

Agricultural Collectives in Gender Transformative Food and Water Systems



In a world of ever-increasing inequality, unjust and broken food systems coupled with pressures of conflict, and biodiversity loss and increasing climate change, one in three people globally remain malnourished. Global, national, and local challenges to social justice are perpetuated through gender inequality and social exclusion. Gender discrimination remains one of the most perverse causes of inequality and marginalisation globally despite major gains in the last two decades.

CARE works with communities to address the root causes of gender inequality by strengthening the skills and confidence of women and girls in sustainable agriculture, financial inclusion, market engagement, challenging harmful gender norms, and increasing food, water and nutrition security – while also engaging with men and boys to support efforts for greater equality.

CARE's work with collectives facilitates dialogues that build consciousness of inequalities and skills for collective action. Through group conscientization and collective empowerment, inequality, poverty and social injustice can be progressively reduced.

Thus, CARE's work with collectives to build group conscientization and collective empowerment is an important pathway to address the deep structural power and relational barriers that create and reinforce gender and socioeconomic inequalities. To better understand the role that collectives play in CARE's work to create gender transformative food and water systems, CARE, with support from the Cornell Atkinson Center, carried out a wide-ranging qualitative investigation of its work with agricultural collectives in Ethiopia, Ghana, Guatemala, Georgia, and Bangladesh.

Why Collectives?

BACKGROUND

Agricultural collectives can provide benefits to members across different scales of governance and market sectors. They can improve market outcomes through increased bargaining power, which in turn facilitates increased incomes, fairer prices, and better access to markets, inputs, and extension services. There is also evidence that collectives play a significant role in improving the lives of women by building social cohesion to organize for the protection of rights, advancing access to and control over resources, enhancing women farmers' skills and capacities, overcoming structural barriers to effectively run agricultural enterprises, and creating platforms for actors to collectively advance their common interests.

TYPES OF COLLECTIVES

The type of these collective organisations can range from savings and credit groups to service cooperatives that facilitate collective investments in physically indivisible inputs such as machinery for hire, in addition to groups to manage land pooling (especially for landless people), common pooled natural resource-based collectives such as Water User Associations (WUAs), food security and nutrition social protection collectives and farmers' groups to promote joint cultivation by small-scale producers.

Communities, governments, development agencies such as CARE and others have implemented programs using various types of collectives: Self-Help Groups (SHG), Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA), natural resource user groups and Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs), among others. This programming has seen the emergence of hybrid forms of collectives, such as Village Economic and Social Associations (VESAs) in Ethiopia, and Farmer Empowerment Marketing Associations (FEMAs) in Ethiopia and Ghana.

¹ This framework seeks to contribute to realization of the rights to food and nutrition security of women small-scale producers

TRAITS OF COLLECTIVES

According to the International Cooperative Alliance, collectives have the following traits:

- 1) voluntariness;
- 2) democratic control and participation
- 3) equitable distribution of resources;
- 4) autonomy and independence;
- 5) provision of training, and information;
- 6) cooperation between cooperatives to increase scale
- 7) support development of their local communities

Methods

DATA COLLECTION

In those 5 CARE Country Offices, data collection comprised in-person and remote Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with CARE staff, and relevant government, private sector, non-governmental stakeholders, and members of CARE agricultural collectives in order to develop an understanding of how well these collectives strengthen gender equality, promote inclusive governance, increase resilience, and meet the needs of members.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The KIIs were structured to understand the impact of collectives on six change areas of CARE's She Feeds the World Framework¹: women's empowerment; productive resources; access to markets; nutrition; social protection, and multiplying impact. With this framework in mind, the research sought to answer the following guiding questions:

- What does CARE's programming reveal about the ability for agricultural collectives to contribute to the She Feeds the World change areas?
- What are the challenges and barriers for collectives to achieve gender transformative outcomes?
- How can CARE and partners better support collectives to achieve gender transformative change in food and water systems?

and their families, in terms of greater sustainability, production, income, nutrition, equality and resilience.

Analysis and Discussion of Key Findings

SfTW Change Area	Benefits	Challenges	CARE Examples
Women's Empowerment	The social networks created through collective membership help mainstream gender transformative approaches; Collectives shift gender norms; Access to savings and credit increases women's economic empowerment;	Influencing large-scale policy change is difficult and barriers to joining collectives persist	In Guatemala, male collectives members participated in gender trainings offered by CARE, public agencies, and community organizations
Access to Resources	Collectives improve access to trainings and inputs; Improved access to land and water for household and productive use, but barriers remain; Collectives increase access to financial services	Discriminatory beliefs and policies, such as those limiting women's access to land, still constrain collectives, in addition to poor enforcement of existing policies	In Ghana, gender dialogues in collectives led to men allocating productive lands to women members
Access to Inclusive Markets	Improved market access, but difficulty making markets inclusive	Structural barriers beyond gender equality limit inclusive markets; Inclusive markets are constrained by multiple points of discrimination along value chains	In Ghana, Market Research Committees opened up new markets for VSLAs, but the offers from these markets were often less competitive
Social Protection	Collectives act as a protective institution for gender-based violence prevention; Collectives build social cohesion which increases resilience; Collectives provide increased access to social safety nets	The pathways for collectives to improve social protection need to be better understood as they were often varied between solidarity, government support, and learnings from gender trainings.	In Bangladesh, collective membership led to increased awareness and use of government services including food ration cards, services for elderly persons, and COVID-19 food security programs
Nutrition	Collective membership and linkages with partner organizations facilitates improved nutrition for women and their families	Positive nutrition outcomes were often dependent on services provided by government agencies, CARE, or other NGOs	In Ethiopia, improved nutrition outcomes were reported because of increased output of nutritious foods, and trainings provided through CARE in VSLAs
Scaling Impact	Collectives facilitate increased female participation in local and regional politics; Participation contributes to better governance and public services, and passage of laws and policies that support gender equality	Though there were some examples, such as in Guatemala, collectives weren't as linked to national policy processes compared to local ones	In Georgia, CARE helped engage collectives in the elaboration of the Law of Georgia on Agricultural Cooperatives

Recommendations

Collectives, to varying degrees depending on the context and function of the collective, operate based on core principles of solidarity, collaboration, and the strengthening of social ties. As a result, they are ideal platforms for integrating gender transformative approaches because they allow members to conceive of agency through participation in a group rather than as individuals. This further reinforces the goals of GTAs by helping members harness increased self-confidence through collective action, understand the ways in which gender inequality is manifested and reinforced through group relationships, and put skills and knowledge into practice through interactions between the collective and partner organizations across sectors. The following are some recommendations on how practitioners and policymakers can better support collectives to achieve gender transformative outcomes in food systems.

- 1. Engage collectives and their social networks to better mainstream and scale gender transformative approaches**
 - Conduct staff reflections to interrogate beliefs, assumptions, and biases
 - Use gender and power analysis to understand the local context
 - Hold critical reflection sessions with collective members
 - Prioritize collective benefit and group solidarity in participatory M&E
 - Create and leverage connections between collectives and partner organizations for better access to social services and political participation
 - Use participatory market systems analysis to ensure markets are inclusive throughout food systems.
 - Establish accountability mechanisms between collectives and partners
- 2. Ensure the sustainability of collectives to eliminate dependence on development organizations**
 - Establish grants facilities, revolving funds, or savings mechanisms for collectives
 - Compare sustainability outcomes between types of collectives and gender transformative approaches.

- 3. Work with collectives to increase impact of multi-sector interventions**
 - Prioritize collectives in climate change adaptation and integrated natural resources management
 - Support and sustain collectives to increase food and nutrition security during humanitarian crises and promote women's collective leadership in disaster preparedness and responses

“We women have not only supported each other - if some members are hurting, the others can support us – but we have learned and have overcome problems together. The cooperative has been a space of solidarity for women and for our families.” – Collective member in Guatemala