

# GREATER RURAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN (GROW) CASE STUDY REPORT

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DECEMBER 2019

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was commissioned by the Canadian Food Security Policy Group (FSPG). The research team expresses a special thank you to Philemon Puordeme Dong-Uuro for his assistance on data validation.

### About the FSPG Case Study Series

In 2019, the Canadian Food Security Policy Group (FSPG) commissioned a series of six case studies to understand how Canadian investments in agriculture support sustainable development outcomes in West Africa. These projects showcase how such investments support broad sustainable development outcomes such as gender equality, environmental sustainability and climate resilience, improved livelihoods and enhanced food security. Case studies were informed by literature reviews of project documentation and interviews and focus group discussions carried out in impacted communities. The research was carried out by local research teams supported by Canadian and local partners.

The FSPG is a network of Canadian development and humanitarian organizations with expertise in global food systems, and food security in the Global South.

**Project at a Glance:** Greater Rural Opportunities for Women (GROW)

**Canadian partner:** Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA)

**Local partners:** Tumu Deanery Rural Integrated Development Programme (TUDRIDEP), Professional Network North (ProNet), Community Aid for Rural Development (CARD), Capacity Enhancement and Community Support (CAPECS) and Partnership for Rural Development Action (PRUDA).

**Total project budget:** CAD \$20 million

**Duration:** 2012 - 2018

**Location:** Upper West Region, Ghana

**Research location:** Wechiau Bau and Pluma in Ghana's Upper West Region

**Participants:** 23,368 women farmers cultivating soybeans in rural Upper West Region of Ghana and over 163,879 secondary beneficiaries.

**Value chain:** Soy

**Key objectives:** To improve food security, by helping women farmers increase availability, access, and utilization of a variety of appropriate and nutritious foods through strengthening production and market linkages, increasing diversification in production, and creating nutrition awareness.

**Sustainable development objectives addressed:** Women's economic empowerment (WEE), gender equality, improved food security, climate change, household and community nutrition, and environmental sustainability.

## **Ghana: Understanding the context for investments in agriculture**

Though agriculture's contribution to economic growth increases and decreases in Ghana, crop production's contribution to development by GDP only increases. Crop production is the second largest activity in Ghana with a share of 14.5 percent of GDP (GSS, 2019). However, the increasing economic developments and opportunities in Ghana are unequally distributed between rural and urban areas, across Northern and Southern Ghana, and among men and women. Small scale traditional farmers in the northern regions of Ghana continue to contend with poverty and food insecurity despite national agricultural growth. Unlike southern Ghana, which has two rainy seasons in a year, Northern Ghana has only one. Since agriculture in Ghana is highly dependent on rain, this disparity negatively impacts agriculture-based livelihoods in northern Ghana more than in the south. Additionally, most farmers in northern Ghana reside in rural areas where there are fewer opportunities for agricultural innovation, growth, and transformative development owing to unequal access to land, markets, financial support, and climate-smart technology.

### **About GROW**

Led by the Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA)<sup>1</sup> working with a range of local partners, the Greater Rural Opportunities for Women (GROW) project aimed to alleviate poverty and food insecurity. Under the project, MEDA supported 23,368 women farmers, referred to as

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<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1953, MEDA is an international economic development organization. Its mission is to create business solutions to poverty by partnering with people living in poverty to start or grow businesses in developing regions around the world. For more information on MEDA, see <https://www.meda.org/about/about-meda>.

clients, who cultivate soybeans in rural Upper West Region of Ghana and over 163,879 secondary beneficiaries. Secondary beneficiaries included children of GROW clients, whose nutrition, education, health, and general wellness increased as a result of GROW's initiatives. Neighbours of GROW clients also benefitted from rain water harvesters.<sup>2</sup>

GROW included interventions related to agriculture, nutrition, value chain development, financial services, gender equality, and technology transfer. The project reached women farmers through local groups and public and private sector partners with interventions that built the capacity of clients and local implementing partners, referred to hereafter as key facilitating partners. Partners and supporters included financial institutions, buyers and aggregators of soya, influential men in beneficiary communities, and decentralized local government departments such as the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA), the Ministry of Gender Child and Social Protection (MoGCSP), and Ghana Health Service (GHS). GROW developed the capacity of its partners to support families with resources, market linkages, and knowledge required to ensure food security.

In addition to working with partners, the activities under the project included:

- Policy and stakeholder engagement to address land tenure issues to improve women's access to productive land;
- Facilitation for women to purchase locally available, appropriate agricultural technologies through a matching grant Technology Fund to improve women's access to technological innovations;
- Recruitment and training of influential men as gender activists in beneficiary communities;
- Establishment of over 1,000 client groups which were both farmer groups and Village Savings and Loan Groups;
- Training on soybean production through the "train-the-trainer" model that included key facilitating partners, lead farmers and members of lead farmer groups;
- Training for women clients on soy aggregation, nutrition and good agronomic practices that supported women's leadership and agency, including using "Talking Books," a device that was shared by project participants and included pre-recorded messages on relevant topics;
- Training and ongoing support to Women Lead Farmers, who led the farmer groups, and Women Sales Agents, who bought soy from farmers and aggregated it for resale to processors;
- Training on household gardens to produce additional nutritious food to consume or sell;
- Creation and strengthening of market linkages, connecting women producers and processors to small and large-scale buyers;
- Facilitation of interactions between project partners, including financial institutions, credit unions, and clients;
- Increasing the availability and utility of rain water harvesters to clients;
- Expanding the economic benefits of village savings and loans among clients towards increasing livelihoods.

Through these interventions the project increased productivity on farms and clients' resilience to drought and other climate impacts. It diversified production in the soy value chain, strengthened market links, and raised awareness on nutritional issues and methods of improving overall household nutrition. To promote gender equality, GROW also supported women's engagement in decision-making and community appreciation of clients' economic contributions to their

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<sup>2</sup> Rain water harvesters are structures attached to the roofs of clients' houses to channel rain water into containers nearby.

households. Overall, improved gender equality, enhanced agricultural production, and environmental sustainability were cross-cutting themes incorporated into all GROW activities.

## **Research approach and focus**

Working with MEDA and local partners, the research team selected two districts within the Upper West Region for a qualitative case study which covered Wa West District and Sissala East District. The research team carried out focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and in-depth interviews with clients of the GROW project. In each community, two gender disaggregated focus group discussions were held with eight participants in each group. Ten key informant interviews were conducted with respondents from key facilitating partners and other partnering state and private organizations. The research team conducted in-depth interviews with six GROW clients and four male residents of selected communities. The qualitative design showing data collection tools and numbers of research participants is detailed in Appendix 1. All interviews were conducted in the beneficiary communities at times convenient for target participants. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim into English. Transcripts were coded and thematically analyzed using the project's areas of operation and objectives.

After the drafting of a study report, a validation exercise was conducted with participants of the study in the Wechau-Bao community on the 4th and 5th of November, 2019. Key Informants from the Key Facilitating Partners (KFPs) and State Institutions who worked closely with the project were also engaged to confirm the validity of the findings drawn from the study. At the community level, the validation involved 18 Focus Group Participants (10 women and 8 men) from the Wechau-Bao community. These were the people who participated in the study. Institutional respondents who validated the study report included the Director of CAPECS (a KFP); Project Officer; Literacy Bridge (an implementing partner); the Regional WIAD Officer; and the Regional Director of the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection.

## **Investments in agriculture transforms lives**

The project partnered with state and non-state actors whose areas of operation focused on women in agriculture, women and children's protection, nutrition and health, gender issues, and financial services. Partners developed a gender strategy that identified and dealt with social norms and power relations that limited women's engagement in agriculture and issues of gender inequality. As the project evolved, its emphasis on women's economic empowerment was strengthened in addition to its goal of improved food security.

### **GROW helped increase women's access to productive land**

The project's partners identified discriminatory land tenancy arrangements and other factors as barriers to women in agriculture. The study found that the project used stakeholder engagement, increased access to inputs, information and technology, effective partnerships, financial and skills capacity development, and engagement with men in communities to empower clients.

With respect to gender biased land tenancy arrangements, the project engaged land owners, traditional leaders, and influential stakeholders at community and regional levels at a land forum held in Wa, the Upper West regional capital. Many of the key informant interviewees indicated that the land forum increased women's access to fertile lands by reducing former practices of allocating small portions of unproductive and difficult-to-cultivate lands to women farmers. A lead farmer explained how the land forum increased women's access to productive lands:

*“...the land meeting in Wa (reference to land forum) was very good. They spoke to the men, the Tindana (landlords), even some of the chiefs were there. So after that, the chiefs and leaders also spoke to the men in the community and the men started giving women more land to farm. In this community they have stopped giving women bad lands. If only you are serious and you want to farm you will get land to farm. Women in our group have gotten more lands...”* IDI\_ woman lead farmer

Increasing women’s access to, and control over, productive land was one of GROW’s key agendas. This was one of the key agendas promoted through the land forum: that husbands and family leaders allocate more family and community lands to women.

While overall GROW clients gained long-term access to fertile lands through engagements with land owners, setbacks occurred in a few instances where some men, after some farming seasons, reclaimed farm lands initially given to women because leguminous soya had enriched those lands permitting them to farm maize and other crops. Implementing partners dealt with this challenge through continuous engagement with community and family leaders where these incidents were occurring to protect clients’ long-term access to and control over fertile lands. Men’s interference with lands acquired by women decreased, and clients’ autonomy increased as a result of the intervention of implementing partners. The clients’ long-term access<sup>3</sup> to fertile lands increased their agency over farming activities on the acquired lands and improved the lands’ agricultural productivity.

### **GROW improved women’s access to technology and agricultural inputs**

The GROW project’s Technology Fund allowed women to purchase agricultural technologies from local commercial providers with a limited-term subsidy from GROW. The subsidy was a matching grant fund, which meant that the women were required to pay a percentage of the equipment cost up front, and MEDA paid the remaining balance. This subsidy was available for a limited time, after which women had to pay the full cost of the equipment; it was ultimately designed to catalyze the market for the equipment. Appropriate technologies were selected to support all stages of the soy growing, processing and marketing cycle, and included motorized three-wheeled vehicles, planters, chemical sprayers and threshers. The tricycles that women acquired through the fund, popularly known as “motor kings,” are three wheeled motorized vehicles used mostly to transport people and items from communities to farms and vice versa as well as between communities. The vehicles are solely owned and managed by the women clients of the project who purchased them. Acquisition of productive resources was coupled with training engagements to equip clients to manage the assets profitably and to independently take decisions on the usage of the productive resources.

Some respondents posited that the project’s co-investment for women’s economic empowerment, such as subsidized acquisition of planters, chemical sprayers and motorized three wheeled vehicles, were critical productive resources that increased women’s financial contribution to household subsistence. By extension, GROW clients became more influential and powerful in their households as their economic relevance increased. This notion was captured in a response by a key informant responding to how the project empowered women by addressing norms and power relations:

*“...the women experienced many changes, because initially most of them were not contributing much to the house, but those who received the motor kings (reference*

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<sup>3</sup> Access to land means clients have secured land tenancy.

*to tricycles) and other supports from the projects started making money and they contributed to the upkeep of the house, the children's school fees, and other needs. So once they start contributing to the upkeep of the house, their status as mere consumers changed, you see? They gained power and the' respect of their husbands..."* Kil\_ woman, gender ministry

In addition to the Technology Fund, the project increased women's access to innovation through district and community level extension delivery agents that partnered with GROW. The study discovered three tiers of delivering innovative agricultural technology and services to clients. First, local Key Facilitating Partners received training on soybean production, specifically on good agronomic practices, conservation agriculture, post-harvest management, and dry season vegetable gardening. They in turn provided training to lead farmers who then provided the same training to their group members. This channel facilitated access to agricultural innovation in terms of updating existing practices. The proportion of women farmers with access to agricultural extensions services increased by 59%, an improvement that implied improved agronomic practices among clients.

Second, GROW also partnered with the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA). Through this partnership extension service agents from MoFA provided technical and innovative agricultural practices to clients of GROW. Examples of specific innovations introduced include climate-smart agricultural practices and access to improved seed varieties. Clients increased their soya bean production as a result of adopting these innovative practices. Soya bean production increased by 0.38Mt/Ha over the baseline measurement (Emperiks, 2018). A significant outcome of adoption of these innovations was the increased yield in dry season farming by 17% from baseline to end line (Emperiks, 2018).

Third, using "Talking Books," women received valuable information on agricultural practices and were even involved in agricultural research. The Talking Book is a battery powered device that contains pre-loaded audio messages on several topics on health, nutrition, and gender. The Talking Books were provided to clients for a period and collected afterwards. Researchers who worked on the GROW project were able to collect information on the number of times an audio track was listened to and take recorded audio feedback from clients (See Plate 1 of Talking Book) below. Some participants in the interviews indicated that clients' feedback from the uptake of introduced technologies was used by the Soybean Innovation Lab which partnered with the GROW Project. In this sense, the project introduced an innovative approach to providing relevant information to clients and soliciting feedback that informed research activities.



Figure 1. Talking Book Used by GROW's Clients

Source: Qualitative data collection September 2019, Upper West Region.

In addition to these efforts, GROW contracted service providers who delivered electronic market and weather information to its clients. This was received by selected farmers and passed on to members of their group. A participant noted similar SMS delivery platforms initiated by other projects as external factors that potentially increased agricultural innovation among clients.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the Women Lead Farmers/Sales Agents organized mechanization services, such as tractor services, for female farmers in the community during production season. This is done through linkage with mechanization service providers at the beginning of the production season. This approach has supported access to inputs as well as the leadership and agency by women acting as Lead Farmers and Sales Agents.

The success of improved access to inputs and innovations led to positive outcomes among clients and non-clients, according to those engaged in the study. Key Facilitating Partners' expectations were exceeded when GROW clients won regional and district awards for best soya bean farmers and best women farmers. Among non-clients it was observed that men had begun cultivating soya beans because of the increasing market opportunities that GROW clients experience.

Overall, GROW facilitated greater access to appropriate inputs, equipment and technology, land, agricultural extension services, and rural financial services. These improvements led to increased participation by women in markets through their roles as producers, sales agents, and processors. Specifically, productivity, nutritional outcomes, and incomes of GROW clients increased. The final evaluation showed that, the average annual income for women farmers had increased from 538 GHS (CAD 135) in 2012 to 1,104 GHS (CAD 278) in the 2017 farming season because of soybean sales, a 105% increase. Further, GROW women farmers' soybean yields increased from 0.73

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<sup>4</sup> This technology involved the use of text messages to communicate weather and market price information to farmers including GROW beneficiaries. Information was received and spread through literate community extension volunteers who were trained and deployed by other project interventions.

metric tonnes per hectare in 2012 to 1.11 metric tonnes per hectare in 2017 (Emperiks, 2018).

### **GROW partnered for impact**

Alongside these efforts, GROW had an important focus on partnership that supported gender equality outcomes. Partnerships with financial institutions, credit unions, and produce-buying enterprising buyers/off-takers, were established to allow clients to benefit from key services. The main factor that contributed to successful partnerships, unanimously expressed by those respondents who discussed this, was the project's minimal involvement in actual transactions between partners and beneficiaries. The focus was to create business relationships without making impositions; the project allowed partners to apply their respective operational standards in their work with client beneficiaries without interference. MEDA facilitated linkages and communication between service providers and potential clients and did not require financial institutions to change the terms of their services. MEDA supported women in understanding the obligations of loans, while helping service providers grasp women's needs as clients. This approach was considered key to productive partnerships between agencies and women's groups.

Regarding the use of local partners, participants acknowledged that their prior experience working with women's groups in the beneficiary communities increased their ability to form and sustain effective partnerships in the context of GROW. Another important success factor was that the project concentrated on building the capacity of clients without altering the operational standards of partners. Both clients and implementing partners had received increased capacity-building, which enabled them to form lasting partnerships.

### **GROW innovated to enable women to manage their finances**

The study also found that one significant innovation by the GROW project was the establishment of Village Savings and Loans Associations (VLSAs) among clients. These were small groups with mainly women as members who met regularly to save money and engage in other group activities. Through the VLSAs, clients were able to mobilize funds. At the same time, GROW partners used the associations as a platform for delivering information, training, and financial services.

Some engagements between financial institutions and clients were found to be innovative and productive. The study discovered a scenario where a financial institution adapted to clients' saving strategies. The timing and amount clients paid to financial institutions were adjusted by a financial partner to allow more clients to benefit from financial services overall. The financial institution accepted any amount of money clients offered without setting a minimum deposit amount. It also increased the number of visits to the clients to enable them to make more regular deposits, at the request of clients. The financial institution also visited clients during their group meetings to collect deposits and provide information on financial literacy.

Field officers of financial institutions understood the women's preference to have their savings and lending activities kept confidential to avoid having their money confiscated by husbands or male relatives. Some interviewees indicated that clients concealed their savings in their clothes until they could hand them over to field officers of financial institutions. Thus, staff of financial institution partners began wearing non-branded shirts when visiting women to collect loan repayments. All these strategies were innovative ways to work with clients who prioritized confidentiality. Their receipts were later prepared and delivered to them individually during their group meetings. The following dialogue captures some of these strategies:



*“...It is interesting, when you work with them (reference to GROW clients) you get to understand them. They don’t want their husbands to know that they are saving, and we understand that. They have many tactics in giving deposits to our staff, and we have trained our people (reference to staff) to do what makes them comfortable.*

*Interviewer: what are some of the ways?*

*Many ways, some of them would wrap their money in clothes and pass it to the field officers. Some will pass it through windows, depending on who is present at the time of the visit. Our field officers have also gotten used to it, so they understand their movements (tactics)...” KII\_ Financial institution*

### **GROW increased women’s agency and leadership**

Alongside technical inputs, partnerships and finance, GROW included an important focus on capacity development and skills training for participants, activities that improved women’s capacity for agency and leadership. The project increased women’s capacity by increasing their control over productive resources and developing their leadership skills. Project interventions targeted barriers to leadership and agency. For example, rural women in impacted communities are viewed mainly through their supportive role to men’s social and economic initiatives. GROW’s interventions tackled this barrier by organizing, training, and empowering women and encouraging them to take on leadership positions. Clients were trained on soy aggregation, nutrition, good agronomic practices, and leadership skills.

The purpose of the training was to equip trainees to be able to train other group members on acquired areas of competence in ways that make them leaders in those focus areas. This study found that through capacity-building initiatives, approximately 150 women who gained aggregation skills and market linkages became Sales Agents, buying soy from other women farmers and selling to larger scale buyers such as processors. Increased agency and leadership by women could be seen in the number of women who initiated autonomous market transactions with GROW networks and even sometimes with market actors outside of GROW’s linkages. Most key informants reported that such market linkages were still active at the time of data collection and further projected that because they were independently negotiated with market actors these initiatives were self-sustaining. Finally, several GROW clients have also become community resource persons on nutrition. Called GROW Mother Facilitators, these clients are demonstrating leadership by providing vital information on nutrition to their community members and facilitating nutrition activities in their communities (Emperiks, 2018).

According to the project evaluation, socially, clients’ engagement in decision making in their households and communities increased, improved confidence, increased income, and improved yields. Regarding decision making, clients of GROW became more involved in decision making (from 58% to 92% during the project lifespan) in household issues, with increased access to assets, services and additional support, all of which were important pathways in facilitating women’s economic empowerment. The Emperiks evaluation showed high rates of involvement (between 91.91% and 88.57%), bordering on important household and personal farming decision making respectively among women farmers across districts in the Upper West Region of Ghana.

One key informant indicated that one unintended outcome of increased incomes of women is that some men are beginning to shirk their responsibilities in the household, knowing well that the women have more resources now to take care of the household expenses. One male participant

indicated that in the last two farming seasons, his wife who is a GROW beneficiary, paid for him to get a tractor to plough his maize farm.

Overall, the research team noticed that narratives of increased agency by participants in the case study research agreed with several quantitative findings of GROW evaluations. For example, more clients of GROW were able to personally employ and pay others for various transactions. Clients' ability to employ others increased in all implementing districts from 84% to 99%, an indication that women were now conducting financially autonomous transactions. Some of the participants thought that the increase in clients' agency was sustainable because women were able to participate in community decision making. Due to the increased leadership skills of some of the clients, they now received more recognition from the community, and some were now part of community committees such as the Community Health Committee and Water and Sanitation Committee.

Others also described the activities of Lead Farmers and Sales Agents as an indication of sustained agency because they observed that their mobilization initiatives continued even after the end of the project. Asked why they thought increased agency in clients was sustainable, one of the participants explained:

*"...the sales agents and lead farmers were doing the mobilization themselves, and they still do it even after the project has ended. I see them all the time. They organize mechanization services for their group members, they bargain and do the transactions themselves. The project just linked them to service providers..."*  
KII\_KFP

### **GROW engaged men effectively to support transformative change**

One unintended consequence of women's increased leadership, as expressed by their husbands, was that increasing the agency of women reduced the degree to which they were submissive to their husbands. This notion was reported by key informant interviews as an initial concern expressed by some men at the beginning of the project. However, this concern was addressed by using male gender activists to dispel the men's concerns.

The project recruited and trained influential men as gender activists in beneficiary communities. Male gender activists were influential men in their communities who showed passion for women's empowerment initiatives. They were nominated by project clients and vetted by implementing partners to verify their competence as effective activists. Male gender activists were trained to sensitize other men on the benefits of enhancing clients' access to fertile lands and other emerging issues at the community level. In some instances, male gender activists mediated land disputes in which men had taken back lands given to women for farming.

The "Talking Book" was also used to address gender stereotypes. Its messages were shared with clients' husbands. In a focus group discussion, a participant noted she listened to the gender roles topics with her husband, who had expressed interest in listening to more topics on the subject:

*"...I like the women and men stories (reference to scenarios on the talking book). We want them to bring more. I listen with my husband..."* FGD\_women group.

A key informant affirmed this when asked how they collected and used feedback from the Talking Book. In his response he revealed that the gender roles topics are the most listened-to topics.

*“...when we retrieve the talking book, we are able to know the number of times they listened to a particular story. The most popular one is the gender topics, they request more of it....”* KII\_ Talking Book

## **Improving livelihoods**

### **GROW supported increased earnings**

Through the activities under GROW, the project increased income from sales of soybeans by 105% among its clients. Clients' annual income from soybean doubled from GHS 538 in 2012 (baseline) to GHS 1,104 in 2017. Most of the project clients and partners interviewed noted that the project increased earnings by increasing the income from soya and other agricultural produce. The Emperiks evaluation found that household income due to better market access increased from 27% at baseline to 81% in 2018. Apart from increasing income earnings from soy, clients diversified their incomes, including through dry season gardening and from using the three wheeled vehicles (motor kings) as a means of commercial transport for goods and people during dry seasons. It was also confirmed by participants that the motor kings were used to support the community in general by transporting sick members to seek healthcare. This, they indicated, has brought recognition and respect to those women who own the motor kings.

Another approach to increasing earnings was by diversifying sources of income and developing entrepreneurial and management skills in beneficiaries. Through entrepreneurial and business training on value-added products, direct and indirect economic opportunities emerged for women beneficiaries. Results from the case study indicate that clients' earnings increased as a result of earnings from the sale of soya beans, soya meals like soya flour, soya kebab, and other value-added products made from soya. Cultivating soya also meant that beneficiaries spent less money on purchasing food due the abundance of soya and the diverse ways in which soya could be prepared for consumption, which they learned through nutrition training sessions. Beneficiaries were also able to benefit from value-added activities, resulting in diversified sources of income.

### **GROW supported diversified access to markets for clients**

The case study revealed three main approaches adopted by GROW clients to increasing market access. First, as noted above, the GROW project established market relations between buyers and clients; second, GROW trained clients on value addition and entrepreneurial skills to identify new products and markets; and third, nutrition and utilization training increased and stimulated local demand for soy in the local market. Market linkages between clients and buyers were established and strengthened through interactive forums that brought together Lead Farmers, Sales Agents and other value chain actors to interact and discuss business opportunities. During these meetings, buyers, aggregators and farmers discussed pricing and established business relations. One unexpected yet positive outcome from these opportunities was that some clients were able to establish relationships with buyers in Burkina Faso, Ghana's neighbouring country to the north. Implementing partners attributed these initiatives to the entrepreneurial and marketing skills they developed in their clients through training that enabled some clients to become sales agents and market intermediaries buying soy from other farmers and selling to larger scale buyers.

### **GROW led to greater sharing of unpaid work between couples at home**

Due to project investments that increased women's earnings, their contribution to household subsistence increased. The result, as shared by some participants, was that men started assisting

women with some unpaid household tasks to enable those economically active women to sustain and improve their earnings and their overall contribution to household subsistence. This was likely due, at least in part, to the gender training, Talking Book messages, and male gender activists who had been working with communities since the project inception and ultimately inspired men to support women with unpaid work. A gender focal person from one of GROW's local implementing partners admitted that men helping with domestic unpaid work, was a positive change:

*"...as for the men, you have to keep talking to them. Sometimes these things are not common, to see a man helping his wife with caring for the children. Something like that is not common, but we have some of the men doing it..."* KII\_ Implementing partner

The view that GROW had led to positive changes in terms of gender relations in the home was also shared by clients of the project. During focus group discussions, some women stated that their husbands now supported them with household duties. These clients attributed the change in their husbands' attitudes towards their unpaid work to the gender roles topics presented through the Talking Book. The Talking Book approach was adapted to the context of target beneficiaries by designing content in local languages using scenarios familiar to target groups. Other clients also attributed men's support in household duties to persistent efforts of male gender activists.

## **Ensuring environmental sustainability and climate change resilience**

### **GROW helped clients develop knowledge and skills to improve climate resilience**

GROW used information sharing, training, and the promotion of improved seed varieties to address issues relating to environmental sustainability and clients' resilience to climate change. The project trained clients on environmentally sustainable agricultural practices such as using manure and composting and refraining from burning farm residues. For instance, keyhole gardening (kitchen gardens constructed so they need minimal water) and the use of manure compost increased clients' resilience to climate and environmental impacts. Dry season yields increased by 17% as a result (Emperiks, 2018). Training sessions also covered appropriate agro-chemical usage and handling to promote minimal soil and environmental pollution. Trainees passed on the acquired knowledge and skills to farming group members, which further increased adoption of environmentally sustainable practices by 24% among clients (Emperiks, 2018). Implementing partners equipped clients with information and training on climate-smart agriculture, an intervention which increased clients' resilience to climate impacts overall.

Results from the case study also show that GROW's project interventions increased clients' resilience to climate shocks through training on climate-smart agriculture innovations and diversifying income sources. For instance, clients received training on how to practice crop rotation from GROW's MoFA partners. A concrete example that demonstrates a sustained change in the case study communities was the practice of crop rotation of maize with soya beans as a nitrogen fixing agent.

While the longer-term impacts of acquired knowledge and skills on local efforts to address climate impacts were unclear from the case study research, the study found that local partners have continued to engage clients on climate-smart information and technologies. This was the key component of longer-term impacts in climate change that was discovered from interactions during the research.

## **GROW improved access to technologies, approaches, and solutions in communities that support climate resiliency**

GROW assisted some clients in constructing rain water harvesters which reduced the impacts of drought and supported resilience to climate impacts. These harvesters are structures that channel rain water through roofs into water containers in the residence of some clients. Water harvesters served both clients and, unintentionally, neighbouring households who were not part of GROW. The project also linked clients to weather information to assist them in preparing for weather disturbances using as a text message service that provided up-to-date weather information via mobile phone. The project also trained clients on dry season vegetable gardens as one way of ensuring a year-round food supply in households and reducing pressure on water consumption needs. Interventions were intended to improve access to water in households.

## **Early adopters of climate resilient approaches saw benefits**

The practice of crop rotation persisted among clients because they experienced positive outcomes in improved soil health and increased harvest. Clients did not report any significant climate event during the project's lifespan, but did mention rainfalls were becoming both irregular and unpredictable. The main change agents in sustainable agricultural practices were positive outcomes from early adopters. Initially, some sustainable agricultural practices proved more time-consuming and, in some instances, required more resources, initially deterring some clients from adopting them. According to some key facilitating partners, adoption of crop rotation increased as clients witnessed the positive outcomes experienced by initial adopters of the practice.

## **GROW contributed to improved environmental conservation**

The GROW project also trained participants on conservation practices such as zero tillage. Adoption of the zero-tillage technique was successful in some areas of operation as a form of conservation agriculture. Progress in land conservation has, as a result, been sustainable. Participants disclosed that conservation mechanisms adopted as new ways of farming were permanently accepted due to the continued positive outcomes observed. Participants in the research added that the practice of stem-cutting soya during harvesting instead of uprooting it, is frequently adopted by GROW clients because, though time-consuming, it improves soil fertility and increases yields.

Due to these positive outcomes, conservation practices spread to non-beneficiaries in the case study communities as their outcomes became visible. The main lessons shared were that soya and other leguminous crops were effective soil enrichment mechanisms, and future projects should consider the inclusion of leguminous crops as cheaper and more productive ways of conserving land.

## **Contributing to food security**

### **Food security and nutrition in households improved as a result of GROW**

Most interviewees from the case study indicated that the GROW project had increased food security in their clients' households. This qualitative study specifically examined how the project attained 86% food security in client households while reducing food insecurity from 3% (baseline) to 0.2% (end-line) among clients, while the control group experienced 22% food insecurity at end-line (Emperiks, 2018). The research team discovered increased diversification in client incomes,

and identified climate-smart agricultural innovations like Keyhole Gardening and nutrition training as key factors that increased food security among clients. These findings agree with findings from Emperiks (2018), who asserted that interventions like Keyhole Gardening and the use of manure and composting increased clients' dry season farming by 17%.

Additionally, the project initiatives significantly increased nutritional awareness among clients, including awareness of the benefits of soya beans. The most effective delivery mechanisms were participatory meal preparation demonstrations and the dissemination of health and nutrition topics with Talking Books. The Talking Book provided audio messages on the nutritional value of soya beans and how to incorporate the beans into native meals. Nutritional awareness increased to a point where clients invented new meals using soya based on their newly acquired knowledge of its inherent nutritional value. The effects of the nutritional awareness spilled over to non-clients through marketing strategies by clients who made and sold soya meals.

The nutritional status of both women and children improved significantly over the project period. By 2018, approximately 88.7% of women had a Body Mass Index (BMI) in the normal range and only 18.4%, 2.3% and 11.4% of the children were stunted, wasted and underweight respectively according to the anthropometric results. That compares very favourably to 2014 Ghana Demographic and Health Survey (GDHS) results for the Upper West Region which found that 72.3% of women had normal BMI and 22.2% of children were stunted, 4.4% were wasted, and 13.5% were underweight (Emperiks, 2018).

Participants added that, the project had also introduced the Orange-Fleshed Sweet Potatoes (OFSP) to them, which has diversified the sources and types of food, and particularly beneficial to children. Overall, the effect of GROW was to increase client households' agricultural production, thereby increasing accessibility and availability of nutritious food throughout the year.

## **Innovation and good practice in agricultural investments**

### **GROW included innovations for regular feedback from clients**

Feedback mechanisms using the Talking Book were another innovative way of improving audio messages delivered to clients. One of the operators of the Talking Book disclosed that feedback from clients through the device was useful in improving content and method of delivery. Messages were mostly delivered in drama scenarios and songs:

*"... when we collect the Talking Books we know which of the messages were listened to more, yes, and they can also record audio feed backs for us to play and listen to. So, when we are revising the content, we use some of their feedbacks, it helps..."* KII\_ Talking Book

### **GROW took a systemic approach to create positive change**

The project strategically engaged regional coordinating offices of the MoFA and the Ministry of Gender, Child, and Social Protection (MoGCSP) on increasing women's participation in agriculture. Regional partnerships were formed with the Women in Agricultural Development unit (WIAD), a division of MoFA; MoGCSP; and the nutrition division of the Ghana Health Service (GHS). The WIAD unit of MoFA focused on barriers of women in agriculture and MoGCSP focused on social inclusion and gender issues that affect women generally. These regional engagements made it possible for district level activities and interventions to be effective. A significant outcome of regional engagements was the well-attended land forum, where the district

offices of partnered regional agencies received directives to assist in mobilization and sensitization to increase women's access to productive lands.

The longer-term impacts of these collaborative efforts were reported as sustained working partnerships in the interest of women. MoGCSP noted that GROW provided an opportunity to establish a partnership with MoFA's WIAD unit even after the project ended. These long-term partnerships meant that MoGCSP could rely on WIAD officers at district levels to assist mobilization for training and other engagements. As such, actors continue to leverage working relationships established by GROW for the interest of women in the Upper West Region and impacted districts.

## Lessons learned

- ***Men are effective agents of change in the economic empowerment of women within patriarchal cultures.***

The case study outlined how GROW successfully addressed the economic empowerment of rural women by strategically involving male gender activists to address issues of women's inequality. Male gender activists were instrumental in addressing some land and social issues in the interests of women. Research participants shared lessons on how to change cultural norms and individual behaviour in response to women's increased access to productive resources. One example was the successful contribution of male gender activists in altering the behaviours of fellow men toward women. Beneficiaries indicated the effectiveness of men as agents of change in patriarchal cultures:

*"...from experience you realize that whatever you want to do, even if it is targeted at women, you need to involve the men. Not just involving the men, but winning them to accept your intervention, because in this part of the country that we find ourselves, men dominate everything. Women get lands through men; women have to work on their husbands' farms. It is a male environment, so when you realize that, and win the men over, it helps the project. GROW did a good job with that, using the male gender activists..."* KII\_ gender focal person

- ***Interventions that target barriers to women's economic empowerment are successful when capacity development and the creation of long-term, sustainable partnerships are rooted in local market conditions.***

As was the case in GROW, investments in agriculture should build the capacity of clients to engage market actors, given factors that support conducive market conditions for clients within the project cycle. Most clients attributed sustainable economic empowerment of clients to capacity building rather than changes in standard market structures. This was the case for female Sales Agents and female beneficiaries of credit facilities. The study also showed that financial partners work well when their business models are not significantly altered, even when dealing with project clients. The main lessons expressed by participants from their experience with the project was that the survival of marketing networks depended on the capacity of beneficiaries to engage market actors independently, and not the continuous intervention of GROW in market transactions.

- ***Development partners can realize significant gains for beneficiaries of agricultural investments by harnessing their reputation, networks, and existing trust with market actors.***

Within the lifespan of GROW, some market linkages thrived on the trustworthiness of actors like buyers and aggregators. This trust was based on the credibility and the presence of MEDA and GROW as facilitators of these new relationships. For example, credit was provided to buyers, farmers, and processors based on the credibility of GROW.

Development partners have a role to play in enabling beneficiaries to effectively transition out of project support. Project exiting strategies should initiate a substitute for non-local actors who leverage transactions based on the credible presence of externals such as MEDA. Some participants were of the view that they were not prepared enough for the project conclusion.

- ***The capacity building component of partnered institutions should include a component that enables these state and private intuitions to sustain the core project supports.***

One of the key reasons why soy production thrived among clients was because it was a gender-neutral crop at the time the project introduced it. Cultural resistance would have been much stiffer if a “male crop” was promoted among women clients of GROW. MEDA conducted a thorough gender and agricultural analysis before selecting soy as the main crop to be promoted by the project; this careful research stage allowed the GROW team to understand the local relationship between gender and specific crops. There is potential for the Ministry of Gender Child and Social Protection (MGCSP) and the Women in Agricultural Development (WIAD) unit under MoFA to work together to sustain and expand GROW initiatives beyond the project lifespan.

- ***Design and implementation of agricultural projects should examine the local context of interventions to ensure successful implementation approach.***

Considering increasing soya in diets, the observed entry point was increasing awareness of the nutritional enrichment of soya—but in relation to local dishes that were already familiar. The project did not introduce new foods made from soya, but rather promoted awareness of the nutritional enrichment of soy. Similarly, implementing partners promoted soya as a good enrichment ingredient. Implementers of other projects experienced low uptake when they presented new recipes for soya. To address this issue, they reformed their messages and presented soya only as an enrichment ingredient in already popular meals. Their reformed approach gained more uptake and eventually women became creative with soya in their diets. During focus group discussions with women, some shared how they invented new meals with soya and shared their recipes with other focus group participants:

*“I add water and leave it to become thick and then I fry it with a little stew... No matter how small the stew is, I can fry it for the children to have something to eat and benefit from the good things (nutrients) in soya*

*Facilitator: so what is the name of that one meal?*

*Participant: I don't know the name [laughter in background]. I did it myself one day when my stew was small and now the children like it....” FGD \_women*



- ***Harnessing the expertise of local partners supports systemic change and long term sustainability.***

The project partnered with state and non-state institutions to successfully deliver its interventions to its clients. All delivery partners, both state and non-state, had areas of operation coinciding with the project's target areas for change. Such partners were extension service providers, input suppliers, markets and produce buyers, and financial institutions. Partnerships with some state agencies were successful because they were established at regional levels where policy influence was higher. Non-state actor partnerships were formed with development agencies with experience and competence in both geographical and professional areas of operation. Some implementing partners had gathered many years of experience in targeting specific client profiles, such as women farmers, and their knowledge and experience contributed to the successful delivery of intervention with desired outcomes.

- ***Strategic partnerships with state actors at policy levels of influence and key non-state actors with coinciding areas of interest ensure productive project partnerships.***

The land forum approach that increased women's access to more fertile lands was effective and should be replicated in similar attempts to increase women's access to land for farming in patriarchal cultures. The key to the effectiveness of the land forum was found to be the joint engagement of community stakeholders who controlled land (the family heads and traditional leaders) and local government agencies who are their (land owners) development benefactors. In the words of a gender expert:

*"...when we brought together the land owners and the local government like that it was easy to get the land owners and traditional leaders to grant the request of GROW. It was something like, today we need a favour from you and, because the local government agencies are also development partners, tomorrow you will need a favour from us. So that was also very helpful. The other day the sector minister was talking about how we can do the same in other regions ..."* KII\_ Gender Child and Social Protection

## Recommendations

Several recommendations arise from the research with implications for civil society organizations.

- **Build strategic partnerships with state and non-state actors for the purpose of triggering systemic and sustainable changes that address structural barriers to women's economic empowerment.**

For the effective formation and sustainability of partnership outcomes, the use of a systematic approach, as modeled by the GROW project, should be adopted by other projects. In the case of GROW, it was observed that once regional partnerships were formed, district and community level engagements followed soon after, allowing many of the interventions to be transferred quickly to the beneficiaries. For example, MoGCSP regional executives used WIAD and MoFA district staff for mobilization in areas where their (MoGCSP) presence was limited.

CSOs should partner with local government agencies with operational areas of interest at higher levels and identify ways they can offer complementary support at district and community levels where local agencies' independent resources are most constrained.

- **Ground agricultural investments in local market systems and business practices to increase impact and ensure long-term sustainability.**

Part of GROW's success was rooted in an approach that allowed partners such as financial institutions to work with clients within their existing standards of operations and, more importantly, to do so with women on a wider scale. This strategy proved effective in sustaining engagements with clients and financial institutions beyond the lifespan of GROW. Once clients' capacity was developed to conduct business according to prevailing standards, they tended to last and, in some cases, exceed performance expectations.

Civil society partners should allow partnered organizations to apply their rules of engagement with target groups to sustain existing working relationships beyond the lifespan of interventions.

- **Ensure long-term sustainability through the co-creation of exit strategies with partners before programming ends.**

To enable market actors who leverage the presence of the project to access credit facilities and prepare alternative means of doing business, all market networks formed during project lifespan should be informed extensively when the project is about to end. A few participants raised concerns about what felt like the abrupt conclusion of the project, despite the fact that the project end-date had been made clear from the beginning of the project, and a six-month extension had been granted by donors. These concerns came from market actors who leveraged MEDA's presence to provide credit arrangements for their clients based on the credibility and trust they had for MEDA and GROW.

There is a need to create a space for productive relationships independent of the project sponsor. For CSOs, this means extensively preparing market actors and service providers for the end of the project. Some actors leverage the presence of CSOs to acquire and provide credit facilities to business partners with whom they established relationships during the project. This would enable actors and service providers to build trustworthy business relationships independent of the CSO before the end of the project.

- **Promote locally relevant technologies and approaches to address the impacts of climate change.**

For environmental and climate change adaptation programming, CSOs should initiate small scale interventions in addition to larger scale interventions. Key-hole gardens<sup>5</sup> were successful in increasing household resistance to environmental and climate impacts.

- **Include engagement with men as champions for gender equality as a critical component of investments in agriculture.**

The inclusion of male "gender champions" who worked as gender activists and advocates was effective. This approach, wherever relevant, should most definitely be used, especially in cases where interventions anticipate cultural barriers to implementation, such as in patriarchal communities, where influential men within those communities could very well be agents of change.

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<sup>5</sup> Small gardens constructed within or close to the dwelling of clients to grow mostly vegetables. This requires less water.

Agricultural programming by civil society organizations should recognize and include influential men at community levels as effective agents of change when interventions seek to address disempowering cultural and social stereotypes of women.

Interventions targeted at rural women should be flexible in their approach and considerate of schedule constraints. Innovative methods of reaching women, such as the Talking Book, are highly recommended because the time burden placed upon women can increase together with more economic empowerment. The Talking Book in the case of GROW proved effective in remotely reaching time-constrained women.

- **Project interventions should identify and engage the real constraints women face.**

Overall, GROW successfully supported women's empowerment and was a major driver of food security in the targeted districts. The lessons learned from this case study and recommendations noted above should inform future agricultural investments to maximize the positive effects of such projects on women's economic empowerment, livelihoods, food security, and climate resilience.

## **References**

Emperiks (2018), Summative Evaluation of the Greater Rural Opportunities for Women (GROW) Project –UW Region, Ghana, First Draft submitted by Emperiks|Ghana to Menonites Economic Development Associates (MEDA), Tamale, Ghana, November, 2018.

Ghana Statistical Service. (2014). Ghana Demographic and Health Survey 2014. Accra, Ghana.

## Appendix 1: Projected versus actual data collection numbers

Day	Venue	Type of Interview	Number of women/men	Actual number conducted
<b>Monday, 16/9</b>	Pluma	FGD 1 (male)	8	FGD 1 male
		FGD 1 (female)	8	FGD 1 female
		IDI - females	5	3 (2 women and 1 man)
		KII - (local partners)	3	3
<b>Tuesday, 17/9</b>	Wechiau Bau	FGD 1 (male)	8	FGD 1 (male)
		FGD 1 (female)	8	FGD 1 (female)
		IDI - females	5	3
		KII - (local partners)	3	2
<b>Wednesday, 18/9</b>	Wechiau Bau	Complete interviews and translation		
<b>Thursday, 19/9</b>	Wa	KII (Program Sponsors)	2	2
		local partners	3	3