Empowering women farmers through literacy training

Rural women in developing countries often lack basic literacy skills, making it difficult for women farmers to benefit from training activities which could improve their agricultural production and increase their incomes. Because of this, in many pilot countries, P4P has incorporated basic reading and writing skills into training to promote their participation.

In 2010, two-thirds of all illiterate adults in the world were women. In 2011, P4P’s global gender strategy projected that literacy training was one of the necessary steps towards empowering women farmers, particularly due to their lower literacy levels than men. This was confirmed by emerging lessons learned, which show that functional literacy is crucial for women to learn other skills, allowing them to manage farmers’ organizations and keep records of financial transactions.

Developing capacity through P4P

After participating in P4P training, many women realized the limitations posed by their inability to read and write. This led to some farmers’ organizations making arrangements to provide functional literacy training for their members. Literacy programmes have a variety of benefits, boosting women’s confidence, assisting them participate more fully in their households and communities, allowing them to better follow their children’s schooling and enabling them to keep records. Literacy training has been provided to P4P-supported farmers in diverse countries, including Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo.

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As a post-conflict country, DRC has posed a variety of challenges during the implementation of P4P, including lack of basic infrastructure and distrust among farmers following civil conflict. Encouraging women’s participation in P4P proved particularly challenging, in part due to a low literacy rate, with 43 percent of women over the age of 15 unable to read or write. This rate is even higher in rural areas. To increase women’s participation, literacy programmes were implemented in both districts where P4P operates, through partnership with a local NGO called BUCODED in the Kabalo territory in the eastern Katanga province, and Oxfam in the Bikoro territory in the western Équateur province. Through this project, nearly 2,000 women have been provided with literacy training in Swahili and Lingala. The programme also provided training in basic calculation skills and information on child-raising, sanitation, family planning, women’s rights and HIV/AIDS prevention to further improve the lives of women and their families. Local governments have been vital partners in project implementation, with support from the national government.

Increasing women’s engagement in DRC
Since the beginning of the literacy project in DRC, women’s participation in P4P-supported farmers’ organizations increased by 19 percent in Kabalo and 34 percent in Bikoro. Now, not only do more women participate in village farmers’ organizations, many have taken on leading roles, with 13 percent of leadership roles now occupied by women, from five percent previously. One such woman, Moma Maua Evaristine, who participated in the literacy project, is now the president of her farmers’ organization. The group, which is called BONIGE, has 25 members, of whom three are women. Moma says that thanks to the literacy programme she is now able to better manage her household, live and work independently, and participate in her farmers’ organization by managing the group’s warehouse.

“I am happy to have responsibilities as a woman in a group of men, because in my society, it is often said that a woman should not speak in a group where there are men, and especially should not speak directly to them. What I am doing now is a great joy to me,” Moma says.

In DRC, implementing the literacy programme has proven challenging due to a lack of timely funding, which has limited the number of spots available and caused the programme to be limited to nine months rather than 18. A symbolic fee of US$ 1 was a requirement for participation, contributing to the funding of parts of the training. Despite the introduction of this fee, interest in the training is still higher than the availability of resources can provide for. P4P and partners hope to respond to continued demand for literacy training by organizing a literacy activity focusing specifically on income-generating activities.

Read more about P4P in DRC:
P4P in DRC fact sheet
Rebuilding infrastructure to link smallholders to markets
Five facts about connecting smallholders to markets in Mali

In rural areas of Mali, agriculture is the primary source of income. Smallholder farmers contribute to almost 90 percent of the country’s agricultural production, but have historically struggled to access quality markets, generally settling for low farm gate prices. Today, smallholder farmers in Mali are increasingly marketing their crops collectively to WFP and private sector markets, including sales to processing units and milling enterprises.

1. Smallholders are benefiting from financial inclusion.
Farmers’ organizations have facilitated access to credit for their members through the National Bank of Agriculture and various micro-finance institutions using contracts signed with WFP as collateral. This has enabled farmers’ organizations to purchase agricultural inputs such as improved seeds and fertilizer, for use when they are needed most. For many smallholders, this has led to increased production. Scaling up these gains will require further efforts, with many farmers still struggling to access financial institutions.

2. Women are gaining access to land.
In areas where women have been traditionally unable to own or control land, male family members and local leaders are now supporting them to access land individually and as groups after having seen the many benefits of their economic empowerment.

3. The government is enabling progress.
The government has played a key role in P4P by encouraging the development of farmers’ organizations and creating a favourable policy framework for smallholder farmers. An emphasis on agricultural and rural development provides an enabling environment for smallholders supported by P4P. The government is now enacting policies such as the expansion of fertilizer subsidies to include sorghum and millet.

4. Improving rural livelihoods are increasing the availability of social services.
In Mali, WFP has contracted some US$ 13.5 million worth of commodities from P4P-supported smallholders. In many cases, improvements in local economies and increased incomes can assist farmers to better contribute to local development taxes (some US$ 2 per person). In the Cinzana municipality, tax recovery was 50 to 60 percent before P4P. Now it is at 83 to 86 percent. These taxes are used to construct schools and health centres, directly benefiting communities. In the village of Falema, a community health centre has been built, increasing access to medical services in the rural community.

5. Improvements in nutrition and agriculture are being linked.
Women have been educated regarding the benefits of consuming the nutrient- and protein-rich local variety of cowpea called niébé, which in the past was almost exclusively grown for sale. Today, more women are using niébé in their own homes, benefiting their family’s nutrition.

To learn more about P4P in Mali read the two-page fact sheet here.
Coffee rust in Latin America showcases need for further improvements in smallholder resilience

The coffee rust outbreak devastating crops in Latin America has negatively affected local economies and is limiting smallholders’ ability to reinvest in their staple crop production. Though the increased capacity of smallholder farmers and their organizations enables them to better respond to shocks, the coffee rust outbreak has highlighted the need for increased efforts.

Coffee production and export is a vital component of most Latin American economies. This has been negatively affected by coffee rust, a fungus, which reduces yields and crop quality. Since its outbreak in the region in 2012, coffee rust has caused more than US$ 1 billion in economic damages. These negative impacts are most felt by smallholder family farmers, though entire rural communities are affected.

Coffee rust impacts smallholder farmers

Though P4P focuses on staple crops purchased by WFP, such as maize and beans, coffee rust is affecting P4P-supported smallholder farmers. In Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, many smallholders diversify production with coffee to earn extra income. Farmers also depend on the supplementary income they earn through seasonal labour like cutting coffee, particularly in El Salvador. Coffee rust reduces profits from coffee sales and the need for seasonal labour, diminishing the extra incomes farmers would use to re-invest in staple crop productivity. Plus, P4P-supported farmers’ organizations often include farmers who cultivate coffee, especially in the Honduran department of El Paraiso. In the last planting season, coffee yields in El Paraíso dropped by 60 to 80 percent, leading to decreased earnings for farmers’ organizations. The degree to which this has created difficulties for the repayment of loans is being further assessed. This could lead to financial institutions hesitating to invest in them in the future.

Capacity development to increase resilience

Farmers’ organizations involved in P4P benefit from training in organizational decision-making, preparing them to better deal with shocks such as coffee rust or other natural disasters. According to engineer Ana Rosa Romero, who provides technical assistance in accreditations and commercialization for the Nicaraguan Cooperative La Union R.L.: “When compared with other cooperatives in the area, I do believe that the capacity building workshops provided by P4P have helped us create a better vision of our organization. The development of capacities and learning of new skills has contributed to a better management of the organization’s resources and has led to a better handling of crises.”

Strengthening efforts moving forward

WFP has responded to the coffee rust crisis in Latin America with some innovative approaches, including cash and vouchers, which allow recipients of food assistance to purchase their own food from local markets. This can benefit local economies and empower people to make their own decisions about what to buy. In Guatemala, WFP is supporting affected farmers and their families with a cash transfer system. In Honduras and El Salvador, families affected by coffee rust receive vouchers, which can be redeemed for food at local shops. Through this programme, P4P-supported smallholder farmers’ organizations have supplied $ 30,000 (30 metric tons) worth of maize and beans, which has been distributed to almost 600 families affected by coffee rust. An additional 15 metric tons will be distributed in the following weeks. This provides an additional market for smallholders’ quality crops, while providing vital food assistance to farmers severely affected by coffee rust. Further efforts are needed to scale up this approach. To decrease the impact of natural disasters and strengthen rural economies, further support is required to increase the resilience of smallholder farmers and their organizations. As P4P is mainstreamed within WFP activities, farmers’ organizations require further support to acquire the skills and assets needed to better respond to shocks.

Read more articles about coffee rust:
- Central America battles drought and coffee rust
- Coffee rust leaves Guatemalan families struggling
- WFP distributes food to families affected by coffee rust
Smallholders benefit from conservation farming in Nicaragua

In the Nueva Segovia region of Nicaragua, P4P is supporting farmers’ organizations to utilize low-cost, environmentally-friendly techniques and technologies. These sustainable practices, which include minimal tillage farming and the use of organic materials in soil enrichment, are enabling smallholders to benefit from increased yields, improved crop quality and reduced production costs.

In the municipality of Jalapa, Nueva Segovia, flat land in this generally mountainous area, and high agricultural potential has led to the extensive use of mechanized farming, particularly since the introduction of tobacco cultivation. Many years of utilizing traditional mechanization has led to soil compaction and erosion, which can deplete the soil of vital nutrients and reduce yields. To promote improvements in agricultural production, P4P and partners are supporting small-scale farmers with a variety of sustainable techniques and technologies.

New sustainable farming techniques
Smallholder farmers in Jalapa are now utilizing minimal tillage systems, which allow them to cultivate land with minimal disturbance to the soil, reducing nutrient loss. Minimal tillage systems are comprised of seeders, which are either hand-held, or trailers pulled by tractors. Minimal tillage also benefits smallholders by decreasing the time and labour required for planting and soil preparation, and can reduce costs by over 30 percent. Plus, fewer seeds and fertilizer are needed, with less lost in application. The equipment also improves the spacing between crops, which can lead to higher yields. Technical assistance has been provided by the government’s Institute of Agricultural Technology (INTA). P4P shares the cost of the equipment with the cooperatives.

The Cooperativa de Servicios Múltiples Campesinos Activos de Jalapa (CCAJ) and the Asociación de Campesinos para el Desarrollo Integral Sostenible (ACADIS) have been supported to create production plans to best provide planting and fertilization services to member organizations. Improved technologies have been further promoted through exchanges, field visits, internships and small trials, benefitting cooperative leaders and key P4P partners such as INTA. While this new technology is already yielding results in Jalapa, scaling these practices to other farmers is challenging, with many smallholders still utilizing traditional techniques. Lessons learned confirm that scaling up will require additional technical support and awareness raised about the benefits of high-performing, environmentally-friendly technologies and techniques.

Conserving soil, improving production
P4P-supported cooperatives are also learning to utilize environmentally-friendly organic amendments, as well as agricultural techniques to promote the conservation of soil and water. For example, the Cooperativa de Servicios Múltiples Santiago is now cultivating slopes along the contour, where natural barriers such as shrubs and trees protect the soil and prevent erosion of nutrients. “If we do not implement techniques to conserve the soil it will erode, and there will then be a need to use more fertilizer. This is an unnecessary costly expense,” says the cooperative’s technician Elmer Sarantes.

In collaboration with the Agricultural Technology Integration System Network (RED-SICTA), P4P is working to introduce low-cost hermetic “cocoon” storage systems. These airtight bags reduce crop losses, in part by preventing infestation by weevils and other pests without the use of toxic insecticides. While the introduction of new storage systems at cooperative level are making great strides in improving crop quality, smallholders in Nicaragua require additional support to access storage facilities on a larger scale.

To learn more about P4P in Nicaragua read the two-page fact sheet here.
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P4P in the News

P4P work with AGRA highlighted
Article in the New Scientist discusses investments made by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) in African agriculture. The article highlights the work of Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), P4P, and WFP’s role as a buyer of smallholder farmers’ surplus produce. Read full article

P4P supporting women’s literacy
WFP and FAO joint efforts to empower women in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) through literacy training are highlighted in local news. Read full article (in French)

P4P participant speaks at UN General Assembly (UNGA)
At the Zero Hunger side event of the UNGA, Karla Trujillo, from El Salvador, describes how P4P assisted her farmers’ organization to go from subsistence farmers to business people. “We can contribute to the eradication of hunger,” Karla says. Video from 53:00

The update is published by the P4P Coordination Unit in Rome, Italy.
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