

Is a Household a Firm?

Food Security, the Value Chain Approach and Gender

By Sandra Blanchard, Ruth Campbell and Suzanne Berkey

The global food crisis has left millions more facing hunger around the world. As a result, there is greater emphasis in foreign assistance on improving and expanding both traditionally focused household food security initiatives as well as efforts related to trade and competitiveness, more-open regional corridors and improved agricultural policies.

The foreign assistance community recognizes that to ensure long-term food security, households and communities must move beyond simple subsistence and strive for integration into the global economy. However, well-intentioned programs designed to increase household income can have unanticipated negative consequences for food security unless we understand and take into account the roles and power dynamics of women and men at the household level. Given this, it is critical that we use appropriate methodologies to identify constraints and promote opportunities to reach the intended goal of sustainable food security while ensuring that women benefit from our interventions.

Approaches to Food Security

One of the strengths of traditional food security programming is the implicit recognition that households are not only sites of productive economic activity, but also the places where the next generation is nurtured. In every society, women bear most of the responsibility for childcare and for the daily activities of maintaining the household. At the same time, they are economic actors working as farmers, wage laborers and managers of business enterprises. The priority they place on their family responsibilities is reflected in how they spend the income that they control: on better food, medical care and education for children and other family members. It is their dual role in economic production and in nurturing the next

generation that makes women the critical linchpin in household food security. Because of their role as nurturers, women have often been the recipients of successful health and nutrition interventions.

Efforts to create sustainable economic opportunities for women that are grounded in an analysis of the broader economic environment have been less successful.

Value chain analysis, on the other hand, has proven exceptionally effective at maximizing economic opportunity. The value chain approach identifies and addresses the systemic constraints that impede the development of enterprises. It places income-generating opportunities in the context of market demand and prioritizes sustainability through its emphasis on facilitating change rather than directly providing goods and services.

ACDI/VOCA combines the two concepts of food security and value chain development. We recognize that reducing poverty and improving the economic prospects of households increases food security. We conceive of households as firms in value chain analyses. However, it is necessary to bring a gender lens to the value chain in which the households operate to help us craft programs that will lead to long-term food security and improve the well-being of all members of the household. This requires taking a careful look at the roles of men and women, including their access to and control of resources within the household and the community, and the social rules that govern men's

and women's behavior and choices. This includes looking at intrahousehold decision making and identifying constraints.

As a leading value chain practitioner, ACDI/VOCA recognizes that, although we call a household a firm, households have many functions and priorities that are not economically based. We also recognize that intrahousehold dynamics and community social norms affect responses to and impact of market interventions. For example, most rural households in West Africa do not pool household resources. Research has shown that this has affected how households respond to market signals for cash crop production. Often there are conflict-laden negotiations within the household about who will bear the burdens and who will reap the benefits of increased production for the market. Women are generally the losers in those negotiations: Increased production of cash crops in West Africa tends to shift control of income to the men while increasing the amount of women's labor time controlled by their husbands.¹

Practical Approaches Make a Difference

To address this asymmetrical access to and control of resources within the household, it is critical to include both men and women in decisions related to both food security and economic growth of the household. ACDI/VOCA recognizes that issues of labor allocation, control of resources, gender

1. For a good overview of both the sociological and the economic literature on non-resource-pooling households, see Lisa Smith and Jean-Paul Chavas, *Supply Response of West African Households: Implications of Intra Household Preference Heterogeneity*, IFPRI, 1999.

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norms and community pressure must be considered to ensure not only improved economic gains, but improved household food security as well.

The following are examples of how we do this:

- » In Uganda we cross train men and women in nutritional messages to ensure that both adults in the household are receiving the same message, and that when incomes increase in the household, health and nutrition expenditures are important to whoever controls the money.
- » In Liberia we increase women’s access to agricultural inputs by bringing service providers closer to communities (unlike their male peers, women are rarely able to travel to procure inputs). By introducing innovative techniques, we help make production more efficient, which allows women to allocate their time to other important activities, including taking care of children.
- » In Kenya we are promoting farming as a family business, recognizing the roles of men and women in the farming household.

ACDI/VOCA recognizes that there are potential opportunity costs in any program design. We therefore try to schedule training periods to be convenient for women who typically put in longer days than men as they try to meet both their work and household responsibilities. We also continue to develop our monitoring and evaluation systems



to capture both quantitative and qualitative information that will help guide implementation and prevent unintended consequences. We look not just at head counts of men and women, but also at remuneration levels, access to leadership positions within associations and self-defined measures of empowerment.

As ACDI/VOCA promotes food security, we apply our expertise in value chains and household-market linkages, as well as our understanding of intra-household dynamics and complex normative rules that are particular to the communities in which we work. We understand that within our programs, even as we work to integrate households into markets and promote sustainable income-generating

opportunities, we must take into account the role of gender in household stability, decision making and control of resources.

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