



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations



LIFAD  
Investing in rural people



World Food  
Programme

**JOINT PROGRAMME:**  
Accelerating Progress towards  
Rural Women's Economic Empowerment



# FINAL REPORT

## PHASE I

## SUMMARY VERSION



## Introduction

The Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women (JP RWEE) was a global pilot initiative with an overarching goal to secure rural women's livelihoods and rights in the context of sustainable development. The programme reached 79,626 direct beneficiaries and over 400,000 households indirectly during the years of implementation. **The programme was jointly implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), UN Women and the World Food Programme (WFP) in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, Niger, and Rwanda from October 2014 to June 2021.** It is the only such initiative between the three Rome-based agencies (RBAs) and UN Women.

The JP RWEE adopted a holistic approach to women's economic empowerment, working towards four interrelated outcomes on **food security and nutrition; income generation; women's leadership and participation; a more gender-responsive policy environment.** Significant achievements were realised across outcomes 1 to 3, and, to a lesser extent, outcome 4<sup>1</sup>. In all countries<sup>2</sup>, there were improvements in dietary diversity and food consumption, as well as sizeable increases in agricultural production, both of which contributed to enhanced household food security and nutrition. Substantial increases in the incomes of rural women were achieved, which, in addition to improving livelihoods, was found to have made a considerable impact on women's financial autonomy and their role in relation to household decision making on finance. Women's participation and leadership in rural life was also advanced significantly, with clear changes taking place with regards to gender roles at household and community levels. At the national level, key technical support provided to national governments by the JP RWEE included the development of gender mainstreaming strategies into agricultural policies, critical to the establishment of a more gender responsive policy environment for rural women's economic empowerment.

**82%** average increase in production by rural women

**\$ 3 600 000**

generated from sales at the individual and group levels



**77%**

of Producer Organizations led by rural women

**\$ 1 900 000**

mobilized through savings and loan schemes

**20 000**

beneficiaries trained through gender-transformative approaches

**Increased empowerment of women and higher gender parity index** as measured by the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI)



More **gender-equitable relations** achieved within participating households



**Gender mainstreaming** incorporated into national policies and strategies



Reported **increased resilience** to the impacts of COVID-19



Photo: WFP Liberia /2015

1 FAO, IFAD, UN Women, WFP and Mokoro, 2021. Accelerating Progress towards Rural Women's Economic Empowerment in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, Niger and Rwanda from 2014 to 2020: Final Evaluation, Rome. <https://mptf.undp.org/factsheet/fund/RWF00>

2 Data for Guatemala was unavailable.

The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture index tool was used to assess whether women had been empowered by the programme in Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal and Niger. In all of these countries, women participating in the programme were found to be more empowered than women in the control group.

One unintended but significant impact of the programme was the role it played in better enabling rural women and their households to withstand external shock, most notably that caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to natural disasters caused by climate change. This was considered as a key learning and has been incorporated into the design of the second phase of the programme.

## Programme Results

The JP RWEE adopted a number of programme strategies to achieve the four programme outcomes and the overall programme goal. Central to this was developing individual, collective and institutional capacity. The programme worked at the household, community and institutional levels and through multiple partners, including national and local government and implementing NGOs. A multi-track strategy with the aim of achieving short, medium, and long term results was also applied. Women's groups were one of the main entry points for the programme. Targeting included the poorest and most vulnerable rural women, as well as smallholder women farmers with economic potential.

### OUTCOME 1

#### RURAL WOMEN HAVE IMPROVED FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY

Outcome 1 focused on increasing rural women farmers' productive potential through increased access to, and control over, productive resources and assets, along with improved access to services which are critical to achieving food security and nutrition.

As a result of the activities implemented, an improvement in dietary diversity and food consumption patterns of rural women and their households was achieved in all countries. Significant increases in agricultural production capacity across the participating countries were also achieved, with an average increase of 82 percent in the production of vegetables, rice, wheat, and fruits. Climate smart agricultural techniques were applied across all countries, whilst local, safe, and diversified food production was encouraged which, in turn, contributed to the development of sustainable food systems at the local level.

In all countries, nutrition training, including on food storage and preparation, was provided to rural women and, for the most part, their household members. This resulted in the enhancement of knowledge and understanding of the nutritional needs of women and children and helped to achieve behavioural change in food consumption practices at the household level for the benefit of women and girls.

Central to programme implementation was partnership with local government. This primarily involved working in close collaboration with Agricultural and Livestock offices. This included capacity building, joint implementation, monitoring of activities and facilitating access to extension services. A total of 40,000 people benefitted from capacity strengthening activities in agricultural production techniques, with a variety of participatory approaches being used to enhance the agricultural and livestock skills of the participants.

Rural women's capacity in food production, processing, and storage was enhanced by using innovative, productive and environmentally acceptable technologies. In all of the countries referenced above, grain reserves proved to be a valuable asset during the COVID-19 pandemic and assisted women in accessing food reserves and generating income.

## OUTCOME 2

### RURAL WOMEN HAVE INCREASED INCOME TO SECURE THEIR LIVELIHOODS AND CREATE WEALTH

Outcome 2 focused on the development of rural women's entrepreneurship, supporting women's role in value chains, enhancing their income opportunities and promoting linkages to higher value markets. As a result, substantial increases in the incomes of rural women were achieved, supporting the development of their economic autonomy and their increased role in household decision making relating to finance.

Over the programme duration, rural women achieved greater market access, which was critical for providing them with opportunities to generate income and expand the scope of their businesses. Improved access to technology also helped rural women to become more competitive in local markets. Access to credit is critical to increasing the economic potential of rural women. The programme facilitated access to credit primarily through informal savings and lending groups which, in turn, created opportunities for women to access formal credit as their incomes and savings increased through business development. This was also supported by formally registering women's groups, or through the formation of Producer Organizations (POs), composed of multiple women's groups. Being part of a formal cooperative or PO provides rural women with previously inaccessible opportunities and services from government, microfinance institutions and other service providers.

At the end of the programme, and despite the economic shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, women generated more than US\$ 3,600,000 from sales at individual and group levels across the seven countries. Savings and loan schemes mobilised more than US\$ 1,900,000.



**We have learned how to manage our money better and to plan what to do with our income. For example, we want our daughters to study so they have a profession, not like us; we didn't have any education. We have learned to care about ourselves, thanks to the training we received we know more about our sexuality, our rights, and the nutrition we must have.**

**– Community group participant, Guatemala**

Photo: WFP Guatemala /2020

### OUTCOME 3

#### **RURAL WOMEN HAVE ENHANCED LEADERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION IN THEIR COMMUNITIES AND IN RURAL INSTITUTIONS, AND IN SHAPING LAWS, POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES**

Actions under this outcome worked to promote and strengthen the participation of women in rural communities and enhance their leadership in local structures. Across the participating countries, there was an increase in women's leadership within POs, in some countries women were elected to local councils and, in all countries, rural women were able to voice their needs and input into local development planning processes. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, 44 beneficiaries (41 women and 3 men) were elected to rural councils and in Guatemala, 42 women beneficiaries were elected to councils.

Women's enhanced participation and leadership was also achieved by bringing about transformative change through addressing discriminatory social norms, which are one of the principle causes of gender inequality and represent a major barrier to women's economic empowerment. The final evaluation of the programme found that gender transformative approaches used by the JP RWEE led to strong transformative effects for women. There was clear evidence of change at both the household and community levels.

The experiences reported at country level during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated evidence of women's participation and leadership within households and communities in multiple countries. Country examples showed that rural women played a central role in the response to the pandemic both at household and community level, and successfully engaged with decisions makers.

### OUTCOME 4

#### **A MORE GENDER RESPONSIVE POLICY ENVIRONMENT IS SECURED FOR THE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN**

This outcome involved working with national governments to develop more gender responsive policies and strategies for rural women. Across the participating countries, the JP RWEE teams supported Ministries with technical guidance and input into key policy processes. This support was primarily in relation to advancing gender equality within the agricultural sector through the mainstreaming of gender into rural development strategies and policies. For example, in Guatemala, the JP RWEE worked closely in providing guidance to the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food (MAGA) in the development of its first policy for Gender Equality and its associated ten-year strategy. In Ethiopia, the programme supported the Ministry of Agriculture to incorporate gender related targets into their policies and plans and to incorporate gender mainstreaming into their strategies. In Nepal, the Ministry of Agriculture was supported in the development and implementation of a Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) strategy.

Policy implementation at ground level was also supported, particularly in relation to budgeting and planning processes. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, 35 local development plans and budgets were developed with the inclusion of a budget for gender sensitive activities.

The overall achievement of Outcome 4 was found by the final evaluation of the programme to be lower compared to the other programme outcomes. The main reason for this was that policy reforms and enforcement of rural women's rights are complex to implement, and results under this outcome take longer to be visible and effective compared to other initiatives.

## Lessons Learned

**Resilience Building** - the experience of the COVID-19 global pandemic served to show that JP RWEE beneficiaries were able to build resilience as a result of the programme interventions, including through increased production, assets, income and access to credit. For the second phase of the programme, resilience building has been incorporated into the programme design, taking into account the increasing global impact of climate change and vulnerability to shock in JP RWEE countries.

**Experience Sharing** was a valuable mechanism for the transfer of technical knowledge and good practice. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, the need for exchange of experiences and good practices among members of self-help groups was identified as critical by beneficiaries. On another occasion, South-South exchange took place when two rural women beneficiaries from Liberia visited the programme in Ethiopia.

**Inter-agency collaboration/coordination** - over time, participating agencies in all countries established effective ways of working together and this integrated way of working enabled a holistic approach to the programme, with activities being delivered in a sequenced and logical way. For the second phase of the programme, this successful model will be replicated in all participating countries in order to address the problem of implementing partners working in silos and ensure effective programme implementation.

**Monitoring and Evaluation** - the need for a more robust M&E system was one of the main learnings of the programme. A uniform M&E system has been designed for the second phase, which will allow for global level aggregation and analysis whilst also responding to requirements at country level.

**Improving Digital Access for Rural Women** - the need for improved access to Information Communication Technologies (ICT) for rural women farmers was particularly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. In those countries where women had more access to ICT infrastructure, the programme was able to facilitate access to women for ICT based services such as access to weather and market information and online selling mechanisms.

## Good Practices

**Programming Through Women's Groups** - the strategy of working through women's groups contributed to women's empowerment in multiple ways, including generating social capital as well as economic empowerment. Recognition for women's work increased, alongside increased opportunities for market access and income generation. The groups also proved to be a key mobilizing and coping mechanism during times of crisis.

**Social Norms Transformation** - social norm change was evidenced across all countries. In Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal and Rwanda, GALS was successful in empowering women to think creatively about their livelihood strategies. In Niger, the Dimitra Club activities resulted in significant changes to cultural practices in communities with deeply entrenched social norms.

**Engagement of men** - successful engagement with men contributed to bringing about gender transformative change. Male household and community members were able to realize the benefits from changes in women's lives for themselves and their families.

**Importance of Working through Local Stakeholders** - ensuring local level ownership was key to the success of the programme and contributed to the likelihood of sustainability. In addition to working with local structures and groups, local government was closely involved in the programme.

**ICT for Rural Women** - in Kyrgyzstan, the JP RWEE partnered with an IT training academy to increase the digital skills of beneficiaries and implementing local government staff. In Liberia and Rwanda, women gained new skills in digital literacy and the use of mobile banking for their businesses.

**Product Diversification** - the ability to adapt businesses through product diversification in response to sudden changes in circumstances is an important strategy for withstanding economic shock. In Guatemala and Kyrgyzstan, women's groups were able to adapt their core business to produce products that were in increased demand (antibacterial hand soap and face masks) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

# Engaging Men in Ethiopia for the Empowerment of Rural Women

Mr. Hussen, the husband of a JP RWEE beneficiary, has shared his story on how the project has brought him positive behavioral changes in terms of supporting his wife's empowerment.



Photo: UN Women Ethiopia /2020

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*I used to believe it is a husband's duty to guide and command his wife's life. For this reason, I was the only one who used to take decisions for her and the family. I also believed that a wife must be at home, caring for the children. I used to limit my wife's activities and participation outside home. As I have only seen men taking part in public activities and never thought women, and particularly my wife, will be able to take part in public activities. My thoughts and beliefs started to fade after the community dialogue we had with the JP RWEE. Starting from that day, I started to question my beliefs and I helped me to open my mind. Gradually it changed*

*how I perceive and understand about women's participation and its importance. Now, I have realized that I am the first person to benefit from my wife's empowerment. I have changed my mindset and she is one of the leading active participants in our district cooperative beside running her own business.*

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Photo: WFP Nepal /2016  
Cover photo: UN Women Nepal /2016  
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**Joint Programme on  
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Women's Economic Empowerment**

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