



Empowering women farmers reduces global poverty: a case from West Africa

By Josiah Neufeld

As the global recession triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to set back progress in combating global poverty and hunger, new research suggests that two areas can be transformative in the empowerment of people experiencing poverty in the Global South.

Those two areas are women's empowerment and agriculture.

Last year, a coalition representing more than 30 Canadian non-profits commissioned independent studies of six agriculture projects in West Africa run by civil society organizations that had received funding from the Canadian government. These projects supported farmers—women in particular—in getting training in climate-resilient farming

techniques and ways to diversify their livelihoods, including easier access to finance and other resources necessary for improving their farms.

The study found that, in many cases, individuals and communities were still benefiting from the investment years after the projects had ended.

In the farming village of Dougoulakoro in southern Mali, a group of women joined together to form a farmers' association. They applied for and received a loan for about \$5,500, thanks to a project led by two Quebec-based organizations, Développement international Desjardins and SOCODEVI. The women used the loan to purchase quality inputs for their onion farm. They received training in climate resilient farming practices. They were linked with buyers and market opportunities, and were given support in accessing financial services including financial education, savings, loans, and crop insurance.

"If it wasn't for the support of the FARM project, we wouldn't know what to do this year because we didn't have the financial means to work the land," says Ramata Diarra, a young mother and the administrative secretary of the farmers' association. Diarra says this year the women haven't experienced the usual stresses they do during the farming season. With the income earned from their onion harvests, they've been able to improve their living conditions. One woman purchased a motorcycle. Another one purchased two tons of cement to start building a house.

Diarra also received training in public speaking, leadership, and communication, giving her confidence as a leader in her community.

Before the project, women didn't have access to good land for growing onions; the best fields were farmed by men. But as men in the communities saw that the women could earn more money by growing onions, they began to allocate more land to women. In some instances, village chiefs appointed men to support the women farmers and make sure they were getting the resources they needed.

Since 2014, the FARM project has helped more than 20,000 farmers in Mali, primarily women.

In Mali, 80 per cent of livelihoods come from agriculture and fishing. Women make up at least half those involved in farming, yet typically have less access to land, technology, financial resources, and training than men do.

In West Africa, UN research shows only 10 per cent of aid for agriculture, forestry and fisheries goes to women.

Researchers looking at the six profiled communities observed that when women gain access to resources like fertile land, livestock, training and technology, the whole community benefits.

“Our research found that investing in smallholder women in agriculture contributes to food security and food sovereignty in poor African countries,” says Mamadou Goïta, executive director of the Institute for Research and Promotion of Alternatives in Development (IRPAD), which led the research in Mali. “Women are central to provisioning domestic markets with the main food products in a resilient way, while also being the custodians of seeds and food reserves.”

Another project in Mali, this one led by Canadian non-profit Farm Radio International, used radio broadcasts to teach farmers about managing poultry farms. During call-in shows, broadcasters discussed vaccines, medicine, chicken coop construction, climate risks and gender dynamics. Before the project, farmers reported average mortality rates of 70 per cent among their chickens; after the project that rate dropped to 30 per cent.

A project in Sierra Leone led by World Vision Canada saw farmers’ rice yields increase seven-fold and an 84 per cent increase in income among households. This was attained through introduction and training of women on the System of Rice Intensification (SRI), a climate-smart system of rice production that entails reduced use of inputs such as seeds, fertilizer, and water, driving down production costs.

In 2015 the UN set 17 ambitious goals for reducing global poverty and inequality by 2030. Agricultural development has already contributed to significant progress on the first of Sustainable Development Goals: eradicating extreme poverty by 2030. But the health and economic harm caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with the effects of climate change, are threatening the progress that has been made.

Supporting small-scale women farmers, in particular, is crucial to ending global poverty. Studies show that GDP growth that comes from agriculture is twice as effective in reducing poverty as GDP growth in other sectors. And good management of agricultural land increases resilience to climate change.

“One of the best ways Canada can make a difference in poverty on a global scale is by increasing its funding for agriculture, especially agriculture that empowers women and helps farmers become more resilient to climate change, “ says Virgine Lavasseur, co-chair of the Canadian Food Security Policy Group, and Africa program director at SOCODEVI.

*Josiah Neufeld is a freelance writer. This article was commissioned by the Canadian Food Security Policy Group.*