

EMPOWERING WOMEN IN THE OILSEEDS BUSINESS: THE CASE OF PKWI WOMEN'S COOPERATIVE

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Country: Uganda
Sector: Agriculture/Oilseeds

CONTEXT

Sunflower has increasingly become an important crop for the majority of the rural households in Bukedea district (eastern Uganda) who depend on farming as their main source of food, income and self-employment. While women provide most of the labour for sunflower production, men dominate the marketing, keeping the income for themselves. This contributes to food insecurity and hinders women from optimising the benefits from sunflower production for the wellbeing of the family. Furthermore, women's heavy workload such as childcare, cooking, and farmwork leaves them with no time to participate in the leadership of cooperatives. Moreover society lacks confidence in women's ability to make household economic decisions and to lead cooperatives.

This situation was made worse by the two decades of insurgency (1985 to 2005) which led to massive destruction of property (farms, houses, and livestock) and displaced most families into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. Moreover thousands of lives were lost, and children and women abducted, tortured and sometimes raped. Understanding these barriers, which prevent women from optimising returns from sunflower production, provided SNV with a unique entry point to explore opportunities to increase women's influence and control of the returns from sunflower production.

It was at the height of the insurgency, that a group of 12 women from Bukedea district including Norah Ebukalin¹ founded Popular Kumi² Women Initiative (PKWI) to provide social and economic protection for fellow women living in IDP camps. Norah describes their main motivation as survival:

The suffering brought by the insurgency led me and 11 other women to found PKWI in my house in 1993, and the main objective was to protect each other from the rebels and to make sure we have food in our houses.

PKWI is a women's cooperative with 2,500 members - 1,500 of whom are women. The members are organised into 100 farmer groups, each comprised of 25 members who live very close to each other. The cooperative is modelled as a vertically integrated business model whereby the cooperative provides five metric tons (MT) of sunflower seeds as seed loan to its members and provides extension services until harvest. Following the harvest the cooperative buys about 2,000MT of sunflower from its members, and recovers the seed loans. After milling, PKWI processes approximately 400,000 litres of edible cooking oil, and seed cake. Members receive one-third of the seed cake and share the cooperative's profits at the end of the year. The cooperative sells cooking oil and the remaining two-thirds of seed cake.



A healthy sunflower plant



Cooking oil ready for sale

INTERVENTION APPROACH

To address the above-mentioned barriers, SNV supported PKWI cooperative to develop an effective community-based extension services model to provide members with a basket of agricultural services. These included seed loans, animal traction services, market information, agronomy and post harvest skills trainings, and an interactive learning demonstration plot for practical application of acquired skills. The extension services model encouraged women and men to jointly discuss specific gender roles and suggest opportunities for joint decisions in sunflower production. Interestingly, the extension services model - which was facilitated by *Key Farmer Trainers (KFTs)* selected from each of the 100 farmers groups - empowered women in a number of ways.

¹ Norah Ebukalin is the Founder and twice Chairperson of PKWI Board of Directors; she is now the General Secretary of PKWI

² Bukedea district was carved out of Kumi district in early 2002, when PKWI was founded, Bukedea was in Kumi district

First, it became easier for women to be selected as KFTs given that women were a majority in the groups. Moreover women felt more confident to lead small groups of 25 members whom they knew well and have lived with in the same community for many years.

Second, given the influence of KFTs as model farmers, and as the main connector between PKWI management and its members, female KFTs gained self-confidence as well as trust from community members.

Third, the KFT model made it easier for women to participate in training events because: a) training scripts were translated to the local language; b) the script was recorded and played as an audio message; c) training venues were re-located to communities, closer to women's homes; d) group members made sure training schedules suited the women's schedules, and; e) each KFT established a demonstration plot for practical learning and application.

We are 25 members in my group and I am in charge of training; I teach my group modern farming methods; our lives have improved a lot, and we don't have to go begging anymore. Salume Oti, KFT for Kobwala Group



An ox-drawn plough



Women at a PKWI learning event

SNV also launched the oilseeds subsector discussion platforms (OSSUP) in eastern Uganda and encouraged PKWI to participate. Through OSSUP, SNV advocated for an enabling policy environment including increased public investment in the oilseeds subsector. Furthermore, through OSSUP SNV facilitated improved linkages between PKWI and a local agricultural research institute (NaSARI) that provides the breeder seeds for PKWI to multiply and give to its members as seed loans.

Through OSSUP PKWI's chairperson, Norah Ebukalin, successfully lobbied for strategies to address the unique constraints affecting women in sunflower production. First, she advocated for training venues to be relocated from centralised learning centres to the communities closer to women, and SNV supported PKWI to develop the community-based extension services model to effectively reach women. Secondly, she lobbied for provision of labour saving technologies to ease the workload of women and PKWI secured funds from United States African Development Foundation to procure and distribute oxploughs to the farmers groups. Thirdly, she worked to mainstream women's empowerment principles in PKWI's organisational structures. This included meeting the goal of 60% women's access at all levels: 60% of PKWI's members and KFTs are women, 60% of KFTs are women; and the same rule applies to board, managerial and technical positions within PKWI.

OUTCOMES

- So far, the community-based extension services model has enhanced PKWI's ability to effectively deliver community-based agricultural services, making it easier for more women to participate, unlike in the past when trainings were centralised at PKWI's learning centre.
- As a result of training conducted, the rate of adoption of good agricultural practices has increased among PKWI members and field evidence suggests that most members are using the improved sunflower seed provided by the cooperative. 95% of them have adopted the recommended practice of planting sunflower in rows, and about 50% use animal traction for ploughing their gardens. By adopting good agricultural practices, PKWI members have increased sunflower productivity from 300 kilos to 400 kilogrammes an acre, making sunflower production an attractive business.
- Women reported that by working together with their spouses in mixed farmers' groups, their influence on household economic decisions had improved, for

IMPACT

instance regarding the sale of farm harvests and how the income should be used. The improved gender relations at the household level have increased confidence and respect for women within the communities with the result that women are now more actively engaged in decision-making processes in the cooperative groups as well as at the community level.

- As a result of the policy dialogue facilitated by OSSUP, the Ugandan government and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) have invested an additional \$142M in the oilseeds sub-sector for the next five years (2012-2016).

Given the increased sunflower productivity as well as the good prices offered by the cooperative, PKWI members have increased their annual income from an average of 350 US\$ to 750 US\$ from sunflower alone, with sunflower contributing upto 50% of their income.

I had a poor family but our lives changed when we joined PKWI; we can afford to send our children to good private schools and have built a permanent house. We earn over 400 US\$ every season, and I now plan for our income together with my husband.' Sarah Esugut, Farmer Pole Pole Group

A recently concluded study confirmed that the households of PKWI members are more food secure compared with households of non-PKWI members in the same community. The food security is realised through household food production and food purchase using additional income from sunflower sales. PKWI employs 100 KFTs, and about 38 staff in technical and managerial positions. Additionally, PKWI members are self-employed on their farms, which have increasingly been diversified to include poultry, piggery, beekeeping and citrus production.

LESSONS LEARNT

The PKWI experience suggests that a focus on shared economic benefits for women and men could provide an avenue for tackling the issue of unequal gender relations at household and community level. In this case, it appears likely that the involvement of male spouses in PKWI groups enhanced the uptake of the initiatives aimed at increasing women's influence and control of the returns from sunflower production, which might have been more difficult to achieve if PKWI had remained a women-only cooperative. Paying attention to governance issues such as accountability and transparency in a farmers' cooperative contributes to increased trust among its members and external partners. Moreover being able to mentor and transfer the vision, mandate and commitment to the next generation of leaders ensures continuity of the cooperative.

It takes time for a farmers' cooperative to develop its norms, strengthen its own institutional arrangements and deepen the productivity and profitability of its core business. Moreover for a cooperative to become an entire chain manager, takes even more time and resources. It is therefore critical in cooperative development to allow sufficient time and resources for cooperative to transition through these stages.

Governance: PKWI's current leaders are inspired, committed and determined. The same inspiration, commitment and determination of the current leadership should be passed on to future leadership. Training and close mentoring of future potential leaders may partly address this challenge. Future potential leaders should be screened not only on their skills but also on their commitment to PKWI's vision and mandate. PKWI female members are good candidates to be mentored for future leadership. Where these women lack the required competencies and confidence, PKWI should invest to strengthen their capacity.

Women's empowerment is very important to PKWI, the percent of women at whatever level is 60%, right from membership, KFTs, board, management and technical positions. When you invest in a woman you get results. Roselyn Ajore, Head of PKWI Learning Centre.

Institutional strengths: The safety net, connectedness and accountability mechanisms embedded within PKWI's farmer institutional arrangements as described above contributes to the cohesion of PKWI producer groups. The extension services model consolidates the group dynamics even further: KFTs also serve as the main connectors between PKWI management and its members thereby providing a reliable monitoring and domestic accountability mechanism within the cooperative. Continuing to build on this institutional strength is thus one of the key success factors for PKWI's continuity.

SUSTAINABILITY

Financial stability: PKWI is viewed as a credible partner by its members and external partners. This credibility has made it possible for PKWI to attract external funding to grow its core business and expand its vision. Moreover PKWI makes profits from its sunflower business and collects annual membership fees. To consolidate its financial stability, PKWI should improve oil factory efficiency, maintain a competitive pricing policy, and deepen public accountability to its members through its annual general meetings.