

Community conversations: a community-based approach to transform gender relations and reduce zoonotic disease risks

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CGIAR is a global partnership that unites organizations engaged in research for a food-secure future. The CGIAR Research Program on Livestock provides research-based solutions to help smallholder farmers, pastoralists and agro-pastoralists transition to sustainable, resilient livelihoods and to productive enterprises that will help feed future generations. It aims to increase the productivity and profitability of livestock agri-food systems in sustainable ways, making meat, milk and eggs more available and affordable across the developing world. The Program brings together five core partners: the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) with a mandate on livestock; the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), which works on forages; the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), which works on small ruminants and dryland systems; the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) with expertise particularly in animal health and genetics and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) which connects research into development and innovation and scaling processes.


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Abbreviations and acronyms

ICARDA	International Center for Research in the Dry Areas
ILRI	International Livestock Research Institute
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

I. Introduction

The CGIAR Research Program on Livestock Strategic Investment Fund gender project was initiated following a participatory epidemiology and gender analysis to understand the gender relations in small ruminant production and the impact of animal diseases on household members. The assessment report identified knowledge, attitude and practice gaps in gender roles in livestock, women's livestock ownership and zoonotic diseases. To address this gap, ILRI and ICARDA gender teams in collaboration with the Livestock Health team piloted a community-based transformative approach called 'community conversations' in selected CGIAR Research Program on Livestock intervention sites.

Community conversations are a community-based engagement approach through which community groups work with trained facilitators to collectively identify community strengths and constraints, analyse community values and practices, and explore strategies for addressing challenges (FHI 2010; Gueye et al. 2005; UNDP 2004). They create forums that enable people to discuss issues away from formal social environments, thereby opening space for new ways of thinking and questioning (Campbell et al. 2013). Community conversations are based on the recognition that people have the knowledge and capability that can bring about positive development outcomes individually and collectively.

The community conversations centred around gender roles in livestock husbandry, women's livestock ownership and prevention of zoonotic diseases. This group process can lead to the evolution of collective ideas and a critical consciousness, which can contribute to changes in restrictive gender norms (De Cao et al. 2017) and livestock management practices.

Community conversations engaged a wide variety of stakeholders. Institutional stakeholders included regional research centres, district offices of Agriculture and Livestock Development, Women and Children's Affairs offices, district government Communications Affairs officers as well as community veterinary assistants. Community stakeholders included men and women farmers, community leaders, Women's Affairs representatives and religious leaders.

This synthesis report presents the experience of ILRI and ICARDA in a community-based approach to gender relations transformation and prevention of zoonotic diseases. It outlines the process, outcomes, challenges, lessons and considerations for scaling community conversations as an approach to capacitating community groups and local partners in transforming constraining gender relations in livestock production.

2. Methodological approach

2.1 Research team planning and reflection sessions

The ILRI and ICARDA team had brainstorming sessions to outline the structure and overview of the process, adapt participatory methods and tools, and develop and test a facilitation guide. It has been a discovery-based learning experience for the team, enabling it to think broadly and have a deeper level of insight about the approach and implementation process.

The ILRI ethical committee provided ethical approval for community conversation intervention. Informed consent was also obtained from each participant prior to commencement of the community conversations. As a token of gratitude for their time and participation, community conversation participants were offered soft drinks and snacks.

2.2 Development of a facilitation guide

The research team developed a process-based community conversation facilitation guide based on a review of participatory methods and tools. The guide provides a methodological background and process steps for organizing, facilitating and documenting community conversation events.

2.3 Local facilitation teams

As facilitated dialogues, community conversations involve trained community facilitators who help community groups identify issues, explore perceptions that underlie the issues and generate solutions together.

Working with and through research and development partners is a strategy adopted to contextualize the process and discussion issues, strengthen capacity of local partners and increase uptake of the methodology. Institutional capacity development of research and development partners has been a central objective in the design of community conversations.

The research team conducted community conversations in partnership with Areka Agricultural Research Center, Debre Berhan Agricultural Research Center, Doyogena Livestock Development office, and Menz Mama and Menz Gera Livestock Development offices. A one-day participatory training was organized for the local facilitation team to develop skills in group facilitation, note taking and reflective report writing. In this co-learning training, local partners reflected on their experiences in working with community groups and shared practical strategies for engaging community groups in dialogues, with a focus on active listening and note taking techniques.

2.4 Community entry

Community entry is an important task for community facilitators to understand and mobilize the community. The research team worked with local partners to define a process overview and identify steps towards mobilizing the community. In identifying participants, the team strived for a diversity of opinions and perspectives to achieve a richer dialogue. A cross-section of communities including women (married and heads of households), men, community leaders, religious leaders, youth and elders were invited to the community conversations. Community conversations aimed to help community groups analyse problems and develop community actions to address these problems. Research and development partners helped explain the purpose of the community conversations to local leaders and mobilize community members.

2.5 Community conversations facilitation process

Opening is an important step of community conversations. Facilitators invited religious leaders or community elders to open community conversations with prayers and blessings. Then they explained the purpose of the community conversations and clarified expectations and roles of participants. The facilitation team explained that its role was to create a space for community groups and facilitate the discussions to help them identify issues, analyse the root causes of issues and develop community action plans to address these issues.

The team conducted community conversations in Doyogena district in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region, and Menz Mama and Menz Gera districts in the Amhara region. At both sites, members from four communities engaged in conversations. Community members at these sites have also participated in the community-based sheep breeding program implemented by ICARDA and ILRI. The conversation facilitators were partners in this earlier intervention; they understand the local context and are known to the communities.

From June 2018 to March 2019, we conducted 16 community conversations with about 50 participants per session in four communities over four rounds. The time period allowed the team to follow up after sessions and engage participants in reflections, sharing of change stories and sharing of information with household members and neighbours.

We encouraged participants from the beginning to attend all rounds of the conversations. Overall, the same participants continued throughout the process though there were a few new participants who replaced the original participants. Continuity in participation helped us to monitor and capture changes and experiences of participants throughout the process.

Table 1. Number of community conversations' participants by site and gender

Community conversation event	Number of participants by site and gender			
	Doyogena district		Menz districts	
	M	F	M	F
1st session	61	44	75	34
2nd session	66	56	80	32
3rd session	53	45	81	33
4th session	55	50	118	45
Total	235	195	354	144

The community conversations engaged 928 (339 females) participants taking part either as couples or individuals in four rounds. Female participation in community conversations was about 37%.

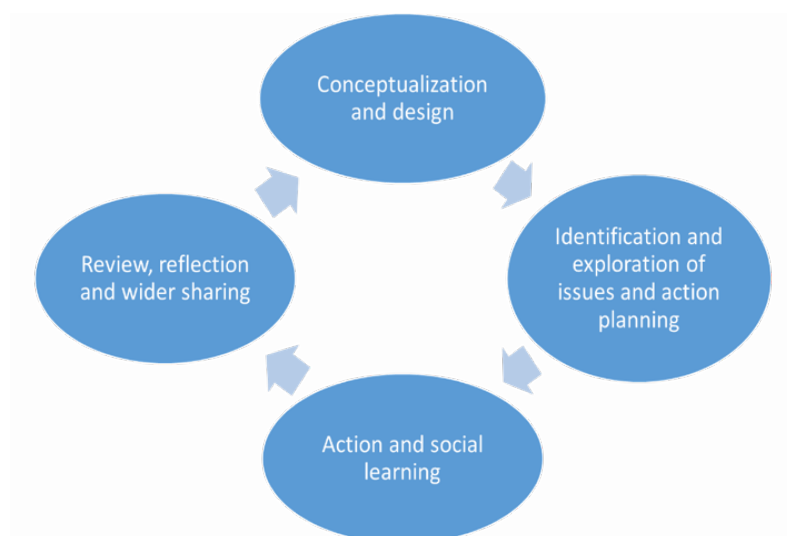
In the first three sessions, facilitators introduced new discussion issues. The fourth session reinforced messages with a focus on review; this session aimed to share information and knowledge from the previous sessions with the wider community and development partners. In this knowledge sharing event, relevant development partners such as District Offices of Agriculture, Livestock, Women's Affairs and Communications Affairs were involved. Reflecting on their observations, these development partners outlined strategies for taking the approach to scale.

The design phase involved brainstorming and team discussion about community conversations to align purpose, outcomes and methods. It also involved formation and training of local facilitation teams. In this step, the team developed a process overview and outline structure for the development of a facilitation guide and documentation tools.

The delivery phase involved community members actively engaged in open dialogues to identify and explore issues, perceptions and practices and decision making for individual or collective actions.

The action and social learning phase involved implementation of community action plans, sharing of information with household members and neighbours, and provision of social support by community development agents and community leaders.

Figure 1. Process overview of community conversations



The review and sharing phase aimed to engage community members in reflection and storytelling about changes they have made and the challenges they faced. It reviews the process and shares experiences and change stories with the wider community and development partners.

Table 2. Learning stages of community conversations

Learning stage	Objectives	Methods/tools
Identification of existing knowledge	Identify knowledge gaps Stimulate farmers' thinking and motivation for learning	Brainstorming, problem solving case study analysis, storytelling, role playing
Imparting new knowledge	Filling knowledge gaps Increasing knowledge and awareness	Pictorial presentation, interactive discussion, storytelling, demonstration
Knowledge integration and application	Learning internalization Action planning	Recap, Q&A, summary presentation
Review, reflection and re-planning	Review and reflection on experiences Identify new learning needs Re-planning/improvising	Reflection questions, observation and feedback, coaching, problem-solving and supportive supervision

Typically, community conversations ranged in length from two to three hours. Using visuals and interactive methods, we invited participants to reflect on community values and practices regarding gender relations and zoonotic diseases, think of how these influence perspectives and behaviour of individuals and groups, and the implications on livestock productivity and household welfare.

Community conversations engaged community groups in dialogues to define and analyse social problems, identify community strengths and capacity for change, and generate solutions for improving social problems. In the process, we captured and reflected on the implementation process to draw lessons and produce knowledge products for sharing with the development community. In effect, we adopted participatory action research and appreciative inquiry

principles in the implementation of our community conversations. The social learning element is a key feature of community conversations. The facilitation teams reflected to draw lessons and achieve deeper levels of learning and insight.

A range of participatory methods including posters, pictures, storytelling, provocative questioning and personal reflection were used in community conversations. Depending on the local context, the research team used interactive seating arrangements and locally available facilitation materials. The facilitation guide provides methods and tools for facilitation, process documentation and monitoring of community conversation events.

A deeper level of learning lies in personal reflection and insight. The research team engaged local facilitators and note takers in reflective discussions to capture lessons, insights and experiences which inform design and delivery of consecutive conversation sessions. The social learning has been a powerful experience for the team. The after-event reflections and insights sessions have been key to the analysis and interpretation of the community conversations outputs.

The research team developed indicators of changes and tools for monitoring and documenting early signs of changes. The community development agents provided follow up support and monitored and documented early signs of changes.

Checklists were developed and used to capture change in behaviour. Additionally, during the community conversations, recap sessions were conducted where participants reflected and shared lessons from previous sessions. Community facilitators visited households on a regular basis to capture changes and mentor households. In addition, the research team captured early changes during recap of previous sessions and household visits to some household members to observe and document changes.

3. Outcomes of community conversations

The community conversations generated rich dialogues and storytelling among community members about gender relations and zoonotic diseases. Community conversations contributed to transforming constraining gender relations and the prevention of zoonotic diseases through enabling community groups to agree on actions to share women's workload and use protective gear when cleaning barns and dealing with sick animals.

In the following, we report examples of changes which community groups have made due to community conversations.

3.1 Changes in perceptions and practices

Community conversations created spaces for community members to participate openly in dialogue and share stories and experiences. The community dialogues stimulate personal reflections, generate new insights and change perspectives, leading to collective decisions to change restrictive gender norms and reduce zoonotic risks.

Community conversations have led to changes in attitudes and perceptions of community members about gender roles. In Doyogena, an elderly man reflected, 'If it were not for masculinity behaviour, men can participate in any domestic activity'. In Menz, some women reported that they have taught male household members how to cook and bake Enjera (traditional unleavened bread). Men also reported that some women have shown interest in learning to plough. For example, a widow approached a male participant to teach her how to assemble and use a plough. A woman participant in Menz said, 'If I am not at home, my husband can manage the house and the animals. I won't worry about my house anymore.'

In Doyogena, a male participant shared a story of his engagement in Enset processing which is traditionally women's work. Previously, he hired women to process Enset while he performed other activities. He worked with women who taught him how to process Enset, a staple in the diet of southern Ethiopians. Explaining the women's reactions, he said that they were happy and wished that other men were also like him.

Community members also revealed changes in awareness and practices about zoonotic diseases. A male participant in Doyogena remarked, 'I was not aware of the consequences of drinking raw milk. I will stop drinking raw milk. When my cow or sheep gave birth, I used to hold the calf or lamb close to my chest. I didn't know that this could expose me to diseases. I will now use gloves when I assist births. I will buy and use gloves, boots and masks during cleaning of barns and handling of sick animals and attending births.' In Menz, a traditional animal healer reported that he covers his hands with plastic when treating sick animals. He has also removed and buried the soil with the blood of sick animals to prevent transmission of diseases to other animals. Other participants reported that they have buried dead animals and sheep heads. For example, a male participant related that a calf died in his herd. He taught his family members to cover their hands with plastic while burying the dead calf.

Community members recognized the importance of improving the health of their animals. They realized that improved animal management practices are key to having healthy and productive animals and reducing the risks of zoonotic diseases. A male participant in Doyogena said, 'The health of our animals is also our health. By spending money on protective gears [sic] and vaccination and deworming of our animals, we can increase productivity of our animals and reduce losses due to diseases.'

Community voices are feeding into animal health service provision strategies and plans. In Menz, community conversations created demand for animal health services. Community members expressed interest in organizing themselves to have access to animal health services, such as deworming and vaccination of dogs and sheep.

3.2 Changes in intrahousehold relations

Involving couples in community conversations facilitated interaction, cooperation and learning application at the household since both acquired shared understanding and commitment. When one spouse attends conversations, information may be only partially shared or not shared at all. Community members reported that they held household conversations which included children, leading to improved interactions, knowledge sharing and decision making.

Speaking of improved household relations, a male participant in Doyogena said, 'I was the one who take [sic] livestock and crop produce to the market. But now, my wife also participates in the market. She sells potato and wheat. We now collectively discuss and make savings. Before she did not trust me but now, she knows the market. We discuss more openly, and our relationship has improved.'

Similarly, a male participant in Menz Gera explained that before his wife got the chance to attend meetings, she did not appreciate his participation in community meetings. She challenged him, stating that he was only wasting time through his participation in community meetings. After her participation in community meetings, she became supportive. One morning, he said, 'She wake [sic] up early to prepare breakfast and asked me to have breakfast because I may stay the whole day'. He said that giving women access to information and a chance to participate in community meetings create more understanding, appreciation and collaboration among household members.

Community members recognized the importance of women's access to information. A male participant in Doyogena said, 'I will make sure that I involve my wife during home visits by development agents'. Other male participants committed to share information with their wives and engage them in household conversations. Community members also agreed to give women the chance to participate in community meetings. A male participant in Menz Gera called on his fellow men to share domestic activities to allow women time to participate in meetings and training events.

3.3 Sharing of information

Community conversations facilitated information sharing and social learning among community groups. Community members used informal spaces to share information from the conversations with household members, neighbours and other community members.

Participants felt that their ability to share information and engage in discussions in the household and with neighbours has improved over time. It is expected that this sharing of information and peer influence will continue to occur and transform gender relations in the household and community.

Community members used informal social spaces to share information from their conversations. Participants explained that neighbours normally approach a person who has attended a meeting or training event. Community members stated that applying knowledge and making changes at the household level is the best way to share information and influence others. A male participant in Menz Gera stated that community members believe and will be motivated to change if they see someone making changes. He added that he once invited his male neighbour to his home to observe him while he shared in the completion of domestic chores. He used this as an entry point to hold a conversation with his neighbour about sharing domestic roles.

Participants stated that they shared information with neighbours during home visits, social gatherings and local savings group meetings. Participants also recognized the need to share information and experiences with the wider community in formal meetings. They demanded that community leaders and Women's Affairs representatives facilitate information sharing in formal meetings. Development agents could also support information sharing by community members through conversations with other community groups.

Community members recognized the importance of women having access to information and attending meetings and training events. Women in Menz Gera who initially lacked agency began expressing their ideas and men encouraged women participants to share their ideas. There was a genuine acknowledgement of challenges and willingness to change. Male participants agreed to provide family support for women and hold household conversations.

In Menz Gera, a male participant provoked his wife in order to create a situation for sharing information from a community conversation. He told his wife that he wanted to sell the ox. While she disagreed, he told her that the ox belongs to him, and he has the right to sell it. When she argued that she also owns the ox, he then told her that he also owns the chicken and household items. She asked him what people would say if he claimed ownership of household goods. He then told his wife that he did this only to create a situation to share information from the community conversations.

3.4 Strengthening capacity of local partners

Capacity development of partners has been a central objective in the design and implementation of community conversations. Research and development partners benefited from their participation in the delivery of the community conversations. They found the social learning to be a rewarding experience. At the end of each community conversation session, the facilitation team reflected on the process, emerging issues, new insights and action points, which was captured in session reports. This reflection and analysis after each session has been so powerful that a deeper level of learning and insight occurs, which again informs implementation of consecutive sessions.

Research and development partners appreciated community conversations. A livestock expert in Doyogena said, 'We have only been gathering people and telling them our prescriptive messages'. Another expert said, 'In fact, we have been domesticating farmers only to listen to our views and ideas'. Explaining his interest in community conversations, the head of the Livestock Development office in Doyogena said, 'That is the way we have to work with farmers'. In Menz Gera, the animal health team leader said, 'The community conversations catalysed our work. We will adapt and make the methodology part of our training program for development agents'. A researcher from Areka Research Centre reflected that he benefited from his participation in the community conversations. The district experts also said that they acquired new skills in writing reflective reports. One district expert said, 'We are used to produce [sic] reports that only capture outputs', adding that he benefited from the team reflections and tools to write reflective reports.



Photo credit: ILRI/Bethlehem Alemu

4. Challenges, lessons and scaling considerations

4.1 Challenges

Community conversations have great potential for helping community groups to realize their goals and to make changes individually and collectively. However, community conversations alone may not be enough to promote sustainable transformations with regard to gender roles and the prevention of zoonotic diseases. We also sought to influence the wider community through religious leaders, self-help group leaders and community leaders. The replication of community conversations in household discussions, self-help association meetings, religious meetings and other social gatherings was found to be dependent on individual characteristics.

Information sharing within households and with neighbours depends on individuals. Some participants were proactive, choosing to use various forums and ways to communicate information from community conversations.

At the start of the community conversations, it was difficult for community members to open up and critically discuss issues. They tended to portray an ideal picture. People in the communities that took part in community conversations are sensitized to listening to outsiders, but they seem to have limited exposure to and experience in dialogues among themselves and in collective decision making. In the beginning, participants expected facilitators to teach them.

We sought the participation of women and men equally. But in Menz Gera, initially, women found it difficult to speak up in public. Despite their good representation in community conversations, women seemed to lack individual agency to actively participate in the conversations.

Community conversations were facilitated in local languages and were audio taped in some sessions. In Doyogena, we had a translator. District experts took notes, but the reports missed important details which occurred partly from their lack of reflective writing skills and experiences in such exercises. Some observations were superficial and lacking in detail and nuance. Community conversations require detailed descriptions of context, process, emerging issues, reactions, agreements and decisions of community members.

Participants reported that they made changes in attitudes and practices. During the community conversations, these reports were verified by other participants, and we also made household visits to talk to other members of the households. However, we were not able to document the extent of influence in the wider community. We hoped that community leaders, religious leaders, self-help group leaders and community agents would play key roles in stimulating wider sharing of information from the conversations.

We understood that situational and individual factors may limit the ability of some participants to share information with household members and apply knowledge from community conversations. Both men and women participants reported challenges in sharing information with household members and with other community members. Sharing of information and knowledge application is more effective when couples participate in community conversations.

Realizing a sustained transformation of gender relations in a patriarchal society requires dealing with norms that are embedded in the socio-culture of the people shaped by individual behaviour and social institutions. Therefore, we believe that changing such norms is possible but requires long-term engagement with communities through well planned and facilitated community conversations.

4.2 Lessons

We learned the following lessons in the process of implementing community conversations:

- Community conversations allow involvement of women and couples since they are conducted at the community level.
- Couples' participation in community conversations improves intrahousehold interactions, sharing of information, collective household decision making and action, and family harmony. It increases access to knowledge and information by women in male-headed households and enhances the ability to share knowledge and information within the household and beyond.
- Community conversations require facilitation skills, reflective writing skills and thorough documentation.
- In the case of the sites where the approach was piloted, the community-based small ruminant breeding program provided incentives for community members to apply the knowledge gained from community conversations. To bring changes in attitudes and practices, community conversations must be linked to ongoing development interventions that tie people together such as village savings groups or any form of collective actions.
- Engagement of community leaders, religious leaders, women's groups leaders and community-based organizations leaders in community conversations increases accountability and social pressure through reinforcement of messages in community meetings.
- Community conversations are powerful tools to engage community members in collaborative learning, reflection and problem solving, and facilitates outreach to the wider community through social learning and peer influence.
- Compared to traditional training programs, community conversations motivate farmers to learn and act on their knowledge. Learning is stimulated when people have shared experiences. A learning environment centred around people's own experiences facilitates learning and generates understanding through feedback and knowledge supplementation, leading to changes in perspectives and practices.

4.3 Considerations for scaling the approach

Our experience suggests consideration of the below conditions in scaling the approach:

- Working in partnership with research and development partners is key to successful design and implementation of community conversations. Participation of local partners, community leaders and community-level development agents in all phases of the process is a fundamental element of community conversations.
- Uptake of the approach requires support and mentoring of local partners. It is important that community conversations integrate institutional capacity development of local partners (i.e. through extension systems) and cover a wide range of topics.
- Single community conversations alone cannot be expected to bring about lasting changes. Complementary development activities are needed to sustain the facilitative role of community conversations. In our case, community conversations were linked to the community-based sheep breeding program and interventions to improve animal health. It is expected that research centres, district livestock experts and community livestock agents will continue to engage communities in discussions and knowledge sharing activities, reinforcing the community conversations and sustaining the changes. Adding community conversation modules/sessions on new topics will help facilitate this process.
- Experience sharing with other community members is essential to foster scaling of the approach. Community development agents can facilitate sharing of information through farmer development groups and functional adult learning programs. Religious leaders, community leaders and local group leaders can also play key roles in sharing information from community conversations, reinforcing messages and sustaining attitudinal and behavioural changes.

- Effective process documentation is key to the success of community conversations. Reflection, review and summary of each community conversation session are necessary to fully document knowledge sharing and facilitate team learning. Each consecutive session begins with a recap of the main discussion issues and action points of the previous community conversation session.

5. Conclusions

Improving livestock management requires the engagement of both women and men in the household to bring about change because of their different roles in the production system. The community conversation approach engages women and men in dialogues and has led to changes in discriminatory gender norms, attitudes, behaviours and power imbalances, creating positive changes related to gender equality and women's empowerment.

Community conversations are facilitated dialogues to explore the genuine views and aspirations of community members about gender relations and zoonotic diseases. Community conversations use participatory methods to engage community members in discussions about issues that matter most to them. Posters, pictures, storytelling and probing questions have been used to explore people's views and share experiences about gender roles in livestock and prevention of zoonotic diseases.

The community conversation process creates a space for community members to share their views, explore their perceptions and learn from one another. This leads to community wide, inclusive practice change as it brings together a wide variety of community members and encourages them to think, discuss and explore gender relations, and management and productivity challenges in livestock. Various community members listen to each other attentively and speak out about what they think is best. The full engagement of participants in community conversations leads to inclusion in the process of decision making about gender and livestock management issues, which presents opportunities for sustained change.

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