



Brief

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A synthesis of changes in women's empowerment from Cultivate Africa's Future agricultural development projects

By Hazel Malapit, Alessandra Galiè, Nelly Njiru, Nathaniel Ferguson, Immaculate Omondi, Els Lecoutere, Caroline Muchiri

There are few examples of assessments of project portfolios that aim to support women's empowerment in agriculture and livestock in low- and middle-income countries and that employ a consistent framework and standardized, validated measures of women's empowerment across the entirety of the projects (see also Baltenweck et al. 2024).

This brief synthesizes and presents lessons about women's empowerment from the achievements of a portfolio of agricultural development projects, where empowerment was consistently measured across the portfolio using the project-level Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (pro-WEAI).

We address two key research questions: (i) What did the agricultural development projects achieve in terms of women's empowerment? How does this aggregate at the project portfolio level? (ii) What is the significance and some of the key applications of the results to inform future policies, program implementation, extension work and other agriculture-related interventions that aim to support women's empowerment?

INSIGHTS FROM THE EVIDENCE

Several key lessons emerged from the synthesis of the results of the projects in the portfolio:

- Analyzing project portfolios on women's empowerment in agriculture and livestock offers pivotal strategy insights.
- Local views on empowerment are essential for designing relevant interventions.
- Shared goals, consistent measurement tools, the use of mixed methods, and dedicated funding are critical for impact assessments and meta-analysis within project portfolios.
- Coordinating the objectives of research and development partners can be challenging.
- Intentional programming, investment, and men's support are crucial for transforming gender norms and empowering women.

AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT PORTFOLIO OFFERS INSIGHTS FOR FUTURE PROJECTS

Canada's International Development Research Centre funded eight Cultivate Africa's Future (CultiAF) agricultural development projects in partnership with the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research. The CultiAF projects—run between 2017 and 2023 in Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe—used the pro-WEAI to measure project impacts on women's empowerment.

Here, we synthesize evaluations of the effects of the eight CultiAF projects,¹ ultimately to draw conclusions about the design and implementation of future project portfolios that aim to increase gender equality and women's empowerment.

All eight CultiAF projects reported using empowerment strategies such as building knowledge and skills, often targeted to women beneficiaries. Five projects provided goods and services, three projects aimed to influence gender norms through gender "champions" and gender-focused training content, and one promoted inclusive savings groups to increase women's access to capital.

RESULTS: CHANGES IN PRO-WEAI INDICES, CONCEPTS OF EMPOWERMENT

Four CultiAF projects reported pro-WEAI indices at baseline and endline: IPM Mango, ACRE Africa, NutriFish, and Fisheries Malawi. For these projects, we calculated the percent change from baseline to endline. These results should be interpreted with caution, as they do not control for other confounding factors. Furthermore, for three of the projects, standard errors were either not available, or indicated statistical insignificance. The exception to this was NutriFish, which reported a statistically significant decrease in the "percent empowered" of women in the control group. NutriFish also reported statistically significant decreases in three domains of empowerment (3DE), percent empowered, and mean adequacy score among disempowered men in the treated group—but the magnitude of changes were very small. IPM Mango reported large increases in the empowerment indices of women in the control group from baseline to endline, relative to men in the control

1 The short names of the projects are ACRE Africa-KALRO, FASIMO, Fisheries, INSFEED 2, IPM Mango, NutriFish, Precooked Beans, and Sorghum.

Our methods

To address the first research objective, we analyzed the qualitative and quantitative findings reported by the projects about their impact on women's empowerment (measured using pro-WEAI tools). We conducted a meta-analysis of the qualitative findings established in individual projects. The quantitative synthesis was limited to projects that reported on impacts attributable to the interventions, and gave percentage change of empowerment indicators between baseline and endline for projects without causal design. Based on the analysis of project- and portfolio-level achievements in terms of women's empowerment, we have drawn programmatic and methodological lessons from that meta-analysis. These lessons are then used to address the second research objective.

group. In the treated group, they reported increases in empowerment for women in women-headed households. ACRE Africa reported negative changes in women's empowerment and gender-parity indices from baseline to endline for all groups. Fisheries Malawi reported that empowerment indices improved for women and worsened for men.

Quantitative impact estimates were only available for IPM Mango and NutriFish. According to impact estimates for IPM Mango, its intervention had a positive impact on the empowerment score and "percent empowered" of men and both women in dual-headed and women-headed households. However, the project reported negative impacts on gender parity. NutriFish, meanwhile, reported a positive impact on the "percent empowered" of women, and a negative impact on the empowerment score and "percent empowered" of men, as well as on the percent of households achieving gender parity.

Qualitative results from the CultiAF projects shed light on the conceptualizations of empowerment held by both women and men participants, among other themes. IPM Mango reported that their participants primarily understood empowerment to be economic empowerment. This image of an empowered women was shared by both women and men; however, men often associated evidence of economic empowerment—such as mobility and off-farm employment—with prostitution. In addition to economic elements of empowerment, Irrigation Mozambique reported conceptualizations of empowerment which reflect social standing: empowered women are in leadership

positions or reputable professions, serve as role models in the community, and have a voice in decision-making. Men also included adherence to household roles in their conceptualization of empowerment, defining empowered women as those who take care of their homes and obey their husbands.

RESULTS VARY WIDELY, BUT PROJECTS WITH STRATEGIES CAN SUPPORT WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

In this study, we aimed to synthesize and learn from achievements of a portfolio of agricultural development projects in terms of women's empowerment.

Quantitative results from projects show mixed results, and among those that we tested for statistical significance, we found mostly null results. Some projects report positive impacts on both women's and men's empowerment, while also reporting negative impacts on gender parity. This suggests that men may be benefiting more than women, leading to a widening empowerment gap. A few projects show more worrisome trends, such as negative changes in both women's empowerment and gender parity, although these results may be a result of other confounding factors.

While the quantitative findings from CultivAF projects are mostly null or insignificant, the projects that have promising findings include explicit strategies to influence and transform inequitable gender norms, and strengthen organizations, consistent

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CONTACT

CGIAR GENDER Impact Platform at International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI)
PO Box 30709 Nairobi 00100, Kenya
Tel. +254-20 422 3000
GenderPlatform@cgiar.org · gender.cgiar.org

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with the emerging empowerment literature. Without intentional programming and appropriate levels of investment, projects do not make much of a difference.

The qualitative findings show that the projects successfully captured local conceptualizations of empowerment. Projects need to understand these conceptualizations and build interventions on them, ensuring interventions are relevant and effective in supporting women's empowerment as locally understood and desired. Understanding local conceptualizations is essential to interpreting the quantitative results on women's empowerment using universal indices such as the WEAI. In CultivAF projects, respondents related empowerment to financial independence and social status. Male respondents in several projects also related empowerment to adherence to traditional household roles, a conceptualization that is equally important for researchers to understand to design effective projects.

The projects examined were: *Improving agricultural productivity and resilience with satellite and cellphone imagery to scale climate-smart crop insurance* (ACRE Africa-KALRO); *Farmer-led Smallholder Irrigation in Mozambique* (FASIMO); *Gender Inclusive Financing for Scaling up Improved Fish Processing Technologies in Malawi* (Fisheries); *Insect feed for poultry, fish and pig production in Kenya and Uganda - Phase 2* (INSFEED 2); *Alien invasive fruit flies in Southern Africa: Implementation of a sustainable IPM programme to combat their menaces* (IPM Mango); *Harnessing dietary nutrients of under-utilized fish and fish processing by-products to reduce micronutrient deficiencies among vulnerable groups in Uganda* (NutriFish); *Scale-up Supply and Utilization of Precooked Beans for Food and Nutrition Security, Incomes and Environmental Conservation by Leveraging on Public-Private Partnerships in Kenya and Uganda* (Precooked Beans); and *Climate-smart sorghum interventions for smallholder farmers in Ethiopia* (Sorghum).

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