



Soybean project empowers women in rural Ghana

By Kwasi Gyamfi Asiedu

A six-year project led by Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA), with support from the Government of Canada, has improved food security and empowered women in rural Ghana, giving them more access to better farmland and increasing the health of families and communities.

Some 23,000 women farmers from across Ghana's Upper West Region on the country's northern frontier with Burkina Faso participated in the project titled GROW (Greater Rural Opportunities for Women), which operated from 2012 to 2018. The project focused on soybeans because of its potential as a cash crop due to high demand from Ghana's cooking oil producers and poultry industry. Soybeans are also climate-resistant, highly nutritious as a food crop, and enrich farmland by adding nitrogen to the soil.

Before GROW, most women were farming small pieces of difficult-to-cultivate land, says Aloysius Kanchog, program manager for the Tumu Deanery Rural Integrated Development Programme (TUDRIDEP), one of five local organizations MEDA partnered with to implement the project. "Women were doing farming piecemeal. They were not looking at the bigger picture of actually taking farming as a real business they can make a lot of income from."

There were systemic reasons for this. Traditionally, women in Ghana are expected to help on their husbands' farms first before they can tackle their own farms. As a result, women often plant their own crops too late for the main rains, leading to meagre harvests.

Understanding that they would need buy-in from men for the project to succeed, GROW staff organized discussion forums with local landowners and traditional leaders. They also recruited and trained influential men in the communities to act as supporters and allies for women farmers.

“We [helped] the men in the communities understand that women too have the ability and capacity to do large-scale farming and earn income that will even come back and support the whole household,” Kanchog says.

Men were nominated by project clients and trained to sensitize other men. The training had positive results. Chiefs and leaders spoke to the men in the community, who started giving women more land to farm. In some cases, male allies mediated disputes arising from situations in which land had been given to women and then taken back.

The project also provided women with training and linked them with technologies to help them improve their yields and gain financial independence. Women were provided with more resilient seed varieties and trained in climate-smart agricultural practices such as using manure, composting, crop rotation, and cultivating keyhole gardens that require less water. These innovations increased dry-season yields by 17 percent and boosted crops’ resilience to climate shocks. Women continue to follow these practices two years after the end of the project.

Women also learned record keeping and organized savings and loans groups to help them manage their finances. TUDRIDEP helped women establish contacts with the key stakeholders in the soy value chain, including buyers. As a result, women improved their negotiation skills.

Project participants have also noticed men in the community doing more unpaid domestic work, such as childcare.

Two years after the project ended, Kanchog points out that links developed between farmers and the soy industry remain strong. And the project has transformed the role and standing of women in many rural communities across the Upper West Region. A study evaluating the project found that women who participated “have become more influential and powerful in their households as their economic relevance increased.”

“Some women are now able to pay school fees for their children so the benefits of the project have trickled down. And those men that were initially hesitant are now even more supportive of their wives,” Kanchog says.

The GROW project is featured in new research commissioned by the Canadian Food Security Policy Group (FSPG), a coalition of civil society organizations seeking to improve Canada’s food security work overseas. The GROW project is featured as one of six independently researched case studies in West Africa that demonstrate how support for agriculture in rural communities can improve livelihoods, promote gender equality and build climate resilience.

To read the GROW case study, and other reports from the Food Security Policy Group’s research project, please visit <https://ccic.ca/leaders-in-the-field>

To learn more about MEDA GROW, please visit <https://www.meda.org/GROWlearning>.

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