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What does it take for a market systems approach to 'leave no one behind'?



Zenebe Uraguchi



Jodie Thorpe

All blogs

What are the particular opportunities and barriers of employing a 'market systems' approach to reach highly marginalised men and women?

HELVETAS's Zenebe Uraguchi discusses the experience of the Samriddhi project from Bangladesh. Jodie Thorpe, a researcher from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), reflects on lessons from her recent [thinkpiece](#).

JT: In our [last exchange](#), you said it is possible to use the principles of market systems development to enhance the livelihood strategies of poor and disadvantaged women and men. What is your evidence that these are inclusive of very marginalised people?

ZU: The Samriddhi project had a clear definition of poor and disadvantaged women and men, and worked to systematically ensure that they were at the centre of its interventions. The selection of geographies and of sectors, both agriculture and non-agriculture, was crucial. Both the external evaluation and the monitoring and evaluation system of the project confirmed that gains from innovative business models facilitated by the project were built on partnerships to promote development outcomes for poor and disadvantaged women and men. The project invested substantial efforts and resources and consequently made good progress in including poor and extreme women and men through relevant value chains, even though progress was uneven and concentrated in certain value chains.

Of course, disadvantaged women and men required supplementary actions, at least initially, for effectively targeting them – ranging from subsidised skills improvement, supporting collective actions of target groups, physical infrastructure, and access to technical, as well as financial and business services. At the same time, we need to be honest and recognise when market system development is the best and most realistic way to make meaningful impacts on the lives of very marginalised people, and when not. There are other means, such as income transfer programmes, that could be used to target and reach them.

JT: From my work with market systems practitioners, I didn't find that the approaches being implemented were fundamentally different when seeking to make markets work better for very marginalised people than when other groups were being targeted. However, the details really matter. Having the right expertise, involving the right people, thoroughly understanding the context. The 'solutions' that then emerged were highly context specific. Would you agree?

ZU: Market system development approach is not entirely new. The approach puts lessons from decades of development programming into a 'set of principles and frameworks' to guide design, implementation and results measurement. So, no, there are not 'ready-made solutions' to exclusion and poverty. But these frameworks can be used to assess the wider system (and parts in that system) that poor and disadvantaged women and men are part of and the main causes for underperformance/absence/ mismatching of key functions and rules.

JT: I think we have to be honest, though, that commercially viable opportunities (in the sense that a company can source produce or sell seeds on a profitable basis) are not necessarily enough. Most companies will not invest if alternative opportunities to use the same resources promise greater returns. We can apply a systems approach but we need to at least consider market actors that are not only driven by profit maximisation. These may include families, community groups, the marginalised themselves (who invest their time and effort), governments, or investors working with more concessional financing models.

ZU: For Samriddhi ensuring inclusion of poor and extreme poor women and men – either as labourers or through providing credits (in-kind and cash) – centred on commercial interest. As the external review of the project in 2013 concluded, if the project phased out at the time of the evaluation, most relationships between private sector companies and local service providers and their associations would provide last mile outreach to the companies for distribution of their products.

However, improving the conditions of poor and disadvantaged women and men meant focusing on elements beyond demand and supply of products. It included improving transactions/interactions between different players. For example, the project recognised that there were other dimensions of poverty, such as improving human capital and increasing the voice (agency) of poor and disadvantaged women

and men which were also tackled through different interventions (e.g. improved advocacy of landless women and men for access to land at roadsides).

JT: My **research** suggests that sequencing and/or the interaction of interventions around these different dimensions is vital; for example, building skills, networks and confidence over time and changes to physical and attitudinal barriers to inclusion in mutually reinforcing ways. But facilitating changes in these elements beyond demand and supply in a sustainable way at scale is hard.

ZU: Sustainable and scalable impacts required the participation of those who had the power and leverage to work with poor and disadvantaged women and men. This included the public and private sector as well as civil society and community leaders. For Samriddhi, for example, it was critical to facilitate change or improvement in social norms at the community level through interactions between opinion leaders and other men and women. For instance, to address the issue of mobility of women, the project found study tours and exchange visits relatively effectively. Women who travelled around – such as local service providers, Centre-in-Charges of garment sub-centres, female mentors, or the suppliers coordinating embroidery value chains – served as important role models to others.

JT: That's really helpful in demonstrating how systems thinking can be applied beyond commercial actors towards social change. This learning is important as I suspect that the pressure is only going to rise to demonstrate how market systems approaches, working in conjunction with other programming, contributes to '**leaving no one behind**'.

*Read **Market systems approaches and 'leaving no one behind'**, by Jodie Thorpe.*