

## **Developing the capacity of extension officers and their organizations to train, work with and support women farmers**

### **1. THE CONCEPT**

Extension systems' widespread neglect of women farmers can be reversed through changes in attitudes of extension personnel and the structures and processes within agricultural institutions to assist them to become accountable to women farmers. While there is ample evidence that women extension professionals are more effective than male professionals in communicating and servicing women farmers, the small numbers of women extension agents (a global average of 15 % according to FAO) requires a strategy that enables male agents to service women farmers as well. This requires a two pronged approach that:

- builds the skills and changes attitudes of the professionals
- facilitates a process of organizational change to create an enabling environment that supports gender equity and is responsive to the needs of women farmers.

Skill building for female and male extension officers on gender, leadership, negotiation, adult literacy, information management, communication and training can develop their abilities to train, work with and support women farmers while simultaneously acting as internal change agents to facilitate processes of change within their organizations.

Our hypotheses is that both men and women extension professionals, if provided with suitable, gender-sensitive organizational support, skills and ICT resources, and made accountable for reaching women farmers will deliver better services to women farmers and groups. This Solution would transform existing extension systems to be accountable to women farmers.

### **2. RATIONALE AND EVIDENCE THE PROJECT CAN BE SUCCESSFUL**

Despite women's major role in the economy (comprising over 70% of total African agricultural labor and up to 90% of the labor engaged in food production (Blackden and Bhanu 1999), women farmers have been by and large neglected by existing extension systems, receiving but 5-7% of extension services, due to their limited control over assets and decisions, and systemic gender biases that are evident in agricultural institutions throughout Africa, South Asia and much of the world. A recent FAO survey showed that only 15 percent of the world's extension agents are women. Only in very few countries have women field staff been deployed in sufficient numbers and with sufficient resources to become effective agents of change among women farmers.

Experience has also shown that complementary strategies to bring about changes in attitude and behaviour within institutions are required. Gender sensitization training has been developed to initiate the task of attitude change within male-dominated extension and research bureaucracies and donor agencies; training materials and methods for gender analysis in agriculture have also been developed and are now in widespread use. Specialist material for training of trainers have been developed and are beginning to spread through agriculture training institutes, colleges, and universities.

But training needs to be complemented by other strategies to bring about change in organisational behaviours. Spring (1986) demonstrated in Malawi the range of often minor but critical adjustments which can increase women's access to and the relevance of extension significantly, even where most field agents are male. For example, male extension agents were encouraged to ask their male farmer contacts to include their wives during visits, demonstrations, or farmers' meetings. Field agents were required by their organizations to devote a greater percentage of their time to working with women's groups. Women farmers' seminars were organized for women to share with researchers and field staff their solutions to the technical problems specific to women farmers' production systems, and women's field days were organized to celebrate and legitimate women farmers' successes and to promote farmer-to-farmer exchange among women in Tanzania.

Extension programs that target women farmers as an integral part of the target audience have produced considerable benefits. In Kenya, following a nationwide campaign targeted at women under a national extension project, yields of corn increased by 28 percent, beans by 80 percent and potatoes by 84 percent (FAO, 1997).

### **3. EXPECTED BENEFITS OF THE PROJECT INCLUDING COMMENTS ON SUSTAINABILITY AND SCALE**

Agriculture extension institutions that have already demonstrated interest in improving their capacities to address the needs of women farmers in African and South Asia would be selected to benefit directly from this capacity building program. The process of selecting and preparing extension professionals to be trainers in successive waves will continue until the proposed target number for achieving a critical mass of extension agents/trainers has been created for each country or region.

The trainers of these extension professionals will be prepared to provide both the initial training course and the structured mentoring that accompanies trainees in the first year of field practice. The program's strategy includes institutionalization of this training/mentoring service to extension professionals in suitable organizations with responsibilities for technical training of extension agents, such as agricultural universities or training institutes. By building the capacities of extension staff and their organizations (including extension training institutes) to train and mentor others through a Training of Trainers, these benefits would scale out to women farmers groups and other extension officers, and would continue beyond the life of the grant supported project.

Cadres of women and men extension professionals and the organizations supporting them will be linked to their team of trainers by a range of information media, adapted to local needs and possibilities, but including radio, phone and where feasible, rural telecenters with internet access where the program's on-line training materials and mentoring will be provided. The program's use of communications media will be flexible but includes technical training in media literacy and financial support for the provision of basic, locally appropriate communication resources such as a radio or cell-phone for use by women farmers or groups.

The WOCAN project in South Asia (currently being replicated with Heifer International extension systems in West and Central Africa), *Institutionalizing Gender-responsive Research and Development for Agriculture and Natural Resource Management through Women's Networks* provides an example of how this approach could be implemented.

#### **4. HOW THE PROJECT WILL TARGET THE NEEDS AND BE OF SPECIFIC BENEFIT TO WOMEN SMALLHOLDERS**

This approach that puts women at the center of supply and demand for agricultural knowledge is required to transform existing systems of extension. From the trained extension professionals, women farmers will develop the capacity to lead- to negotiate, to communicate and to organize so that they are able to demand agricultural services and market access. The process through which women farmers demand services, in tandem with processes inside the agricultural organizations that create opportunities for them to play a role in planning and decision making, result in a strategic shift in power for women farmers.

#### **5. PROJECTED COSTS OF THE PROJECT**

To be effective, the organizational change to create an enabling environment the proposal should be implemented at the scale of a national innovation system (this includes the key actors both public and private who provide extension services). The goal is to create a “tipping point” in the institutional environment that shifts the perception and the practice defining women farmers as clients, what their needs are and how to work with them. An indicative budget for a one country pilot that aims at training at least 2,000 extension professionals in the public sector and another 2,000 from NGO extension providers, adapting the training package to national and local cultural and linguistic needs and providing field staff with basic communications technology is US \$4 million per year for a total of three years.

#### **6. MEASURES OF SUCCESS**

Organisations that have experience in capacity building for organisational change and gender equity at the institutional level, women’s leadership at the community and professional levels, and extensive experience working in the agriculture and natural resource management and marketing sectors are best able to lead the implementation of this initiative.

Among the organizations that might be invited to respond to the RFP are: Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WOCAN); Heifer International; African Women Leaders in Agriculture and Environment-Net (AWLAE-Net).

#### **7. RISKS**

The selection of suitable partner organizations is critical to the success of this initiative. Time and money are wasted when the top management of agriculture organizations do not wholeheartedly believe in or support a shift to putting women farmers at the centre.