

3

And what about women? Promoting gender balanced participation

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• Introduction

I would like to share experiences gained in promoting gender equality in an agricultural development project in Nicaragua. They represent important lessons for gender sensitive participatory diagnosis and are applicable to other organisations eager to improve the effectiveness of development efforts.

PRODETEC, the 'Support to Generation and Transfer of Agricultural Technology Project' works with the newly created Nicaraguan Institute for Agricultural Technology (INTA). It is financed by the Finnish Government. The development objectives are: to increase food security, to increase revenues to farm families, to empower farm units and to consolidate and institutionalise the generation and transfer of agricultural technology. The project is underpinned by two approaches: farming systems and gender, although the primary focus has remained on agricultural families. However, as analysis uncovers problems relating to women, the project directs activities to solve these dilemmas.

• Rapid gender analysis

At the start of the project, a rapid gender analysis was carried out. This explored the broad differences between male and female production systems. It focused on the division of labour, structural constraints and opportunities. Particular emphasis was placed on access to and control over resources and knowledge systems. A key difference was the identification of different household types, with an explicit focus on female headed households.

• Participatory diagnosis

To facilitate a participatory planning process, participatory diagnosis was developed by the project staff. The planning process begins with a participatory diagnosis in each Recommendation Domain. This is a group of farmers with similar characteristics facing similar constraints and opportunities. The participatory diagnosis is undertaken before the start of the agricultural season. Its results feed into project planning, which ends before the main agricultural activities in the fields start.

Participatory diagnosis begins with a review of the characteristics of the Recommendation Domain. The session then moves on to identify and prioritise problems, continues with a discussion of possible technological solutions and ends with the selection of technological alternatives to be tested in the next agricultural year.

Participatory diagnosis is facilitated by extensionists. In spite of their efforts and those of project staff, the percentage of women participating in the diagnosis sessions is below that of men. It varies from session to session (and from extensionist to extensionist), from 10 to 40 %, with 25 % as an average.

• Looking for gender equality

Introducing gender equality to the project was a daunting task because gender affects a wide range of project activities. A first step can be to augment the participation of women in the activities organised. However, it is not enough to strive for equal number of male and female participants. To examine the quality of

participation, other indicators should be developed.

When to participate

It is necessary to analyse when farmers participate. To promote active participation, it is essential that women have access to decision making moments. Each organisation has key moments or activities which determine the process and contents of the institutional planning and evaluation. These should be identified and male and female farmer participation promoted at the key times.

For example, within INTA, the participatory diagnosis session is a key moment because plans for the generation and transfer of technology are determined for the next agricultural year. It is essential to facilitate active gender balanced participation at this stage if both male and female farmers are to influence project activities.

How to participate

The following practical tips were developed during a workshop held to refresh extensionist knowledge of participatory diagnosis. They are methods of improving active participation and female participation during diagnosis sessions.

- people are more likely to participate in a relaxed environment in which they feel comfortable. Ice breaking sessions and the seating plan are important for setting a relaxed atmosphere in which women feel confident.
- in meetings one frequently comes across people who are said locally to be *chispa*, literally 'sparks'. These people function as catalysts because they motivate other people. They can be used to initiate discussion and provoke other people to participate. It should be noted that the catalyst person for men is not necessarily the same person who can catalyse women.
- increasing the number of women present in a meeting makes it easier for them to express their opinions.

Fostering women's participation is not simply letting them say something or letting them speak more. People can often express their

practical needs more easily than other constraints. This means that a project can get caught in 'doing activities' because people often say what they think we want to hear. Verbal and non-verbal clues must be used to identify real priorities and needs.

How to speak and express ideas

Active participation is only possible if one knows what the discussion is about. An extensionist should enrich a discussion about technological alternatives with local and relevant information on the advantages and disadvantages of each option. It is also important to relate the information to different members of the farm family: who is going to benefit, who will have to work, who has to contribute (e.g. fertiliser or land).

Participation of specific members of a farm family can be encouraged by inviting them to share their local experiences in a discussion: For example: *Doña Carmen, you also have been using this new variety. What do you think about your harvest?*

In Nicaragua, women generally do the weeding in the maize. When the discussion relates to this topic, women can be invited to express their opinions or experiences. The results of the rapid gender analysis are useful for facilitation, identifying appropriate moments to invite women to participate.

Is asking enough?

Women have often lacked the opportunity to learn how to express their opinions and defend them. Women may speak in a low voice because they don't know how to express themselves in a clear and convincing manner. Often, we noted that people started explaining their ideas before a woman had finished her point. A group may also not be receptive to female contributions. At times, men may laugh because women are discussing a subject not thought to be within the female domain. Men may oppose an idea simply because it was suggested by a woman. Alternatively, they may make fun of it and so the idea is rejected.

The more important the discussion, the more one encounters these kind of group processes. To promote gender equality in participation, it

is necessary to make clear that it is the responsibility of the facilitator to listen carefully to all participants and to make others listen too. It is also his or her responsibility to ensure contributions are valued and participants' self esteem raised.

Apart or together?

Another way to augment female participation is to let men and women discuss issues in separate groups. This can create a better forum for women to prepare themselves for a plenary. The moment for separation should be chosen carefully. If not managed, gender groups can cause feelings of jealousy and interrupt the process. To avoid this, it is valuable to bring men and women together in a plenary after separation to exchange their ideas and opinions.

Consensus and majorities

It is important to distinguish between sharing ideas and looking for consensus. Experience suggests that there are dangers in certain approaches to group decision making. Often the one who is talking most or talking loudly can push through his/her opinion. Seldom is this person a woman.

More important is the inherent discrimination against women when decisions are taken, for example by counting, voting or consensus. When there are 20 participants of which 25% are women (the average in PRODETEC), this results in a situation of 5 women and 15 men. If we look for the majority vote, gender interests of women seldom will prevail.

An important characteristic of female agricultural production in Nicaragua is diversification. Women manage a wider range of crops and animals than men. Achieving consensus for women's interests is more difficult than for men (see Box 1).

BOX 1

In the project area, nearly all the men agreed that problems in maize and beans are the priority. By contrast, when women expressed their priorities, they listed many different problems. Individual women only agreed on two or three priorities. Thus, if the men's and women's problems are scored according to frequency, the problems identified by women may not appear on the group list. Unless one is aware of the diversification differences between men and women, women's problems appear less important.

Finally

Using a gender balanced approach to participatory technology generation and transfer has led to a more gender sensitive understanding of farming systems for extensionists and technical staff. The question 'who does what?' has contributed to a better directed and more successful attempt at promoting female farmer participation.

In spite of these positive contributions, the gender approach in this project related more to the practical aspects of project activities than to strategic gender needs. To be able to identify and respond to strategic needs, existing structural gender inequalities need to be addressed specifically. This needs more than attention to who controls resources. It requires a change of attitude and a commitment to empower those who are at the bottom.

Donors often prioritise gender sensitive development. Our experiences suggest this may conflict with the working practices of national institutions. Conflicts can arise because gender policies are more donor driven than locally demanded. It is important to push for gender equality, but balance is important. A high or low profile gender approach should be adopted according to what is appropriate and sensitive to the local context.

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