: Closing the Knowledge Gap*, FAO and Springer Science + Business Media B.V, Dordrecht, p. 187.

also be used as affordable small loans for SHG members' business needs. Furthermore, rural women in target villages have access to revolving funds and established women's cooperatives, and associations, which also allow them to jointly process and market their produce, and have a greater negotiating power within the value chains. Finally, revolving funds at the community level serve to provide access to affordable financial capital for agricultural and non-agricultural business activities of their members. Thanks to this multi-level approach, since programme started, over 1,700 rural women are running productive activities with up to 70% increase in productivity, while 805 women are running small scale businesses, and have increased their income by 30% on average.

- In Liberia, one of the pillars of the JP is the establishment and capacity building of women's Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA), which provide sustainable micro-finance services to members and enhance their engagement in economic activities. VSLAs add value to a traditionally known informal financial institution called Susu²⁶ by incorporating interest-based loans, share-based savings and social funds. Self-selected groups averaging 25 women are trained in the SLA methodology and best business practices to enable them to manage their own VSLAs and develop their businesses for improved profits. Of the 3,250 people (3,000 women and 250 men) who are currently members of the RWEE-supported VSLAs and accessing financial services, 1,750 (1,684 women and 66 men) are already engaged in entrepreneurial and agricultural activities. This approach, which also includes training on business development, has been adopted and replicated by the Ministry of Gender of Liberia in counties that are not covered by the JP.

Achieving SDG 5: Promoting women's agency

Even where gender gaps in human capital and physical assets are narrowed, differences in gender outcomes could emerge because women and men have unequal capacity to exercise agency, the individual's (or group's) ability to make effective choices and to transform those choices into desired outcomes²⁷. The JP RWEE focuses on a selection of activities closely associated to the promotion of women's ability to have a voice in society, influence policy and their decision-making at the household level, and live a life free from the risk of violence. This is integrated by the utilization of innovative tools to measure women's empowerment to inform programme implementation and have greater availability of tools and data to track progress in the economic empowerment of rural women. The ultimate outcome is to contribute to SDG 5 as gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for the attainment of the Agenda 2030.

- **Strengthening collective voice and representation**

Ensuring that women have a greater voice in decision-making processes at all levels – households, rural organizations, and communities at large - is providing benefits beyond gender equality and is also recognized as a significant target to achieve SDG 5²⁸. Collective action is a

²⁶ Susu is an informal means of collecting and saving money through a savings club or partnership, practiced throughout Africa and the Caribbean. It is usually taking turns by "throwing hand" as the partners call it. They pay a specific amount of money in one hand when it is collected to a person. Each month, every person in the group will collect a sum of money until the next time, when another susu is thrown.

²⁷ The World Bank (2011). *World Development Report 2012. Gender Equality and Development*: Washington, p.150.

²⁸ SDG 5, target 5 aims to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

powerful means for women to increase productivity and to access markets whilst sharing knowledge, information and productive assets including land, livestock, and credit. Supportive collective structures – such as producer organizations, community-managed savings and credit groups, enterprise and marketing cooperatives – help smallholders through economies of scale²⁹, greater bargaining power, facilitating access to agricultural services, and strengthening political voice³⁰. It is also essential for increasing the production of smallholder agriculture³¹.

Women leaders can advocate for improved women's access to and control over assets and productive inputs, thus creating conditions for boosting their productivity and incomes, leading to food security and increasing women's employment opportunities and real wages. However, even in the case of activities aimed at promoting rural women's leadership there is no "one size fits all" pathway that could be followed by the JP RWEE. Interventions had to be context-specific and based on gender analysis and gender assessments that looked at the prevailing social norms and stereotypes, the existence of legal and policy frameworks protective of rural women's rights and the extent to which they are enforced. Examples of the activities that have proven to be quite successful during RWEE implementation include:

- Literacy; which has been recognized by rural women participants themselves as one of the priority action to promote their full participation in the life of their communities, including in POs, and other women's or mixed groups. Through the Joint Programme, in 2016 alone, almost 3,800 women completed adult literacy courses, either organized as separate trainings (Niger, Guatemala), or as part of a more comprehensive capacity development package (Liberia).
- Human Rights trainings; as agency starts with women having a better understanding of their rights, including basic principles of gender equality and human rights.
- Formalization of women's groups; in all countries, the JP RWEE is working with two types of groups of women: the ones who are already part of established cooperatives, and the most vulnerable ones who are either part of an informal group or are not organized at all. While support to the first category has mostly focused on improving their access to markets, their production, or their gender-sensitive organizational capacities, the second group of women needed to be accompanied in the process to create formal organizations, thus allowing them to have access to a wider array of services from both private and government providers. This included the organization of awareness-raising sessions on national legal frameworks on cooperatives, and more concrete support to submit the requested documentation to relevant public offices.
- Leadership development; for women who already hold leadership positions and other women participants, for whom the JP RWEE teams have developed simplified modules. This "twin-track" approach has improved the share of women in governance bodies within POs and other groups (75% in average) and increased their self-confidence, up to the level

²⁹ Larger POs can enjoy cost advantages in skills and technology, finance and access to capital, and the organization and logistics of trading, marketing and storage as compared to individual smallholder farmers, thus outweighing the potential loss in productivity. See Rapsomanikis, *The economic life of smallholder farmers: An analysis based on household data from nine countries*: Rome, FAO, 2015.

³⁰ Ruchi Tripathi et al. *What works for women: Proven approaches for empowering women smallholders and achieving food security*. London: Oxfam GB, March 2012.

³¹ International Fund for Agricultural Development (2015), *Promoting the leadership of women in producer organisations – Lessons from the Experiences of FAO and IFAD*: Rome.

where approximately 100 women in Liberia and Kyrgyzstan³² asked for additional support in order to run for local elections.

- Promoting more equitable intra-household relationships

Many efforts to support women's empowerment focus on strengthening women's economic opportunities and decision-making capacities in groups or organizations. However, the same women often remain disempowered at the household level. They lack a voice in determining household priorities and spending patterns, and in addressing their own health care needs.

The Household Methodologies (HHMs) are innovative, participatory approaches used by the JP RWEE to promote equitable intra-household relations, fair division of labour and shared decision-making processes, in line with the provision of SDG 5, target 4, which calls to recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the promotion of shared responsibility within the household.

HHMs build on the understanding that women's empowerment cannot be achieved without change within the household involving all its members across genders and ages, thus shifting the focus from the individual to the household level, from things – such as assets, resources and infrastructure – to people, i.e., who they want to be and what they want to do. As part of the HHMs process, household members realize that inequalities in gender roles and relations can be part of the reason they stay poor. Hence, a household's ability to understand the causes of their current situation – and their willingness to act upon the findings – is crucial for unlocking a household's potential.

One of the most innovative, cost-effective and successful HHMs is the Gender Action Learning System (GALS), a community-led empowerment methodology that can be adapted to different cultural and organizational contexts³³.

Through a set of pictorial tools, GALS helps household members to build their vision for the future and define strategies on how to achieve it. The process at household level has four main steps³⁴ (see [Figure 4](#)):

- (i) Creating a household vision, which indicates where the household would like to be in two to three years' time. Visioning also involves identifying where the households are at present – in terms of their economic and social situation – and the reasons why they are there;
- (ii) Preparing an action plan, which requires the identification of opportunities that are available to help household members realize their vision and the challenges they may encounter, and the breaking of the vision journey into achievable time-bound steps;
- (iii) Implementing the action plan and monitoring progress;
- (iv) Graduating from the need for external support for implementing HHMs and ensuring sustainability.

³² In Kyrgyzstan, 20 of them got elected in local councils; while the results of the vote in Liberia will be known only in October 2017.

³³ The GALS methodology was developed by Linda Mayoux (international consultant) with partner organizations like Hivos, IFAD and Oxfam More information on the approach can be found at <http://www.galsatscale.net/>.

³⁴ Households move through the main steps several times as the situation changes; for example, updating action plans once targets have been met, new challenges have been encountered or new opportunities have arisen.

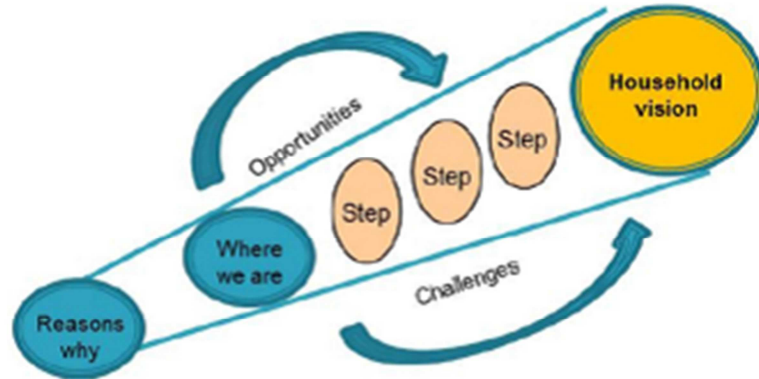


Figure 4: Vision Journey Tool. Source: www.galsatscale.net

This empowerment process helps improve the livelihoods of all household members, by realizing that working together is a win-win solution for everyone.

Implementation is currently conceived in the following three phases at community-level:

- Phase 1: Catalyst Phase 0-6 months working with 20-60 champions to develop and adapt the simple catalyst tools and pyramid peer-sharing structures.
- Phase 2: Skills, leadership and governance strengthening after 3-6 months reviewing achievements on the original diagrams, introducing more advanced versions of the basic diagram tools and for leadership and organizational governance. It starts to integrate the methodology and develop simple monitoring.
- Phase 3: Annual Review and Sustainability Plan reviews aggregated information on gender justice and other achievements. It also develops a sustainability plan including certification of the best champions to be paid for upscaling in other regions, robust monitoring and documentation system, training of staff to mainstream the methodology and local and/or commercial funding for upscaling and policy advocacy.

IFAD has rolled out GALS in the JP RWEE in Kyrgyzstan, where it adapted the methodology for the first time in Central Asia, and in Rwanda, where it built on the consolidated capacities of implementing partners.

In Kyrgyzstan, GALS used women's groups as delivery channel, providing a sustainability strategy for continued changes in the communities through a network of champions and to further improve income-generating business ideas through market mapping, and livelihood tools. In Rwanda, GALS are being channeled through cooperatives and producers' groups, alongside interventions aimed at supporting women's income generating capacity – such as kitchen gardens development and hen house construction. GALS/HHMs are therefore not only enhancing the effectiveness of these economic empowerment interventions, but also helping women's leadership and participation in their communities and in the household³⁵.

³⁵ In 2016 in Kyrgyzstan, 419 women and men have been reached through GALS champions and learned the skills of gender-sensitive visioning for happy family life, using participatory household methodologies, with a plan to scale up to additional 4,725 community members in 2017 through the pyramid peer sharing structure. In the same year, in Rwanda 160 Champions from eight (8) cooperatives in four (4) Districts have been trained and have trained in turn their fellows, adding up to a total number of 725 individual trained on GALS (447 women and 278 men).

For its capacity to i) transform gender-based power relations, ii) promote men and women's self-confidence and iii) improve livelihoods – both at individual level and through groups, GALS are being used as a key element of the JP RWEE sustainability strategy.

▪ Supporting women's right to live free from violence

Despite not being part of the initial design, activities focusing on combatting Gender-Based Violence (GBV) have been included in the majority of country workplans, in order to respond to priorities voiced by the rural women themselves. This is achieved through individual and collective activities like:

- Introducing a module on Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) and prevention of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), including channels of reporting during trainings for RWEE participants in Kyrgyzstan and Liberia.
- Supporting the collection and analysis of data of the National Information System on Violence against Women in Guatemala.
- Promoting a conducive environment at the community level: the JP RWEE recognizes the importance of creating a conducive environment for women's empowerment, where women participants can count on the support of their communities to enforce their rights. Almost 18,000 community members have to date been reached through Dimitra clubs, community conversations, and other awareness raising campaigns (like "HeforShe"³⁶) aimed at changing harmful attitudes and stereotypes towards women, and gain the support of the whole community for women's economic empowerment.

These forums have also constituted an entry point to discuss, manage and prevent potential conflicts or violence, so that this approach is being replicated also in other regions that are not currently targeted by RWEE (Niger) or is being institutionalized through the preparation of training manuals (Ethiopia).

▪ Using innovative tools to measure women's empowerment

Despite the existing extensive literature, part of which has already been mentioned in this paper, rigorous evidence on whether and how specific agricultural development investments empower women is still limited. Indeed, there is a need to systematically examine strategies that agricultural development projects use to empower women and standardize ways of measuring empowerment, so that we can understand the initial conditions women face in different contexts and the impact of different interventions on women's empowerment and other outcomes³⁷. This evidence is also needed to advocate with national governments for the adoption and strengthening of sound policies and enforceable legislation for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels, as requested by SDG 5, target 5.c³⁸.

The JP RWEE has used the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) in four of the seven countries of implementation to address this evidence gap. The WEAI is a survey-based index which is designed to measure women's empowerment (or the lack thereof) in five domains: i) decisions about agricultural production, ii) access and decision-making power about

³⁶ "HeForShe" is a solidarity campaign for the advancement of women initiated by UN Women. Its goal is to engage men and boys as agents of change by encouraging them to take action against negative inequalities faced by women and girls

³⁷ Johnson and al. (2017), *How Do Agricultural Development Projects Aim to Empower Women? Insights from an Analysis of Project Strategies - IFPRI Discussion Paper 01609*: Washington, p. 20.

³⁸ SDG 5, target 5.c: Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

productive resources, iii) control and use of income, iv) leadership in the community, and v) time allocation³⁹. The WEAI, first launched in 2012, is based on ten weighted indicators across the five domains. A shorter (abbreviated) version of the WEAI (A-WEAI) with only six indicators across the same five domains is also available⁴⁰.

In Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Niger and Guatemala, the WEAI was adopted as one of the diagnostic tools to study women's disempowerment in program communities⁴¹. [Table 1](#) summarizes the results from the baseline estimates of the WEAI in the four countries using a "scoring" system going from 1 to 3 where 1 is the domain that mostly contribute to disempowerment. The empty cells mean that the domain did not contribute significantly to disempowerment.

Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index: Key Contributor to Women's Disempowerment					
DOMAINS	INDICATORS	ETHIOPIA	GUATEMALA	KYRGYZSTAN	NIGER
Production	<i>Input in productive decisions</i>		3		
	<i>Autonomy in agricultural production</i>	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Resources	<i>Ownership of assets</i>	2	1	2	2
	<i>Purchase, sale, or transfer of assets</i>				
	<i>Access to and decisions on credit</i>				
Income	<i>Control over use of income</i>				
Leadership	<i>Group member</i>	3	2	1	1
	<i>Speaking in public</i>	n/a			
Time	<i>Workload</i>	1		3	3
	<i>Leisure</i>	n/a			n/a

N/a is used to note that data for the particular indicator was not collected. For example, in none of the countries there were data available on the autonomy in agriculture production used largely because of the difficulty in implementing the particular module and therefore the concerns about the reliability of the reports. While in most countries, an attempt was made to collect the full version WEAI (and reporting on the 10 indicators in the five domains), in Ethiopia the pro-WEAI version was collected. The pro-WEAI is still under development, but the A-WEAI estimates can be projected and are reported in the table.

Sources: the statistics for Ethiopia are based on preliminary analysis carried out by the Gender Team of FAO; the results from Guatemala come from a working paper by Alessandra Garbero and Emilie Perge. 2015. Reducing the Women Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), working paper IFAD, Rome, Italy. The results from Kyrgyzstan are derived from USAID/Kyrgyz Republic Economic Growth Project Zone of Influence Baseline Report. September 2015, prepared by Social Impact and M-Vector. The estimates for Niger are based on the baseline report for JP RWEE in Niger prepared by IFAD.

Table 1: Key contributors to women's disempowerment by country

³⁹ The WEAI is a composite of two sub-indexes: the 5DE and the gender parity index (GPI), where the 5DE is weighted by 0.90 and the GPI is weighted by 0.10.

⁴⁰ The A-WEAI was developed with the aim to shorten time and to reduce costs for data collection. Some projects have implemented versions of the WEAI that fall in between the full WEAI with 10 indicators and the A-WEAI with only six (6) indicators. For example, implementing the modules related to the autonomy in agricultural production proved difficult for enumerators and respondents in both Guatemala and Kyrgyzstan; therefore, this indicator was dropped from the calculation of the WEAI in those countries and instead of with 10 indicators, the WEAI is calculated with 9 indicators.

⁴¹ In all countries, except Ethiopia, the full version WEAI was implemented. In Ethiopia the pro-WEAI version was collected but because the pro-WEAI is still under development, only the A-WEAI results can be reported. In the A-WEAI (and the pro-WEAI) data for all 5 domains are collected but not for all indicators.

There are some similarities in the factors that contribute to women's disempowerment in all countries. Leadership and access to resources are key domains in which women are disempowered, and workload is a key determinant of women's disempowerment in three of the four countries. In Kyrgyzstan and Niger, leadership, and more specifically group membership, is the number one factor contributing to women's disempowerment. This is because few women can participate in formal or informal groups in the community. Access to resources is another area where a significant share of women has not achieved adequate empowerment. This domain consists of three indicators – ownership of assets; purchase, sale or transfer of assets; and access to and decisions on credit. Among these three indicators, access to and decision on credit is the one where women across all countries are most disadvantaged. Excessive workloads also contribute substantially to women's disempowerment. Guatemala is an exception, where input in productive decisions is a larger contributor to women's disempowerment than excessive workloads.

The case of Kyrgyzstan illustrates how the results from the WEAI were used to inform the RWEE program implementation⁴². According to the findings of the WEAI, the three key three main contributors to women's disempowerment are inadequate leadership (34.2%), access and decision-making power about productive resources (31.2%) and excessive work burden and dissatisfaction with time for leisure activities (22.1%). JP RWEE interventions were therefore designed to address these dimensions of disempowerment. As part of the JP RWEE, saving and revolving funds at the community level were set up to increase rural women's access to funding for their business initiatives⁴³. The JP RWEE also supports the establishment of SHGs with members from similar background who live close-by to each other. These women meet regularly with their group members and on a monthly basis with all women in the association of self-help groups. Today these women's organizations have actively initiated public discussions around women's reproductive rights and health, domestic violence, early marriages. Women in self-help groups participated in the process of local strategic planning discussions, through focus groups, in budget hearings, and other decision-making fora, which allowed them to voice their needs and priorities.

To address time poverty, the business initiatives women pursue have been analyzed from the perspective of the time they require for running it. Special trainings on use of IT, computer designing, repair of cellphones have been organized, which require less time for running, and the highest outcome in terms of profit per unit of time invested. Finally, to facilitate changes in gender roles, and reduction of unpaid care work on women, the GALS methodology has been introduced and is expected to lead to fairer distribution of work, and higher participation of women in decision-making in the household. This integrated approach is expected to improve empowerment of women in the identified dimensions.

The WEAI can also be used to evaluate the impacts of the programme over time. For example, in Ethiopia in addition to the baseline data which was collected before the start of the program, another wave of WEAI data will be collected in 2018, two years after the start of the program, in order to assess whether the program achieved its objectives and improved women's empowerment.

⁴² The WEAI was implemented as a part of the baseline data for USAID's Feed the Future interventions in Kyrgyzstan. The survey was conducted in four provinces, which coincided with four of five provinces where JP RWEE operates.

⁴³ See para on "Access to finance".

III. How to promote rural women's empowerment in the changing world of work: lessons learned from the JP RWEE

As UN Agencies and other international organisations are more and more focusing on women's empowerment and its contribution to poverty reduction, we need a clearer understanding of how this goal can be achieved effectively. There has been little systematic work on mechanisms by which interventions can enhance women's empowerment, and on measuring the effects of different types of interventions⁴⁴. To contribute to this research, the JP RWEE has, since its inception, invested time and resources in knowledge management and knowledge sharing at the national and global levels, in order to identify the types of strategies and interventions that are proving to be particularly effective to reach the final objective of empowering women and accelerating poverty reduction in target areas⁴⁵. Among the key lessons learned so far from programme implementation, we can mention that:

- *Providing a multi-sectoral development package* to each beneficiary (including provision of productive assets, tools and technologies and design of needs-based capacity development interventions maximizes the impact and sustainability of interventions;
- *Accompanying the creation, consolidation and formalization of women's groups* facilitates access to goods and services (e.g. credit and financial services, market information), promotes economic competitiveness of rural women and ensures support beyond project completion date;
- *Identifying the right partners*, avoiding duplication of efforts and building on each other comparative advantages enhances programme performance and results;
- *Choosing adequate governance and programme implementation mechanisms* reduces operational costs and ensures programme-wide coherence beyond national boundaries. In addition, ownership of partners for the JP RWEE, especially local partners, guarantees sustainability and scalability in the long term;
- *Gaining new skills, competences and organizational capacities* helps women participate in socio-economic activities, enhances their decision-making roles and to earn increased respect within and outside their households;
- *Engaging men and promoting equitable intra-household relationships* ensures joint efforts for improved livelihoods as well as a real transformation of barriers that prevent women from achieving their full potential;
- *Promoting South-South cooperation* through knowledge exchange, peer support, and pooling of capacities accelerates programme results and contributes to the adoption and adaptation of the most relevant and effective solutions amongst stakeholders;
- *Supporting a more gender-responsive policy environment* at the national and local levels fosters empowerment of rural women in line with their socio-economic needs.

⁴⁴ Johnson and al. (2017), *How Do Agricultural Development Projects Aim to Empower Women? Insights from an Analysis of Project Strategies - IFPRI Discussion Paper 01609*: Washington, p. 20.

⁴⁵ Those lessons and best practices were identified and discussed during a Learning Workshop held in FAO HQ on 22-24 February 2017. The workshop brought together for the first time the National Coordinators of the JP RWEE in the seven countries, and the focal points of the four Participating Agencies at HQ level, who are also members of the Technical Advisory Committee of the Joint Programme.

The flexibility of this approach, along with a close collaboration with national governments and especially the Ministries of Agriculture in each country, has eliminated duplication of efforts but also, in some cases, extended the scope of the JP beyond the indicative activities included in the initial design⁴⁶.

IV. Conclusions

While there is widespread recognition that women's economic empowerment takes time, the process can be accelerated by combining a wide array of interventions that work simultaneously on different drivers that have the potential to expand women's economic opportunities and promote access to decent work for individual participants.

This integrated action has mostly focused on removing structural barriers to women's engagement in economic activities and on freeing up women's time to take advantage of new employment opportunities:

- Promotion of women's equal participation in rural communities;
- Provision of technology for increased and better quality production, and drudgery reduction;
- Holistic approach to capacity development for increased income;
- Use of HHMs to encourage fairer division of unpaid care responsibilities and allocation of resources between women and men;
- Establishment of revolving funds to provide access to capital for women at the individual and group levels;
- Increased awareness around land tenure and land use rights; and
- Support to public institutions to provide and/or enforce policies, legislation, and other measures to ensure gender equitable rights in the world of work.

This approach is starting to produce promising results in terms of creating employment opportunities not only in POs, but also at the individual level: during 2016 only, almost 5,100 women participating in RWEE who run small businesses (of which 1,840 started following the support received by the Joint Programme itself) saw an increase in their incomes of up to 30%⁴⁷.

It is important to highlight that these interventions, in addition to guaranteeing better incomes for targeted rural women, are also having a positive impact on the social welfare of their families, including family health insurance and children's education: for instance in Ethiopia, 13% of rural women participants reported that they were enabled to provide educational materials for their children attending school. Similar results are emerging from several interviews that were carried out by project teams in the other countries⁴⁸.

As mentioned before, this paper summarizes the first lessons that are being learned from a programme still being implemented and with a relatively short lifespan; however, the JP RWEE

⁴⁶ See for instance para on "Supporting women's right to live free from violence".

⁴⁷ JP RWEE Consolidated report 2016.

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

will continue to draw lessons and create opportunities for information and knowledge sharing, thereby contributing to the global dialogue on the “business case” for rural women's economic empowerment as a key strategy to achieve the Agenda 2030.