Beyond beneficiary numbers: Unlocking the potential of women farmers

After five years of piloting smallholder-friendly procurement models in 20 diverse countries, Purchase for Progress (P4P) has released a new report reviewing how market development can and cannot promote women’s empowerment based upon five years of field experience.

In developing countries, women are the backbone of the rural economy and are responsible for 60 to 80 percent of food production. They are also highly knowledgeable about crop varieties.

However, women face many challenges that can preclude them from independently owning or managing land and productive assets. In many households, men control the production and marketing of crops as well as household finances. According to UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), if women had the same access to these resources as men, they could increase agricultural yields by 20-30 percent, lifting 100-150 million people out of hunger.

As the world’s largest humanitarian agency, the World Food Programme (WFP) is a major buyer of staple food, procuring over US$ 1 billion for cash annually. In 2013, WFP bought nearly 80 percent of this food in developing countries. Purchase for Progress (P4P) is a WFP pilot initiative which, over the past five years, has experimented with smallholder-friendly procurement models targeting smallholder farmers in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The rationale behind P4P is to provide smallholders with the opportunity to improve their agricultural production, and an incentive to do so, as they benefit from an assured market in which to sell their surplus crops, dependent upon quality and price.

The P4P pilot specifically targeted women farmers in order to address the particular difficulties they face, with an ambitious goal to have 50 percent women participants. While P4P succeeded in tripling women’s participation in P4P-supported farmers’ organizations from 100,000 to 300,000 during the pilot period, the experience demonstrated that mere numerical participation in a project does not directly translate into a positive impact on the lives of women farmers, nor provide them with the same financial gains as their male counterparts.

A modified version of this blog post was published on the Guardian Global Development Professionals Network on 12 June 2014.

20 P4P pilot countries
Asia: Afghanistan
Africa: Burkina Faso, DRC, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia
Latin America: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua
These are some of the key lessons learned that will help empower women and reduce poverty and hunger:

**Context-specific action plans:**
In order to empower women economically, the underlying causes of income inequalities must be addressed. Due to the immense variation between culture, religion, and infrastructure which can exist even in areas only a few miles apart, strategies to empower women farmers cannot be ‘one-size-fits-all’. Implementation must be informed by country-level, context- and culturally-specific assessments to determine the needs of women farmers on a community, regional and country level in order to tailor approaches which will address underlying causes of inequality while ensuring women’s well-being. This should be informed by a broader gender strategy which establishes long-term goals and guides the intervention.

**Targeting women farmers:**
Targeting women farmers can be challenging, because they may not be active in farmers’ organizations, and often produce crops for household consumption rather than for sale. Additionally, women farmers take on different and often overlapping roles; contributing their labour as unpaid family workers, taking on farm work as casual agricultural labourers, and sometimes as the principal producers of crops. Women in the different roles will have different needs and interests and it is important to target support accordingly.

**Equipment and capacity development:**
Labour and time saving technologies and practices that contribute to reducing women’s workload and save them time are an important aspect to address if market development programmes are to succeed in empowering women, both socially and economically. Women also need assistance to develop the capacity necessary in order to increase their incomes. For this, a vital first step is to provide them with training as well as agricultural inputs and credit so that they can produce more, aggregate their crops, and market them collectively. However, giving women farmers the tools to produce more and market their crops does not guarantee that they will be able to do so or benefit economically from their work.

**Inclusion of men:**
Effective gender sensitization efforts incorporate the needs of communities, responding to the opportunities, challenges, and recommendations identified by country- and region-specific assessments. One effective method has been to ensure the inclusion of both men and women during gender sensitization, in order to acquire the buy-in of the most influential members of communities, such as religious and customary leaders, who are generally male. Within P4P, this has often been achieved by stressing the economic gains for households and communities which embrace gender equality. In many contexts, these methods have assisted men to understand that women’s empowerment does not mean men’s disempowerment. In the same way, male authorities and community leaders have played vital roles in supporting the increased agricultural production and economic gains of women farmers under the P4P pilot.

**Be aware of the risks:**
By overlooking generations-old cultural norms, initiatives which seek to empower women can cause social isolation and risk the safety of participants. Malawi is one example where some women farmers reported forceful resistance at household level, as the male heads of household resisted their wives’ efforts to independently earn and control income. This highlights the importance of carefully designing culturally and context appropriate interventions in order to ensure the safety of women participants. Household negotiation is a powerful tool which can assist women to strategically gain voice and influence, while simultaneously reducing pressure within their households.

**Tools for household negotiation:**
A household negotiation approach emphasizes the inclusive management of household resources, assisting women and men to improve their collaboration at a household level. A woman farmer and field monitor named Mazouma, from Burkina Faso, says that in her community, many women are now able make family decisions in collaboration with their husbands, making it easier to manage their income. She also says that this has led to the increased inclusion of women in decision-making and planning in their farmers’ organizations and communities.

Any assessment of gender achievements must go beyond counting the number of women vs men involved. Nuanced examinations will inform new methods to more effectively facilitate the empowerment of women farmers. One such lesson learned for WFP was the importance of emphasizing the procurement of traditional “women’s crops”, such as niébé (cowpeas, or navy beans), in order to best increase women’s participation to sales.

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Blog post by Ken Davies, Global Coordinator Purchase for Progress (P4P)

Read more about the lessons learned in the new report: "P4P’s Women’s Empowerment Pathways: Roadblocks and Successes"
WFP demand helps catalyse effects of FAO and IFAD smallholder support

In Sierra Leone, government partners, FAO and IFAD have established Agricultural Business Centres (ABCs), providing smallholder farmers with access to training, equipment and storage. Since 2010, P4P has linked the ABCs to WFP’s demand for quality crops, providing smallholders with an incentive to invest in production and taking advantage of capacity development opportunities.

Agricultural production in Sierra Leone is currently recovering from the decline caused by a decade-long war, with about two-thirds of the population dependent upon subsistence farming for their livelihoods. These smallholder farmers have limited access to the resources necessary to effectively aggregate and market quality crops, including storage facilities and training in business and best agricultural practices.

ABCs
The P4P pilot has tested innovative methods of supporting smallholders by responding to context-specific challenges in 20 countries. In Sierra Leone, working with the ABCs has proven to be particularly effective. Within the ABCs, smallholders can purchase inputs, hire equipment, undergo training and access services such as processing, storage and group marketing. The agro-centres are governed by farmers’ organizations, with support from FAO, IFAD and government agencies. This fosters ownership of the ABCs, which is an important step towards sustainability. To date, 193 ABCs have been established.

In Sierra Leone, IFAD, FAO and WFP collaborate with the Global Agriculture and Food Security Programme (GAFSP) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security (MAFFS) to implement the government’s Smallholder Commercialization Programme (SCP). The SCP aims to increase smallholder farmers’ capacities and improve their ability to aggregate and market quality crops collectively to formal markets. Under the SCP, smallholders are grouped into farmers’ organizations, and supported with training in agricultural production and collective marketing. Several organizations then work together within an ABC to process and store crops.

WFP as a source of assured demand
P4P facilitates the link between the ABCs and WFP demand, providing farmers’ organizations with an incentive to improve the commercialization of staple crops such as rice or pigeon peas, as well as practical experience selling to an institutional buyer. P4P also provides smallholders with training in post-harvest handling and quality control, assisting them to produce high quality commodities. This should prepare smallholders to ultimately access commercial markets beyond WFP on an increasingly competitive basis.

Mariama Koroma, the chairwoman of Holima Agricultural Business Centre, says: “I have gone through a lot of training orchestrated by FAO, World Vision, WFP and others, so I have acquired a wealth of knowledge and experience in governance and management. That is why we don’t have problems in our farmers’ organization. I am confident that I can comfortably manage this Agricultural Business Centre.”

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**Progress made but challenges remain**

Local food prices in Sierra Leone are volatile and often higher than the international price of the same commodity, notably for rice. Because WFP’s procurement policy obligates the organization to buy maximum quantities of food at no more than the import parity price, procurement from smallholder farmers in Sierra Leone has been limited. Despite these challenges, in total, WFP has procured some 1,100 metric tons of food commodities from smallholder farmers’ organizations in Sierra Leone since 2009. Of this, four ABCs have contracted with WFP to date, selling a total of 140 metric tons of rice, 15 metric tons of pigeon peas and 5 metric tons of gari, a form of processed cassava. These crops are then distributed in WFP’s School Meals and Food for Assets programmes.

In 2013, a joint assessment was carried out by the Programme Advisory Group (PAG), GAFSP, FAO and P4P to evaluate the ABCs in terms of their skills and capacity. As a result of this evaluation, 21 ABCs were identified as potential WFP suppliers. Though procurement by WFP has been limited, smallholders have been effectively prepared to produce and market higher quality staple commodities. Efforts to facilitate linkages to quality markets beyond WFP, such as government or eventually private sector traders and millers are ongoing.

*Article written by Marta Ortiz Nuñez, P4P country coordinator, Sierra Leone.*

**Read More:**
- P4P Country Fact sheet
- Farmers progress in times of peace
- Introducing “gari” into the food basket
- P4P Breaks New Ground in Sierra Leone

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**Spotlight on P4P in Uganda**

In Uganda, P4P has supported infrastructure improvements to facilitate smallholders’ aggregation of commodities and collective sales. Meanwhile, many challenges remain, especially related to crop quality and standards. Read the P4P in Uganda fact sheet to learn more.

**Overview - P4P in Uganda**

In Uganda, P4P focuses on strengthening the capacity of farmers’ organizations to aggregate and sell commodities to quality buyers, such as WFP, local millers, traders for export and others. Through partnerships with the government, indigenous and international NGOs and other partners, P4P has provided smallholder farmers with the necessary training and equipment to increase their production, improve crop quality and strengthen the marketing capacity of farmers’ organizations. P4P is promoting Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA) to facilitate credit access among P4P-supported farmers’ organizations.

P4P also seeks to connect farmers’ organizations with institutional and private sector buyers that can provide an assured source of demand beyond WFP. This approach has built on WFP Uganda’s Agriculture and Market Support (AMS) project to enhance prospects for sustainability.
Brazilian pro-smallholder procurement model inspires African governments

Drawing from the expertise of Brazil’s widely acclaimed national local procurement programme, five African countries are piloting their own indigenous models. This small-scale pilot project known as PAA Africa, is implemented by FAO, WFP, local governments, and the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Since its inception in 2012, PAA Africa has developed a complimentary approach to P4P, promoting the use of food items purchased from local smallholder farmers in WFP and government-run school feeding programmes.

The initiative, which was inspired by Brazil’s national Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos (Food Purchase Programme), also aligns with WFP’s Home Grown School Feeding programme, in which commodities are often purchased from local smallholder farmers using P4P modalities. These efforts maximize programme benefits as they can not only improve small-scale family farmers’ access to institutional markets, but also encourage school attendance and improve pupils’ food security. PAA Africa has proven to be an excellent opportunity to strengthen collaboration with African governments and civil society, leading to greater sustainability of WFP’s smallholder procurement initiatives.

PAA Africa is being piloted in Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique, Niger and Senegal since February 2012. Following an 18 month start-up phase, a further five year phase was launched in January 2014. WFP and FAO jointly support the implementation of PAA Africa with financial sponsorship from the Government of Brazil and the UK Department for International Development (DFID). In order to assist smallholder farmers to produce surplus of high quality crops and fresh food items, FAO facilitates access to inputs, and provides training in best agricultural practices and post-harvest handling. Building on lessons learned through P4P, demand for government and WFP’s school feeding programme provides the smallholders with an assured market, which can act as an incentive for them to invest in production.

Sustainable solutions to hunger and poverty

In order for local procurement initiatives to be sustainable, farmers must be able to access quality markets beyond WFP. In a video message to participants in June’s workshop, WFP’s Executive Director Ertharin Cousin said “The role of PAA-Africa is vital, as it is showcasing sustainable and innovative models for smallholder procurement that we can and will expand.” The added value of PAA Africa lies in the creation of innovative models to build sustainable institutional markets. For example, in Ethiopia and Malawi, funds have been transferred to district departments of education or directly to schools to manage procurement activities, purchasing food directly from local farmers’ organizations. PAA Africa continues providing them with support that fosters government ownership and builds local capacity. Government ownership and enthusiasm has been further strengthened through visits to Brazil where African leaders have been invited to learn from the Brazilian PAA model.

Read more about PAA Africa:

PAA Africa website
Structured Demand and Smallholder farmers in Brazil: the case of PAA and PNAE” study
From Brazil to Ethiopia: Experiences on Empowering Farmers
Report: The Power of Procurement: Public Purchasing in the Service of Realizing the Right to Food

In June, PAA Africa hosted an Institutional Markets Knowledge Sharing Seminar in Addis where P4P and other partners met to discuss smallholder procurement and share lessons learned.
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P4P in the News

The impact of coffee rust on smallholders in Central America
Miguel Barreto, WFP regional director for Latin America and the Caribbean, discusses WFP’s response to support smallholders on CNN Espanol. Watch here

WFP Food for Assets participants in Sierra Leone and Liberia receive food produced by P4P-supported farmers thanks to continued support from the Government of Japan. Read more

USAID website features WFP response to drought in Malawi, which was assisted by local smallholder farmers. Read more

WFP chief economist highlights P4P
P4P is cited as an example of how capacity development and smallholder market access can improve food security and strengthen rural economies in the June edition of the European Centre for Development Policy Management publication GREAT. Read more (pp. 26-28)