



Investing in agriculture: key to empowering women and climate resilience

By Josiah Neufeld

The COVID-19 pandemic and its economic fallout now threatens a global hunger crisis too. For too many people, each day's food depends on that day's wages; to stay home is to starve. Women will suffer more acutely from the food insecurity, yet, as always, they will be on the front lines of responding to it.

In the least developed countries, nearly 80 per cent of women grow food for themselves and their families. Yet they are consistently given poorer land, receive less training and have less access to equipment, technology and markets than men. On top of that, they're responsible for the unpaid work of cooking food, fetching water, and caring for children and the elderly.

New research from a coalition of Canadian development organizations shows that one of the most powerful ways Canada can help fend off a global hunger emergency and prepare for future crises is by supporting agriculture projects that focus on women's empowerment and investing in climate change resilience. This way, Canada can put its aid dollars towards building a more resilient future for all.

Powerful examples

"We found powerful examples of how agricultural programming that focuses on empowering women and girls can radically change lives for the better," says Carol Thiessen, a senior policy advisor at Canadian Foodgrains Bank, who coordinated the research project for the Canadian Food Security Policy Group. "Women were better able to feed themselves and their families, gained financial independence and became influential voices in their communities."

The coalition, which includes more than 30 member organizations, commissioned studies of six agriculture projects in West Africa, a region vulnerable to climate shocks and political and economic instability. These projects trained women farmers in climate-resilient farming techniques and alternative livelihoods and helped them organize collective savings and loans groups. Communities were still benefitting, in some cases years after the projects had ended.

Hannah Anafo lives in northern Ghana, where rising temperatures and increasingly erratic rainfall are already threatening people's livelihoods. Until recently, Anafo struggled to feed her family with the millet, rice, and groundnuts that she grew during the rainy season. During the dry season she had no source of income.

But in 2012 Anafo was one of 21,000 farmers—70 per cent of whom were women—who took part in RESULT, a six-year, \$19 million project implemented by Canadian Feed The Children with funding from the Canadian government. The project trained farmers in a range of sustainable agricultural practices to help strengthen their resilience to climate stresses, including farming fish on nearby water reservoirs.

Aquaculture used to be considered men's work in Ghana, but training sessions helped men see the benefits of women earning their own incomes.

"With sensitization, the men came to understand," says Amanda Anipu, one of the project implementers. Many women now report that their husbands support them by helping with childcare and other domestic tasks because they see the benefits of their wives earning money.

Six years later, Anafo is still raising fish, even though the project wrapped up in 2018. She's a leader in her aquaculture group and has more influence in her community. "Before RESULT, most of us didn't have the confidence to stand in public and talk," she says. "I can now interact easily in large crowds."

Stronger voices and decision-making power

Women now have stronger voices and greater decision-making power in all of the project communities.

At one time, only men were invited to meetings with school teachers or government officials in Simbadougou, northern Burkina Faso. Now women speak as well, says Bintou Dramé, a participant in an agricultural project implemented by Mission inclusion.

In northern Ghana, a MEDA project called Greater Rural Opportunities for Women (GROW), has enabled women to work collectively in groups, gain access to better land and speak up in public.

"Through the GROW project training sessions, now I can convene my group and share everything I have learned. I have built my confidence and I feel proud," says Alifatou Zakaria, a former program participant.

In Sierra Leone, SATISFY, a World Vision project, trained women in sustainable rice cultivation, encouraging farming together in groups for bigger yields targeted at larger markets. Women formed savings and loans groups to save money together and acquire low-interest loans. They still meet regularly even though the project ended a few years ago.

Thanks to the program, Tianga Kamara's increased income and access to loans have allowed her to care for a household of eight and send one of her sons to medical school. "If it weren't for the group, he would never have entered university," she says.

Agriculture projects like these can strengthen communities and change social norms,” says Virginie Levasseur, Africa program director for the Quebec-based development organization SOCODEVI, and co-chair of the Food Security Policy Group. “But only if they are designed having the needs of women in mind. When women are empowered in key ways, the whole community benefits.”

Aid for agriculture falling

The research also analyzed Canada’s overall development spending on agriculture and food security. Notably, Canada’s funding for agriculture in developing countries has been steadily falling over the past decade. Between 2015 and 2019, the amount of money spent on aid for agriculture fell by 24 percent from \$390 million to \$295 million.

“With COVID-19’s likely impact on global hunger, this is a critical time. Now, more than ever, is when we need investment in agriculture projects that focus on women,” says Levasseur.

Josiah Neufeld is a freelance writer. This article was commissioned by the Canadian Food Security Policy Group. To read the research reports, please visit <https://ccic.ca/leaders-in-the-field>