



Challenges and opportunities for women's economic empowerment in agriculture

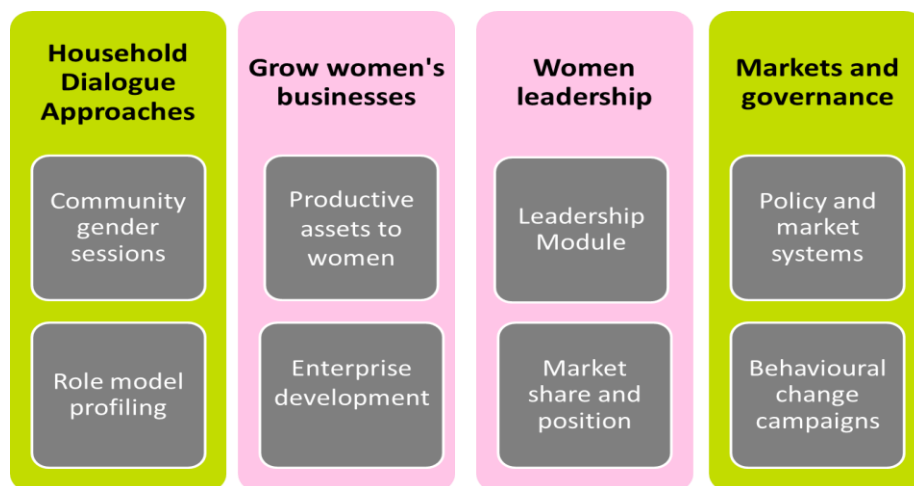
By Raymond Brandes, FLOW Programme Manager at SNV

Over the past several years, there has been increasing evidence regarding the importance of women's economic participation, both for the advancement of women's rights and gender equality, as well as for the economic well-being of families, communities, sectors and nations. As Global Programme Manager of SNV's [*Enhancing Opportunities for Women's Enterprises \(EOWE\) programme*](#), funded by the Dutch government as part of the Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women (FLOW) funding stream, I participated in the [*Women's Economic Empowerment Global Learning Forum*](#) (WEE Forum) organised by the [*SEEP Network*](#) from 23-25 May 2017 in Bangkok.

Advancing women's political participation, leadership and economic empowerment are central to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Women have a critical role to play in all of the SDGs, with many targets specifically recognizing women's equality and empowerment as both the objective, and as part of the solution. SDG5 is known as the stand-alone gender goal because it is dedicated to achieving these ends.

SNV's EOWE programme aims to advance women's economic participation and self-reliance in Kenya and Vietnam by creating a conducive environment for female entrepreneurship as a vehicle of change. The intervention strategy of the programme builds on SNV's [*Balancing Benefits*](#) framework which is developed by SNV as a gender-transformative, integrated fourfold approach which stimulates household and community dialogue to challenge gender norms that shape resource allocation patterns. Men are engaged in the dialogues too, and role models and community influencers are identified to act as change agents.

SNV's objective is to grow women's enterprise's viability and profitability, while encouraging more women to start agribusinesses. SNV strengthens women's leadership and voice in organisations and institutions that govern markets and businesses. When women have decision making opportunities and power, they can challenge the structural barriers that cause inequalities, they can advocate for better business terms and services and they can claim market share. SNV is supporting the improvement of markets and governance in favour of equitable opportunities for women.

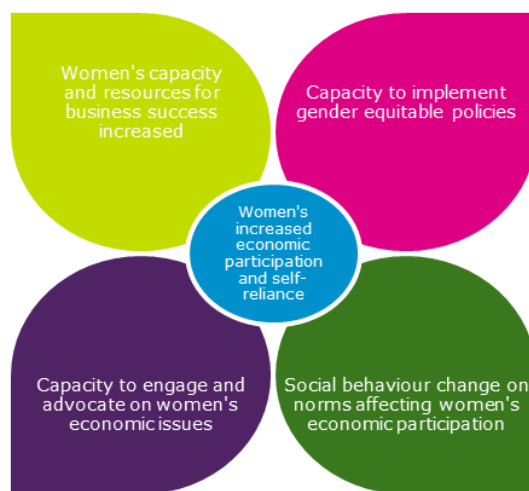


SNV's Balancing Benefits Framework

In a globalised world, as people become more integrated into markets, it is essential not just to produce, but to sell, and to do this, it is increasingly necessary to market products. Markets are widely recognized as a key component of development. Many governments and international donors now embrace the need to enable producers to take advantage of, even create, business opportunities, but in a responsible and sustainable way. For example, the concept of “making markets work for the poor” is a way of bringing the benefits of economic growth to poorer parts of society and often women constitute the majority of the poor.

The intervention strategy of the EOWE programme builds on the Balancing Benefits framework by developing capacities at different levels (individual, business entities and institutions) in order to create a holistic approach leading to women’s increased economic participation and self-reliance.

We need to shift away from the traditional emphasis on economically “empowering” women exclusively through micro loans or grants, training programs or networking and mentorship. These interventions are important (and comparatively easy to implement), but they are limited in their power to shape broader institutions and can only get us so far. We need to turn our attention to the larger environment where economic opportunities unfold – examine and correct pervasive gender biases in organisations and alter service provision so that it is not biased against women. The assumption that services, especially productive ones, are gender neutral and not gender biased is wrong, but so far this has been largely overlooked in both development research and practice.



EOWE Intervention Strategy

Gender biases pervade the design and delivery of extension services, banking products, land, housing, and much more. Ensuring women’s access to productive resources does not seem to be enough. Even when access was guaranteed, women farmers often benefit less than men farmers from extension advice, suggesting that the delivery of these services is better attuned to the needs of male farmers.

To make the shift away from “gender neutral” (but really gender blind) service provision, companies not already doing so, need to disaggregate client data by sex, so that they can identify and differentiate women’s market segments. Only then can organisations begin to understand women’s



 Nungari preparing her vegetables for sale to brokers in Kenya.

specific needs and constraints, whether they're seeking access to farm equipment or financial services, and design and deliver products accordingly.

Given women's existing levels of participation in value chains and the constraints under which they participate, understanding and responding appropriately to the social and economic contexts within which women engage in production, processing and/or sales are thus central to achieving rural agricultural value chain related goals.

As such, programmes should include approaches that start from a careful understanding of these contexts, and either 1) work within these contexts to improve how women are included, or 2) seek to improve the equity of the social and institutional environments in which value chains function to enhance the range and quality of choices and outcomes women and men have within them. Programmes operate along a continuum of gender integration approaches, from the accommodating to the transformative, and will contribute to understanding under what conditions each approach has the potential to enhance value chain performance and the outcomes of women and other marginalized groups.

Gender differences in roles and resources in agricultural production and in women's and men's participation in household decision-making around resource allocation, technology adoption, marketing and food consumption are relevant, though likely in different ways, across the different value chain sites. These differences imply that in order to achieve its expected outcomes, investments are to be made to understand these gender differences, their causes and their consequences.

Some of the WEE Forum partners shared their approaches and experiences which contribute to the establishment of research evidence and proven practices and showed that SNVs programme design fits well with the learnings of (other development) partners.

Ms. Naila Kabeer, Professor of Gender and Development at the Gender Institute of the London School of Economics and Political Science, is a leading scholar on the topics of gender, poverty, and women's empowerment. In her [Opening Key Note](#) she discussed gender terminology and conceptualization used throughout the years and how economic empowerment emerged from that. I was fortunate to have a lunch meeting with Naila to discuss SNV's Balancing Benefits concept and framework.



 Naila Kabeer (l) and Raymond Brandes (r)

During the WEE Forum, CARE introduced the [Farmer Field and Business School \(FFBS\) model](#), a gender-transformative approach to agriculture extension (and a product of the [CARE Pathways program](#)), which integrates sustainable agriculture, market engagement and business skills, nutrition, gender, as well as participatory performance monitoring all under one model. This holistic model increases productivity, empowerment, and equity, and contributes to more inclusive and equitable agriculture systems.

It was useful to learn about CARE's FFBS toolkit which consists of practical approaches for understanding the farmers' context the project is working in (e.g. the seasonal calendar and daily plans) as well as to gain more insights on social norms that impact women's roles and control in the agriculture sphere through participatory gender dialogue tools. For example, the cash flow tree is a tool to understand control over income within the household, who earns the income and how and who spends the income and how and what are the underlying social norms that play a role in the decision-making and control over income. Control over income, time use of women and access to assets (finance, equipment or inputs) have been identified as major themes in which gender inequality persists for women farmers under SNV's [EOWE programme](#) and we are using similar diagnostic and practical implementation tools.

USAID shared some preliminary outcomes of a project called "Leveraging Economic Opportunities (LEO)" focused on supporting programming that fosters inclusive growth through markets. The importance of engaging men as allies, agents of change and role models was prominently highlighted. Engaging men is not only important to create and support a conducive environment for women farmers to thrive but also to prevent gender-based violence which may unintentionally occur if women's economic empowerment programmes are not carefully thought through and designed.

Project Concern International (PCI) shared experiences from their [Women Empowered initiative](#) in which engaging men also plays a central role through couples' discussions that are facilitated at household level in order to promote shared workload and joint decision-making. Even though men recognize the benefits of the couples' discussions, it is still hard to get them to attend these sessions. The clarification that empowerment of women does not mean disempowerment of men as well as showing that economic gains (increased income) benefit the household as a whole, if women have more time to engage in business initiatives, often seem to help to increase men's participation. Besides that, the importance of facilitator's capacities was highlighted as a crucial enabling factor to guide families and couples.



In the EOWE programme, involvement and participation of men is well taken into account through household and community dialogues to safeguard that spouses of the female farmers the programme targets (as well as community influencers e.g. village elders, religious and political leaders) are well-informed and engaged in making a difference in households and communities. SNV is in the process of developing and rolling-out a facilitation guide which also specifies the desired traits of any facilitator to guide dialogue processes. Selected facilitators also go through a training before taking on their roles in their localities.

By applying the different components of the SNV Balancing Benefits framework in the EOWE programme, we hope to advance women's economic participation and self-reliance in the areas our programme operates, so as to create a conducive environment for female entrepreneurship as a vehicle of change.