

Introduction:

On behalf of Oxfam GB and the wider Oxfam family, I am delighted to have been invited to contribute some thoughts to this important discussion initiated by the Gates Foundation. The desire of Gates Foundation to launch this debate at ODI, the openness to learn from the experience of others, and work collaboratively on this issue is to be strongly welcomed.

If Oxfam is represented here today it must be because we considered one of the organisations which Catherine is referring to who have been addressing gender issues in their work in agriculture and rural livelihoods for some time! Indeed, some of you may have attended an earlier seminar, in April, co-hosted by Oxfam and ODI, where the recent issue of Oxfam's Development and Gender journal on rural livelihoods was launched with contributions both from our own programmes as well as wider practice.

I encourage those of you who haven't seen this to take a copy or access this online ([www.genderanddevelopment.org](http://www.genderanddevelopment.org)). A forthcoming issue of our journal 'Development in Practice' is copublished with CGIAR and tackles a number of issues relating to gender in agricultural research.

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Now, to respond more directly to Catherine's presentation:

Oxfam is delighted to hear such a strong and impassioned call for action from Gates, regarding the need to focus our attention, energy and resources, in the midst of what WFP has called 'the silent Tsunami' that is the food crisis - on women in agricultural development. And we'd agree that an unacknowledged underlying cause of today's food crisis is the persistent failure to recognise, invest in and support rural women producers.

Equally, we understand that women – both rural and urban – are bearing the brunt of the food crisis as they attempt to maintain household consumption and nutrition in the face of escalating prices, queue to obtain foodstuffs and in some instances, increase their time investment to process or cook foods in the home. And that

women should be in the frontline of those involved in social protection programmes or targeted by transfers including to ensure that other household members and children are effectively targeted. Oxfam is currently supporting school and community canteens run by women in Haiti to provide basic nutrition to low income families and households.

We also strongly endorse the overarching message, that we now have a huge opportunity to review the way in which we have been supporting agricultural development **from the standpoint of poor rural women** – precisely in order to respond to the challenges so evident at present. ‘Putting **women at the heart of all we do**’ is consistent with Oxfam’s values and the practice to which we aspire.

Nevertheless, the track record of the development community as a whole on addressing poor rural women’s gender specific needs and interests within agricultural systems, institutions, policies and practices is not good. And unless we begin to address the ‘gender biases’ that are embedded in these at all levels, comprehensively and systematically, we will continue to perpetuate unequal and inefficient outcomes in terms of both productivity and well being.

As Catherine has pointed out, there are cumulative ‘biases’ operating against rural women – in control of resources, in access to finance, inputs, markets..... A familiar example:

- The lack of secured rights of many rural women over land prevents them accessing finance to purchase inputs or equipment. This in turn limits their productive capacity. It also undermines their incentives to invest. Their productivity and thus their contribution to household income and - crucially - their own status and security is weakened. This reduces overall wellbeing in the household. Women’s weak rights also renders them highly vulnerable in case of divorce or widowhood and assets are may prevent land passing on to female children - adding to the intergenerational transfer of poverty for women.

Put simply, women’s lack of, or insecure rights, translate into ineffective developmental outcomes perpetuating cycles of poverty **and** inequality.

In spite of all these challenges, what is amazing - and awe inspiring - is the lengths rural women will go to, once they access even limited resources or opportunities, in their own right. This bears witness to a deep hunger for change among many rural women. I am sure you can identify from your own experiences, many similar, or even more dramatic examples.

I am thinking, for example, of women farmers in southern Mali, whom I worked with over the past 2 years, given the opportunity for the first time to produce cotton 'on their own account' as part of organic and fair trade cotton promotion, walking miles with metal bowls to collect cattle dung to fertilise their fields – because for the first time, they will produce cotton on their own plots, sell cotton at a guaranteed price and themselves directly receive the income in a sector historically dominated by men. Around 40 percent of the farmers involved in this activity are women – because they don't need expensive chemical inputs and loans secured by a male run cooperative to begin. In one cooperative, **Djegenina**, the second most productive member of the cooperative is a woman, Yvette, who has reached yields of over one tonne a hectare. But it is not always simple: other women are struggling, because they lack literacy skills or technical training, equipment, or the support of male family members.

In this instance, Oxfam working with local partners is reducing women's labour burden and increasing their productive capacity by enabling access to partly subsidised carts with which they can transport organic matter in larger quantities, helping to alleviate the labour burden and increase the land area they can farm. We are also promoting literacy among women and ensuring higher levels of participation in technical trainings via developing materials in local languages and making trainings more accessible.

Women's visibility as organic cotton farmers in these communities has translated into greater acceptance of women as farmers in their own right in part as a result of their increased contribution to household incomes. At least one cooperative is headed by a women - unheard of in the conventional

cotton sector where many cooperatives do not even have women members in their own right.

As women's visibility in contributing income to households and communities increases, so, in turn, does the potential to secure their rights over resources. There are some cases locally of women producers of organic cotton negotiating secured tenure rights over land with local leaders. But this remains the exception rather than the rule, which is why Oxfam is supporting an alliance of farmers groups and rural women leaders, to advocate for increased land tenure security for women. Without this, the sustainability of the production system in the longer term will be undermined. And the potential for those women's incomes to contribute to reduced household poverty will be lost.

Investing in women's agricultural livelihoods is a critical path to improving rural incomes as well as strengthening women's rights.

While agreeing with the broad principles enumerated by Catherine and the core message, I'd also argue that the implications are far reaching. Integrating gender ('mainstreaming') into our already established priorities, agendas and processes may not be enough. We may need to **rethink the 'lens' through which we look at agricultural development**, from the point of view of that rural woman Catherine has so eloquently described.

1. Rethinking our priorities in agricultural development

Integrating gender into existing priorities may not be enough to shift the balance back to rural women. Given prevailing gender inequalities, our choice of sectors, markets, technologies... are not gender 'neutral'. In choosing where to invest or intervene, we need to analyse the gender implications and assess women's as well as men's priorities, based on knowledge of the specific context .

This means supporting women where they are. Including food production.

As the example above illustrates; we may need to invest more in low input, sustainable production systems which pose fewer constraints to women's entry.

We need to focus more on local food markets and perishable goods where women are more heavily represented because they have greater ease of access, increasing women's engagement in and bargaining power within these markets

But as well as focusing on women's existing activities, we need to look beyond the existing gender division of labour, for value addition opportunities– in storage, processing, trading and service provision – moving them 'up the value chain' – or, into new, more profitable sectors and markets...

## 2. Widening our lens

Promoting agricultural development from rural women's perspective equally means considering issues which are not generally seen as part of the remit of agronomists and agricultural economists....

- Reducing the cost to women's time by investing in rural water supply and energy systems must be a huge priority in any attempt to increase women's productive capacity. An estimated 4 billion hours are used by rural women to collect water
- Investing in alleviating women's burden of reproductive work through provision of reproductive health services, improved basic health services and child care. In Ethiopia, 'women's information centres' provide childcare in a members' home, freeing women up to engage in agricultural training, or work.
- Increasing investment in adult education and literacy as well as rural girls education. Without basic literacy and education, women's access to information and productive capacity is impaired
- Tackling violence against women. Women's engagement in activities outside the household is often perceived as a threat by male relatives — and as result, women may suffer abuse or even violence. Violence in the home or community negatively impacts on women's productive capacity, mobility and well being.

## 3. Changing institutions

It also means that the **institutions we work with and through may need to change the way they do their business**; whether that is government ministries, research institutions, extension services, producer groups or private companies.

Institutions are not 'gender neutral' but as we have seen from the examples in Catherine's statistics, they often carry or reinforce societal 'gender biases'. Unless specific attempts are made to redress this, the outcomes of our interventions will be 'gender biased' and rural women will not benefit or will benefit unequally, from service provision, or market participation...

Current initiatives in Oxfam include:

- Promoting women's economic leadership within agro-enterprises and mixed producer led organisations
- Supporting transformation in delivery of government extension services
- Working with selected businesses to how to more equitably integrate smallholder women producers and agricultural workers into their value chains and service delivery models
  - In supporting producer organisations, we need to ensure that we are developing and strengthening women's leadership, voice in decision making, etc. This is challenging. Women may not immediately perceive the benefits of joining mixed organizations where their needs are not prioritised; male members often resist women's inclusion. Imposing quotas can backfire if skills are not developed and attitudes changed alongside this. Women leaders can simply be co-opted family members of male leaders.
  - Oxfam's experience shows that we need to work both with women as a group and supporting women as members of mixed organisations. We need to develop women's business and leadership skills; We need to take measures to facilitate their participation in group processes; we need to work to change men's attitudes and beliefs.

- Oxfam has supported women only economic producer organisations such as COMUCAP in Honduras and women's clubs or sections among wider producer networks such as NASFAM in Malawi and women's network in the Inland fisheries sector in Bundelkhand... increasing women's confidence, leadership skills as well as income. In some cases, it has enable women producers to engage directly in international markets.
  - Oxfam has also supported women members to more effectively integrate of mixed organisations in order to have shared decision making. This can be particularly challenging in sectors which are traditionally male dominated. E.g. Fedecares coffee producers in the Dominican Republic. Changes to rules of membership and investments in women's capacities led to increases in women's representation at all levels.
  - In promoting women's leadership in rural organisations, will need to look at a variety of organisational forms, some less formal and more flexible...
- In working with government extension services, there is a crucial need to improve access of poor women to services via a variety of measures. Women's culturally defined responsibility for household work or caring for children, means that attending trainings, or group meetings outside their communities is often not possible – or if they do, the burden is simply transferred onto other women or even girls. Women have higher rates of illiteracy and often only speak local languages – this means service delivery needs to provide information in ways that are accessible
- In Vietnam, Oxfam is working with farmers groups and government extension services in Tra Vinh province, to improve access of poor, especially minority men and women to quality extension services. The representation of women among extension workers is being increased in Tra Vinh province,

technical trainings targeted according to actual participation rates in specific activities; and held in closer proximity to communities.

- Private sector companies are responsible for much of agricultural research, service provision, and marketing of agricultural produce through the value chain. While these companies do not recognise women farmers as a key part of their business models or client base, their procurement policies or service delivery models are likely to deliver biased outcomes...
  - Earlier this year, Oxfam worked with Indian company Hariyali Kisaan Bazaar which supplies the FMCG sector to analyse their supply chain in terms of its impact on smallholder farmers. One major finding was that the company had never considered women farmers as part of its business and had almost no women among its frontline extension staff. This in spite of an increasingly 'feminised' agricultural sector in India... .
  - Through its engagement in the ETI, Oxfam has worked with major food retail companies to ensure that basic rights for agricultural workers – many of whom are women in high value export chains - are enshrined in their codes of practice

#### 4. Understanding impact of wider trends on women and advocating for change

Beyond the framework of our specific projects and programmes, we also need to **analyse how economic and social trends as well as wider policy changes are helping or constraining rural women's livelihoods** and, where possible, **support rural women (and supportive men) to advocate for policy change.**

We have already raised the issue of land rights. **Some current trends are raising challenges to women's existing rights as well as creating potential opportunities.** The takeover of land for bio fuels production while posing a

general problem for land rights also has specific gender dimensions – as in Ghana where women's access to Shea nut collection is being restricted.

Mtamba is one of 11 villages that skirts 9,000 hectares of land that Sun Biofuels Tanzania Ltd, a subsidiary of British company Sun Biofuels plc is finalising a \$20m investment on. About 11,000 people live in the villages surrounding the land. It is used by the villagers for charcoal making - which provides a major source of income - collecting clay for pottery and gathering firewood, as well as herbs for food and medicine. Most significantly the land allocated to Sun Biofuels includes a swamp where they collect water in the dry season. It is the only water source they have during the dry season. Sunbiofuels will acquire a 99 year lease on the land and the villagers hope they will continue to be able to access the land, and the water on it, into the future.

Policies of individual land titling promoted by World Bank and others have not proven widely beneficial to poor rural women though a minority have been able to buy land commercially. Equally, the more recent tendency to build on customary land tenure systems in a framework of decentralisation can also be disadvantageous for women who have weak rights in customary systems.

In some instances, however, processes of land reform or registration have provided opportunities for women to secure land ownership through joint or sole registration of land. In Cambodia, Oxfam supported advocacy led to the possibility for up to one million women to be registered as joint owners of family farms under the World Bank funded land management project (LMAP).

In Latin America there are examples of legal changes which, via pressure from civil society, have translated into formal land rights for increased numbers of women in Mexico, Colombia and Honduras. The point is that these changes came about through political pressure and legal challenges from social movements.

Another example:

**The HIV/AIDS epidemic has profoundly impacted on labour availability in rural southern Africa while simultaneously increasing the care burden on rural women.** It is critical to adapt production systems and enable access to key

productive resources, to assure food security in HIV affected households and communities. In Malawi, Oxfam has promoted labour saving production techniques (zero tillage) as well as access to herbicides to reduce the labour burden on women farmers who are sick or caring for sick relatives or both, assuring household food for women and their families who otherwise would be unable to meet their food needs. Given the scale of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and its impact, such interventions need to be promoted far more widely combined with policies to reduce the care burden on women.

- Oxfam International is currently developing national agricultural advocacy and campaigns in several countries, with broad based civil society engagement, including mobilising women farmers to influence policy agendas and investment in favour of rural women's literacy, land rights etc

#### 5. Addressing power in gender relations

Finally, we need to recognise that in addressing the question of gender equity in agricultural development we are dealing with deeply embedded '**power relations**'. These are often legitimised by strongly held 'cultural' traditions, beliefs and prejudices.

But we also know that both these **relations of power and the beliefs surrounding them can change**. While there is bound to be resistance, there is huge scope for change, and rural women themselves are the primary agents of that change. But they need support – and wider alliances - to influence current power structures in their favour.

For Oxfam, our agenda needs to be 'transformative' of gender power relations, and surrounding attitudes, beliefs and practices. These are often particularly susceptible to change during times of crisis such as we are experiencing now....

These kinds of lasting change take time and require actions to shift men's attitudes and behaviours, as well as actions to empower women as leaders of

farmer organisations, networks, and as decision makers in local and national policy. In assessing the impact of our work, it is important that we also evaluate these qualitative changes in gender relations, in the household, the community, and wider institutions.

Conclusion:

The current food crisis may provide 'transformative' opportunities to empower women in producer organisations, agricultural markets and wider institutions – and invest in the wider enabling environment for women

There are huge risks of women's rights being undermined and increasing their vulnerability to hunger, violence etc . if we fail to act urgently, concerted and comprehensively.

Gates is right to demand that its partners are accountable on gender issues and to introduce internal procedures to ensure this.

Nevertheless, given the resources at its disposal, and its convening power, the Gates Foundation is uniquely placed to influence to leverage changes in wider investment patterns and development practice. The opportunity is huge to really shift the policy agenda in favour of poor rural women and to bring about lasting change. Without this wider change in the enabling environment, lasting change is unlikely to occur.

Gates can take on this challenge, with others, at a broader scale:

- Targeted transfers and employment schemes which promote high levels of rural women's participation, including their access to inputs (NREGA)
- Facilitating women's access to inputs
- Supporting scale up of tried and tested institutional changes in agricultural research and extension targeting women farmers (e.g. Danida in India)
- Financing or leveraging funds for significant infrastructural investments to increase women's productivity in both domestic and agricultural work (e.g. rural water supply, energy, transport...)

- Promoting expansion in rural essential services, including women's literacy provision, basic education and reproductive health services.
- Strengthening women's asset security
- Promoting women farmers visibility and influence in policy

Oxfam hopes to continue the dialogue with Gates foundation and others, to address these critical challenges. We believe that investing in women's agricultural livelihoods is key to reducing poverty and strengthening women's rights.