



Women members of the Azatek cooperative sort their tomato harvest beside their new greenhouse. © Benjamin Gazaryan/Oxfam

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND LEADERSHIP IN ARMENIA

Oxfam is promoting women's economic empowerment and leadership in remote regions of Armenia. Armenian women face many barriers to their equal participation in agricultural production and marketing chains. Oxfam supports the development of women's agricultural businesses and builds their leadership capacities by engaging them in cooperative management structures and training programmes. Oxfam is also working to change agricultural policy in Armenia in order to make it more gender-inclusive. With a focus on key learning and recommendations from the programme, this case study sets out Oxfam's experiences in supporting women smallholders to develop new agricultural businesses producing fresh fruit and vegetables.

1. INTRODUCTION

Agriculture employs 45 percent of the Armenian workforce, and almost half of these workers are women. Smallholder farmers from small, remote rural communities are highly vulnerable to poverty and increasingly harsh climate and weather conditions are affecting their crops.

Women in Armenia are more likely to live in poverty than men. There are no laws and few policies aimed at integrating rural women into development initiatives, and they are under-represented in decision and policy-making processes. Women smallholders face many barriers in agricultural production and in marketing chains. They lack access to the agricultural services, credit and government support that they need, and have few economic opportunities beyond agriculture.

Oxfam in Armenia is promoting women's economic empowerment and leadership through involving rural women in the management of agricultural cooperatives and in different types of rural agri-business activities. The aim of this project to bring transformational change to women farmers in the remote Vayots Dzor and Tavush regions of Armenia. It supports the development of their agricultural businesses and builds their leadership capacity by engaging them in cooperative management structures and training programmes.

Oxfam in Armenia supports farmers to take collective action through cooperatives because this can help them to reduce their individual costs and gain access to a wider range of support services. Farmers who are organized can benefit from agricultural inputs and new technologies at lower prices, as well as better access to training, support and credit. Cooperatives can also support smallholder farmers add value to their crops – for example by investing in collective infrastructure to grow, store or process their products. Collective marketing and negotiation can result in better prices for individual farmers, with resulting improvements in their livelihoods.

Through this project, Oxfam is piloting a new model of rural business and social enterprise. The model is based on the development of small-scale community infrastructure to support agricultural business improvements – such as cold storage, greenhouses or processing facilities. The infrastructure is owned and managed by the cooperatives and part of the income generated is invested in a fund which is used for projects benefiting the wider community.

Oxfam is complementing its work to support gender-inclusive cooperatives at the local level with national advocacy and lobbying work to support the creation of a more favourable administrative and legislative environment for agricultural cooperatives. This work has been successful as the new national agricultural strategy for Armenia emphasizes the importance of gender-inclusive approaches to agricultural development, as well as the role of agricultural cooperatives and new approaches to agribusiness in rural areas. Within the framework of the European Union

Food Security project a joint working group was established with the Ministry of Agriculture to proceed with the development of the new Strategy for Sustainable Agricultural and Rural Development 2015-2025. The unique feature of the strategy is that it's the first gender sensitive strategy ensuring gender equality in agricultural policies.

2. ABOUT OXFAM'S PROGRAMME

Working with implementing partners, Oxfam has established 21 cooperatives in the target regions, which produce fresh fruit and vegetables. Eight of these are women's cooperatives. The remaining cooperatives include both men and women, with a minimum 40 percent of women members. Altogether the cooperatives have 625 members, almost 400 of whom are women.

The programme activities have included:

- Support for the establishment of smallholder women farmers' co-operatives – with the aim of supporting women farmers to achieve economies of scale, to organize their inputs more efficiently, to get better prices for their products and to increase their bargaining power.
- Providing the women's cooperatives with new climate-adaptive agricultural business infrastructure, such as community greenhouses and cold storage facilities, equipped with new irrigation technology and insulation to maximise the use of scarce water resources and protect the crops from harsh and unpredictable weather conditions. By being able to store their fruit and vegetables for longer, the women's cooperatives can extend their crop marketing opportunities beyond the immediate harvest season.
- Support for the women's cooperatives to use their new greenhouse and cold storage enterprises as a business platform to generate income not only for their own members but for the whole community. The women's cooperatives invest up to 30 percent of their net profit in a community social fund.
- Capacity building for women farmers to increase their knowledge and skills in business management, marketing, and agricultural practices and technologies.
- Improving market access for the women's co-operatives using Gender Enterprise and Market (GEM) approaches¹. This enhances the marketing opportunities for smallholder women farmers by building market linkages between female farmers and buyers, including wholesalers, retailers and fruit and vegetable processors. Marketing support also includes support for the cooperatives to build their online marketing presence.
- Providing microcredit services to the members of the women's cooperatives (via an Oxfam partner). Each cooperative member

receives a zero-interest subsidized loan for seasonal agricultural or business activities.

- Providing information about market prices for agricultural crops via mobile SMS services.
- Supporting pro-poor and gender-equitable agricultural policies through joint advocacy and lobbying work.

As a result of the project, smallholder women farmers have gained access to new markets using newly-established linkages with buyers and local processors. Around 100 tonnes of fresh pears, apples, figs and cherries were sold to national large-scale processors and supermarkets through the cooperatives, using their cold storage facilities. Smallholder women farmers involved in the project increased their income by 30-40 percent.

Around £15,000 in loans were disbursed to women cooperative members during each year of the project, benefiting some 240 women farmers.

Women farmers increased their knowledge and skills in relation to cooperative management, crop marketing, and high-value and resilient agricultural practices and technologies, such as drip irrigation, integrated pest management, post-harvest management and crop nutrition.

3. WHAT DID OXFAM LEARN?

The agriculture sector in Armenia is characterized by gender-blind policies and strategies. Oxfam's experience confirmed that there is a real need to engage rural women in the agricultural value chains from which they have previously been marginalized or excluded. Empowering women economically and politically through community-based cooperative structures is an effective way to do this. The assumptions in the model of change underlying the project design were supported by the project experience.

Supporting the development of women's cooperatives

The project found that the women's cooperatives tended to be better organized and more efficient than mixed cooperatives, in terms of the organization and allocation of duties; collective cultivation, harvesting and marketing activities; decision making on social projects and allocations; and distribution of income among members. Women farmers were more proactive and keen to work collectively than their male counterparts. They were also more trustful and accountable to each other while working around common issues and objectives. It is important to keep raising awareness about the efficiency and profitability of women agricultural cooperatives and sharing the experiences of the most successful cooperatives.

Intensive support is needed for gender-inclusive cooperatives

Women farmers in rural Armenia typically have limited knowledge of management and marketing techniques, or in new agricultural technologies and practices (e.g. drip irrigation, greenhouses etc.). Their capacities for accessing financial, extension or other services are also minimal. Cultural barriers often prevent rural women from getting involved in the economic, political or social activities of their communities or in public national level campaigning events. Intensive work with women farmers and cooperatives was needed in order to improve their capacities in business management, financial management and entrepreneurial thinking, as well as to build their confidence to assume new roles and activities.

The project also had to work to change the mentality of smallholder farmers who were used to working individually rather than collectively, and who had a deep-seated mistrust of cooperative development resulting from their experiences of collective agriculture during the Soviet era.

Compounding this is a lack of professional extension support for agricultural development at all levels, in particular a lack of targeted support for the development of cooperatives or for pro-poor and gender-sensitive agricultural policies and strategies. For all these reasons, it was important not only to ensure that direct support for the cooperatives was intensive and sufficient, but also to couple the direct programme work with influencing and advocacy at local and national levels.

Moving beyond the cooperative: Women as community leaders

In Armenia, women rarely participate in public life within their communities. They have limited access to decision making at the community level and are usually not represented in local governance bodies. Oxfam's programme experiences confirmed that rural women's participation in cooperative management structures can create new

'Everything is difficult at the beginning. When we were founding a women's cooperative in Hermon with Oxfam, no one believed that we would be successful. And today, just one year later, our cooperative is known all over the province. They all know what tremendous work we have done. As a result of that, not only have we increased our members' incomes, but we can also help to buy books and other necessary stationery for the community school.'

Naira Mnatsakanyan,
president of the Hermon
women's cooperative

horizons for the realization of women's potential growth and development. Many female cooperative members became increasingly involved in the wider socio-economic and political life of the community over the course of the project. The head of the Vankadzor women's cooperative, Nune Avagyan, was elected as a member of Gomk Community Council in 2012.

Women leaders were also identified through annual initiatives, such as the Women Food Heroes competition, a national-level platform for rural women leaders to present their success stories and highlight the challenges they face.

As such, the development of cooperative farming activities have acted as a springboard for women to take broader public action and to start to realise their potential as leaders both in the cooperatives and in the wider community.

Influencing for wider agricultural policy change

Political will and state funding to support improvements in agriculture in Armenia are low, and local government bodies often have very limited power or capacity to take steps to support agricultural development. Farmers have low levels of trust in authorities at all levels. The agricultural sector is dominated by state-sponsored monopolies and large-scale agribusinesses with strong state interests. As such, the current political, business and institutional environment in Armenia does not support the long-term sustainability of the programme.

Accordingly, it was important to accompany the programme with continuous advocacy work aimed at creating a more conducive institutional and legal environment for the sustainable development of farmer cooperatives, and women's cooperatives in particular. Oxfam has established a multi-stakeholder platform, the Agriculture Alliance, which brings together civil society organizations with government and research institutions working on rural agricultural development in Armenia. The Agriculture Alliance recognizes women's marginalized role in agriculture, and supports the integration of women's voices into the process of designing effective agricultural policies and strategies. It is supporting new research and evidence to feed into the policy dialogue; developing joint advocacy and lobbying activities; monitoring the implementation of gender-sensitive policies and strategies; and working to draft a new law on agricultural cooperatives.

Oxfam and the Agriculture Alliance have also been deeply involved in the development of the new national Strategy for Sustainable Agricultural and Rural Development (SSARD) for 2015–25. Oxfam facilitated participation from actors from community to national level in the development of the strategy, as well as providing gender analysis.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

As a result of Oxfam's work, the Strategy for Sustainable Agricultural and Rural Development (SSARD) explicitly acknowledges women's roles in agricultural value chains and the importance of rural women's economic empowerment. It also emphasises the importance of agricultural cooperative development (including cooperatives led by women) and the establishment of new rural agribusiness infrastructure, such as greenhouses, cold storage centres and processing plants. If the Strategy is implemented as planned, the approaches that Oxfam has developed in this project will be widely replicated by the government and other international development organizations.

Going forward, Oxfam will be focusing efforts and allocating resources to monitoring the proper implementation of the SSARD, in order to ensure that it supports empowerment and livelihoods improvements for women and men smallholder farmers in Armenia, and contributes to long-term rural development.

NOTES

¹ Oxfam's Gendered Enterprise and Markets (GEM) Programme is a cutting-edge holistic market-systems approach to sustainable livelihoods development. It looks at the whole market environment in order to identify Oxfam's key intervention points to gain the maximum positive sustainable impact for marginalised smallholder communities. For further information see website <http://growsellthrive.org/>

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail programme learning team at programmelearning@oxfam.org.uk

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