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Investing in Women Smallholder Farmers

An ActionAid International Briefing

June 2011

Many poor communities depend on women to grow most of the food they eat, yet women farmers struggle with a severe lack of extension services, credit, inputs, and productive assets. Merely by ensuring women farmers get the same access to these resources as men, the G20 could lift 100 million people out of hunger.

It's time for the international community, including G20 governments, international organisations, and the Committee for World Food Security (CFS) to meaningfully confront world hunger by acknowledging the many irreplaceable roles played by women farmers in ensuring food security. To facilitate rather than undermine their work, they should:

1. Recognise women are farmers and support interventions which specifically focus on their unique circumstances. These should include: public credit and financial services; guaranteeing secure access, use and control over good quality agricultural land and other productive resources, including appropriate seeds; and targeting women smallholders through agricultural research and extension services. In order for policies and programmes to succeed, they need to incorporate an understanding of women's multiple roles in food provisioning as well as help address gender constraints at the household and community level through empowering women smallholders.

2. Set specific and measurable targets for actions on women farmers into policies and spending plans. Gender-targeted budgeting in support of policies which aim to address women's needs must be allocated according to explicit goals if gender is to be more than a buzzword in budget documents. This must be supported by an increasing share of public budgets and agricultural aid that supports women farmers. Ensuring this spending is addressing and reaching the needs of women will also require the use of tools such as gender data collection, and monitoring of sex-disaggregated data.

3. Act quickly to provide the material support for country-owned initiatives that prioritize smallholders and women farmers which has already been promised by the G8 and the G20. The accountability report released at the G8 Summit in May 2011 revealed that many countries are failing to maintain the commitments they made under the Aquila Food Security Initiative (AFSI) at the 2009 G8 Summit. The promising Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP), developed as a vehicle for new AFSI contributions, is likewise seriously under-funded. The G20 has endorsed both AFSI and GAFSP, and must take steps to encourage more G20 members to commit and provide funds in 2011.

Background

The food crisis of 2008-09 and the recent price spike of late 2010 and early 2011 has put the issue of hunger back on the political agenda in many countries, as well of the international community. After decades of neglect of the agricultural sector and food security more broadly, there is a renewed focus on reducing hunger and under-nutrition. ActionAid believes that to

reduce hunger and enhance food and livelihood security there needs to be a focus on those living with hunger, particularly those responsible for producing the food.

Smallholder farmers produce more than half the global food supply from a small portion of the farmable land available.¹ Women smallholders comprise an average of 43 percent of the agricultural labour force of developing countries. Of those women in the least developed countries who report being economically active, 79% of them report agriculture as their primary economic activity; the global figure is 48%.²

Cheryl Doss in her paper for FAO Agricultural Development Economics Division *If women hold up half the sky, how much of the world's food do they produce?* states, "We know that women are important as food producers, and we know that development efforts that target food and agriculture must recognize the unique roles and constraints that face women. We also know that interventions targeting women are complicated...For many reasons, we need to support women as food producers and to ensure that the structural changes now underway in world agriculture benefit women, as well as men, both as producers and consumers of food."

Despite this, rural women rarely receive any attention in agricultural policies, programmes and budget allocations. Women own only 1 per cent of the land in Africa; receive only 7 per cent of extension services and 1 per cent of all agricultural credit³. If women farmers in Africa had the same access to land as men, they would increase their farm productivity by up to 20 per cent⁴.

Women smallholders face the added burden of juggling multiple responsibilities and systematic prejudice in land rights and political representation. If we wish to increase food production and reduce food insecurity and poverty, we need to examine the specific issues facing women farmers – and smallholder farmers in general – and develop policies that enhance their rights and meet their needs.

Figures from the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) show that more often than not, women own smaller and less fertile land holdings than men⁵. Indeed, most women do not own the land on which they farm. Customary practices and legal provisions also limit their access to land and productive assets. According to the FAO, ensuring women farmers get the same access to these agricultural resources as men could reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12-17 percent -- at least 100 million people.⁶

In addition, poor farmers, who tend to be overwhelmingly women, are increasingly suffering from the impacts of climate change. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts that climate change could put 50 million extra people at risk of hunger by 2020, rising to an additional 266 million by 2080.⁷ Hence, there is an urgent need for smallholder farmers to adopt climate-resilient sustainable agricultural methods. Government measures such as securing land tenure; investing in water harvesting structures; training in ecological farming practices; and more financial and market support would help make ecologically sustainable farming methods more widespread. That would in turn improve living conditions, preserve the environment, and strengthen resilience to climate change.

Women smallholder farmers face multiple constraints

Smallholder farmers generally face many challenges. However, women smallholders face multiple constraints beyond those of men farmers. Women tend to be invisible to policy makers because they are not seen as 'productive' farmers. They often are expected to provide unpaid farm work⁸, and bear a disproportionate burden of care and reproductive roles within the family and community. They are deprived of access to markets, key assets, and inputs, and are frequently excluded from decision-making. And women are even disproportionately impacted by poverty and hunger - including having less access to education and health care facilities.

These multiple constraints mean that agricultural policies targeting women need to be different from those that have historically targeted men. First and foremost, policy makers must start recognising women farmers and their multiple roles, and ensure that well-funded and well-managed programs specifically target women farmers. Donors and international institutions have taken a renewed interest in both agriculture and smallholders recently, especially in Africa, but women farmers continue to be systematically neglected by agricultural policies. Some governments are promoting women farmers (e.g., through specific gender policies, or separate gender units in Ministries of Agriculture), but such moves remain too rare.

The international community and national governments should support women smallholder farmers to unleash their potential contribution to avoiding another food crisis:⁹

- Women farmers have little or no access to credit, which is often constrained by a lack of collateral (usually land) and high interest rates, being seen as too high-risk or being excluded from cooperatives. **Access to financial services including social transfers** in the case of marginal farmers and loans and credit for smallholder farmers is essential so that they can pay for inputs, improve farming and develop small business enterprises to empower themselves economically.
- Women smallholder farmers have smaller and less fertile land holdings than men, while actual rights over land are often restricted by national laws and socio-cultural structures.¹⁰ **Securing poor women farmers' access to and control over land** is essential for basic livelihoods and household food security. Greater economic independence can also serve as a means out of poverty.
- Women smallholder farmers often do not have access to seeds and farming inputs. **Gender appropriate farming inputs** – including seeds, breeds, farm tools and equipment, and manure – enable women farmers to farm sustainably, be more productive, and achieve food security.
- Women farmers do not have secure access to and control over irrigation and drinking water. Global warming and climate change pose an even greater threat to farming land and water supplies all over the world. In the more competitive race for resources, poor women farmers are the most likely to lose out.¹¹ **Access to clean and stable source of water** is essential for sustainable farming and food security.

- Extension services provide advice and training to enable farmers to use new inputs and methods to farm more productively, but women farmers have less access to these services, which tend to be tailored to men and commercial crops rather than the staple foods principally grown by women. **Appropriate extension services and training** must address the specific constraints women smallholders face.
- Research and technology often bypass women smallholder farmers. For example, women farmers tend to use traditional hand-held hoes, because ploughs and irrigation equipment is often too heavy or otherwise inappropriate for women. **Appropriate research and technology** is essential to develop crops that are more climate resilient, nutritious and high yielding.
- Women smallholder farmers have less access to local markets to sell their produce due to time constraints, little access to market information or lack of transport and facilities to add value to their produce. **Appropriate marketing facilities** including access to local markets and reliable information about markets and fair pricing are essential for economic empowerment.

At the household and community level – it is crucial for governments and development actors to ensure¹²:

- **Active participation of women in collective action:**
Building women's self-agency is critical for their empowerment. ActionAid's experience of working alongside rural women over decades has taught us that there is power in collective action – be it in forming savings group, setting up local seed and grain banks, collective marketing, or coming together to address domestic abuse. In all cases, engaging in groups has helped them take on leadership role at the community level.
- **Improved access to and management of productive resources (individual and collective) for women:**
Women are responsible for food security of their households in many cultures. They have kitchen gardens and produce food crops for domestic consumption, and more often, they are the ones who travel to get water. Devising strategies and providing support to improve women's control over productive resources and to better manage them will help enhance their own and their families' food security.
- **Enhanced contributions by women to household revenues (and control over these resources):**
Women are involved in unpaid work, including unpaid care work disproportionately compared to men. Greater control over household revenues empowers women economically and increases their bargaining power within the household.

In policy making and allocating public funds, governments and development actors must ensure that their investments and policy-making responds to the needs of women:

- **Agriculture policies tend to have little or no specific gender targeted interventions.** Excluding the primary producers of food from agricultural policy planning makes no sense. Some governments have policies to address women's needs, but these tend to be marginal projects, and they are often not fully implemented or given the same political and technical backing for delivery. In Ghana, for example, strategies developed as far back as the late 1990s remain largely unimplemented; that all of the ministry's senior officers are men helps explain why women farmers continue to be neglected.
- Where mention is made of women farmers, **the actual agriculture budgets that are allocated tend to have very little investment specifically targeted at women.** Often there are no specific budget lines allocated to women within the annual agriculture budget. For instance, in Kenya, the government said it was going to mainstream gender in agricultural policy in its 2007 strategic plan, but failed to mention women or gender at all in the 19-page budget that was attached to the plan.¹³ Setting specific and measurable targets along with budget lines is the only way to ensure that gender is taken seriously.
- **At present, agricultural aid – at the multilateral, bilateral and national levels – is playing a major role in ensuring the continuing neglect of women farmers.** Studies show that gender issues are incorporated into less than 10 percent of ODA to agriculture¹⁴. Of \$12.9bn in agricultural aid from 2002 to 2007, only 13 percent was reported by donors as including a focus on gender¹⁵. Very few donors have specific policies to promote women farmers within their agricultural aid support. The US is starting to address this by setting out a specific policy to address gender issues in agriculture and women farmers, which is a welcome shift.
- **The methods of analysing, monitoring and measuring these initiatives and policies also need to be developed.** Women's work in agriculture is often not counted, measured or valued. Statistics on women's yields, women's technology adoption rates and women's use of inputs are rarely reported. The problem is not just that there is a lack of gender-disaggregated data, but also what is considered important and valuable in data collection methodologies and methods. Increasing the share of agricultural assistance that supports women farmers and spending will also require the use of tools such as gender budgeting and collection, and monitoring of sex-disaggregated data.

¹ Altieri, M. 2009. *Small farms as a planetary ecological asset: five key reasons why we should support the revitalisation of small farms in the global south.*, Penang: Third World Network.

² FAOSAT as quoted in *If women hold up half the sky, how much of the world's food do they produce?* By Cheryl Doss, FAO, March 2011.

³ Sanchez P., et al. 2005. *Halving hunger: it can be done*. New York: UNDP, p5. Available at: www.unmillenniumproject.org/.../Hunger-lowres-complete.pdf

⁴ Saito K.A. 1994. Raising the Productivity of Women Farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa. *World Bank Discussion Papers: Africa Technical Department Series No. 230*. Washington D.C.: The World Bank.

⁵ FAO. 1995. *Women, Agriculture and Rural Development, A Synthesis Report of the Africa Region*. Rome: FAO. Available at: www.fao.org/docrep/x0250e/x0250e04.htm#P760_80833

⁶ FAO. 2011. *State of Food and Agriculture (SOFA): Women and Agriculture—Closing the gender gap for development*. Rome, Italy.

⁷ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). 2007. *Fourth Assessment Report*.

⁸ Because of their limited access to essential production resources, such as land, labor, and inputs, women's role in crop agriculture is often restricted to producing subsistence food crops with low potential to generate income. Women farmers are more likely to be asset-poor subsistence farmers. See World Bank. 2010. *Gender in Crop Agriculture – Overview*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank. Available at:

<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENAGRLIVSOUBOOK/.../Module12.pdf>

⁹ This section draws on: Centre for Land, Economy and Rights of Women. 2006. *Mainstreaming gender in agricultural programmes within the context of NEPAD's strategy on agriculture and rural development*. Nairobi: CLEAR WOMEN, p.iii-vii; International Fund for Agricultural Development, Food and Agriculture Organization and World Bank. 2009. *Gender in agriculture sourcebook*. Washington D.C.: The World Bank.; and ActionAid International. 2011. *What Women Farmers Need: A blueprint for Action*. Johannesburg: ActionAid International.

¹⁰ Oxford Policy Management. 2005. *Evaluation report: The plan for the modernisation of agriculture*. Oxford: Oxford Policy Management, p. 42; Deere, C. &Doss, C. 2006. Gender and the distribution of wealth in developing countries, *UNU-WIDER Research paper No.2006/15*, p14.

¹¹ UN (2006), *Gender, Women and Sanitation: a Policy Brief*, Task Force on Gender and Water (GWTF), available at www.unwater.org/downloads/unwpolbrief230606.pdf

¹² ActionAid International (forthcoming). *The Long Road from Household Food Security to Women's Empowerment: Signposts from Bangladesh and The Gambia*, written by Carine Pionetti and Meena Bilgi.

¹³ Mark Curtis, *Fertile Ground: How governments and donors can halve hunger by supporting small farmers*, ActionAid, April 2010, p.20.

¹⁴ *Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook*, World Bank/FAO/IFAD, 2009.

¹⁵ Mark Curtis, *Fertile Ground: How governments and donors can halve hunger by supporting small farmers*, ActionAid, April 2010, p.20.