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Gender relations and innovation ‘from below’ in cocoa and oil palm growing communities in Ghana

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Background
The inclusive value chain collaboration (VCC) project aims at examining whether and how VCC involving tree-crop farmers in Ghana (cocoa and oil palm) and South Africa (macadamia and avocado) can be made more equitable and inclusive. Gender relations are at the core of understanding the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. This info sheet presents findings from a study on gender relations and innovations conducted in Ghana in March 2016.

Analytical framework
In Ghana women are the most important actors in the food chain beginning with farm production, marketing and intra-household distribution of food. They constitute 52% of agricultural labour force and play a key role in post-harvesting activities, storage, transportation, processing and marketing (FAO 2012). Even so, women are often ignored in top-down services and knowledge transfer. Consequently, such efforts reach women and men unequally and overlook specific challenges that women are facing.

This study aims at unravelling the position of women in cocoa- and oil palm-growing communities. It focuses in particular on innovations embraced by women involved in different agricultural and non-agricultural income-generating activities. In most Ghanaian rural communities women tend to combine farming with agricultural processing activities for both household consumption and the market. The study uses the gender relations framework developed by Van Eerdewijk & Danielsen (2015) to examine four gender dimensions and the interplay between them. These are (1) the roles men and women play in agricultural production, (2) their respective access and control over resources, (3) norms, values and institutions, and (4) intra-household decision-making.

We examined how gender relations and their interactions shape innovations adopted by women and how innovation ‘from below’ could improve women’s lives and increase their control over income.

In line with the overall scope of the inclusive VCC project, we took two crops – cocoa and oil palm – as a starting point. However our focus was much broader, including women’s income-generating activities outlined in Figure 1.

Fig. 1. Research focus

In order to understand bottom-up mechanisms we conceptualised innovation as a complex process,
based on trial and error and interactive network learning (Reij & Waters-Bayer 2014). This bottom-up approach recognises farmers’ capacity to innovate and provides an alternative to the conventional top-down ‘transfer of technology’ model.

Research locations
This study focused on two communities (Darmang and Pramkese) in Kwaebibirem District (Eastern Region), and two communities (Tanokrom and Mfani-bu) in the Ahafo Ano North District (Ashanti Region), allowing for a comparison between sites. Due to the presence of the Oil Palm Research Institute (OPRI) and national and international oil palm companies (GOPDC, Obooma, Seredipalm) with out-grower schemes, the majority of farmers in Kwaebibirem District are cultivating oil palm, with many women being involved in local oil palm processing. The major commercial crop in the Ahafo Ano North District is cocoa and most of the women also grow food crops for the market and household consumption.

Research design and methodology
Our research followed four steps. The first step included understanding gender relations and particularly how these influence women’s involvement in agricultural and non-agricultural income-generating activities. Next, we identified the main reasons for women to be involved in the different activities they undertake, related to their ‘pains and gains’ (challenges and opportunities). The third step involved detecting ‘innovations from below’ in different income-generating activities as a response to a particular ‘pain’ or ‘gain’. The final step was analysing the potential of the innovations for improving women’s livelihoods.

We used a qualitative methodology, collecting data through focus group discussions, key informant interviews, semi-structured interviews and observations. In total we interacted with 155 respondents, both men and women.

Innovation from below
We identified a number of ‘pains’ and ‘gains’ among the female respondents, listed in Figure 2. The innovations from ‘below’ that we identified are mainly pain relievers. We encountered only one strategy that responded to a ‘gain’ (Figure 3). Figure 4 shows an example of innovation in palm oil soap.

Concrete examples of innovations can be found on the Inclusive VCC website (https://inclusivevcc.wordpress.com/publications/presentations/).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pains</th>
<th>Gains</th>
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<tr>
<td>Health risks</td>
<td>Control over income</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tediousness and labour intensity</td>
<td>Autonomy in the household</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dependence on buyers</td>
<td>Household use and by-products</td>
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<td>Scarcity of inputs, initial capital, and credit</td>
<td>Proximity to the house</td>
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**Fig. 2. Pain and gains**

- **Pain reliever 1:** decreasing labour and costs
  - Mechanization
  - Repurposing of old technology
  - Labour sharing
  - Production process facilitation

- **Pain reliever 2:** decreasing dependence on buyers
  - Establishment of associations
  - Product quality enhancement
  - Disengaging from the market

- **Pain reliever 3:** minimising health risks
  - Usage of protective equipment

- **Pain reliever 4:** access to initial capital and credit
  - Saving groups (microfinance)
  - Engaging with traders

- **Gain creator 1:** increasing income
  - Product diversification
**Fig. 3 Overview of innovation strategies**

Findings illustrate how innovation ‘from below’ is influenced by the way in which the gender dimensions interact (Figure 5). For instance, women’s high labour burden and the labour intensity of their work cause time shortage, resulting in limited participation of women in extension services and private agricultural training. This restricts their access to knowledge and key resources such as agricultural inputs. Male ownership of land is another aspect that constrains women’s participation in learning opportunities, as access to training is often provided to land owners only. Limited access to knowledge and services negatively influences women’s ability to learn and innovate.

When it comes to women’s alternative income-generating activities, women mostly acquire skills based on ‘mother-daughter’ knowledge transfer. Certain income-generating activities such as making *gari* (food made from cassava tubers), *kenkey* (maize meal), soap and brooms are seen as strictly women’s occupations. The innovation capacity within these activities is very limited, because they often use the same tools and methods for generations; there is barely any new knowledge generated.

Norms and values influence the household division of labour, since women are expected to take care of the children and the household chores. As a result, their income-generating activities are limited to the proximity of the house. Their engagement in income-generating activities is often dependent on whether they can bring children to work. This reinforces traditional patterns of labour division.

We found that limited access to resources and low control over resources weaken women’s negotiating position and say in decision-making within the household, resulting in low innovation capacity. This suggests a paradox that innovation occurs as a response to labour intensity or scarcity or a lack of access to finance. Innovations build on traditional knowledge and practices such as *n’nobua* (collective labour) and *susu* (saving groups).

Sometimes innovation does not simply mean a change for the better. Often it bears certain costs in terms of labour or reduced income. Innovation also appears to be a fluid process where one is able to step in or out depending on access to resources and markets at a particular moment. Women make strategic choices to innovate or not.

We found examples of changing gender relations at the household level through for instance redistribution of land between men and women. In this case women gained independence, but were also expected to contribute more to household expenses such as school fees.

Changes also occur with respect to women participating in training. The degree of joint decision-making seems to depend largely on the relationship between husband and wife, as well as on woman’s contribution to household expenses. Therefore, innovations that strengthen women’s financial position have the potential to change gender relations.
The potential of innovation ‘from below’ to transform gender relations varies across the examples that we found. Most of the innovations are merely responding to ‘pains’ that women are facing in reality. The innovations with the highest potential for transforming gender relations occur when women are organised. Group support and collective action are important factors influencing women’s bargaining power in the kramer (oil-palm processing unit) and on the market.

We found two interesting factors that can be a catalyst for innovation:

1. **The degree women rely on a certain activity.**
   Women that were relying on an income-generating activity as their primary (and often only) occupation turned out to be important change agents and drivers behind innovations.

2. **The complexity of the activity.** In the case of oil processing, local mills (kramers) are learning sites where women learn from each other and experiment. Here the capacity for innovation was higher, possibly also due to the complexity of the process and the interaction between women.

**Gender in Inclusive Value Chain Collaboration**

The potential of innovation ‘from below’ to transform gender relations is limited. Women operate and make strategic improvements in their livelihood options based on their degree of autonomy and the choices available to them. In reality both their autonomy and choices are limited. Existing agricultural programmes and interventions often overlook the gender dimension. This mismatch reflects the exclusive process.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

Access to and control over resources, as well as norms, values and institutions are key dimensions of gender relations that constrain or potentially enable, women’s innovation capacity. Most often innovation ‘from below’ occurs as a response to a particular gender-related constraint and aims at taking away the ‘pain’.

Innovations ‘from below’ have only limited impact on improving women’s livelihoods. We found that organisational innovations have the highest potential to transform gender relations through collective action and leadership roles. The local change agents are often women who have a higher degree of autonomy over decision-making within the household. Often they are single or widowed women.

We suggest the following interventions:

1. **Group creation and collective learning**
   Inclusive VCC should build on existing group structures as well as promote the creation of women groups to stimulate collective learning and promote female leadership.

2. **Addressing health and safety issues**
   There is an urgent need for interventions addressing health and safety issues in oil palm processing and soap making. A widespread lack of awareness and almost no usage of protective equipment calls for education and improved technology.

3. **Providing alternative livelihood options**
   Although innovation capacity is higher among women specialising in one income-generating activity, providing different livelihood options should also be on the agenda of the private sector, to enhance resilience among farmers and their communities.

4. **Enhance women’s access to and control over resources**
   VCCs should aim at addressing current gender inequalities, particularly women’s unequal access to land and knowledge.

5. **Building capacity for bottom-up innovation**
   Building capacity for bottom-up innovation includes education and facilitating creativity through for instance participatory exercises.

**References**


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