

Boost women's economic power through agricultural cooperatives

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The Top 40 Under 40 2021 women finalists at the Capital Club on December 4. Empowered women will generate positive outcomes for households, communities and society. Diana Ngila / Nation Media Group



By [Isaac K. Nyamongo](#)
Deputy Vice-Chancellor
The Cooperative University of Kenya

Traditionally, men have focused on, and controlled through cooperatives, cash crops and dairy farming, largely because these provide higher returns. Extension services are, in fact, often geared towards support for cash crop and dairy farming leaving out activities residing primarily within the ambit of women.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation, even when women have full control of the farms, they produce 20-30 per cent less than those managed by men, a result of gender-specific obstacles.

In poultry, for example, we should address the differential impact of adoption of poultry-keeping technologies, and scale the knowledge barrier because women have less access to extension services and development interventions. Also, the ground should be evened for women to overcome barriers relating to access to market systems and financial services.

Among the key gender issues in cooperatives are: women's low level of education; less active participation; and their under-representation in decision-making and leadership levels. Despite the evidence that membership to a cooperative (sometimes referred to as collectives) impacts positively women's economic and social well-being, the macro-and micro-level factors still weigh heavily against women even when they contribute a significant amount of their time in providing on-farm labour.

Specific actions

Regrettably, the economic benefits primarily go to men and the trickle down to women is minuscule. Many are the stories in the Press of men who disappear in towns when they earn tea bonuses only to reappear when the money is exhausted. All is not lost, though.

There are specific actions that have the potential to support and create a positive impact on women in agricultural cooperatives. Such support actions could go into value chains, like poultry and small stock, that attract more attention from women. Supporting these value chains will directly and positively impact on women by improving their access to resources, like knowledge and inputs, and markets.

Take the case of poultry rearing in Makueni. In the 2019 Kenya population and housing census, there were 141,577 households with chicken (94.5 per cent had indigenous chicken, 3.5 Many are the stories in the Press of men who disappear in towns when they earn tea bonuses only to reappear when the money is exhausted.

Women owned chicken in more households (65.1 per cent) compared to men (5.2 per cent). Women primarily decided on and performed chores related to chicken rearing except construction of chicken coops, while men made decisions related to chicken rearing in over 70 per cent of the households. One in four households reported ever receiving information or training on chicken rearing.

Consider poultry keeping in Makueni. In order to address obstacles linked to access to vaccines against Newcastle disease, new models for effective delivery, adoption and utilisation of Newcastle disease vaccine for smallholder women producers could be deployed.

The challenge for these farmers lies in the packaging of vaccine vials. The smaller vials have vaccines adequate for 50 birds and the larger for 100 birds. What then does the farmer do with the

remaining vaccine after vaccinating their 16 chickens? The answer lies in organising the poultry farmers, who are primarily women, into cooperatives to take advantage of the bigger numbers.

Through these cooperatives smallholder farmers can be encouraged to improve poultry farming practices including group access to the Newcastle disease vaccine to protect their chickens from near certain death. Any poultry farmer knows that Newcastle disease is fatal. Now you have them, now you do not — that is how it goes when your chickens are not vaccinated against Newcastle disease; the disease has extremely high morbidity and mortality rates.

Market participation

Using the cooperatives, farmers' capacity can also be built in other ways: from training them on appropriate poultry rearing practices to supporting group formation or joining existing ones through which capacity building on matters relating to cooperatives, including governance, marketing, value addition, gender empowerment and nutrition could be provided. With this approach, the women who would otherwise have little say in cooperatives can establish groups within the larger cooperative but with a specific focus on poultry.

The cooperative model provides a way through which (women) smallholder poultry farmers could improve their welfare and of their families. Through this approach, women can be empowered through access to more information and technology, enabling them to make informed decisions to impact production and their economic outcome.

Increasing productivity, market participation, and household income leads to additional benefits to the household, including access to diversified and quality food with better nutrition.

Overall, empowered women will generate positive outcomes for households, communities and society.

Prof Nyamongo, an anthropologist, Fulbright Scholar and 2022 Pelto International Award recipient, is a deputy vice-chancellor at The Cooperative University of Kenya. inyamongo@cuk.ac.ke. @Prof_IKNyamongo