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Are we there yet? The quest for women's economic empowerment at scale in agricultural market systems, part 1



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Part 1: Incentivising the private sector

Ah, scale: that Holy Grail of development. Scale is increasingly being discussed in women's economic empowerment (WEE) in agriculture. But what's in a number?

Well, a lot, frankly. In agricultural market systems development (MSD), the number of stakeholders who benefit from an activity - demonstrating achievement of scale - can help us know if we are achieving results and making progress on development goals.

These numbers don't tell the whole story, though.

For many MSD practitioners, understanding the scale of impact is not merely a question of tallying up results and seeing bigger as better. When considering WEE at scale, it is just as important to think about how it happens. It is vital to understand whether or not the intervention was the biggest factor in facilitating positive change and addressing the root causes of poor system performance. In other words, focusing on the how, in addition to scale, helps us move closer to designing for systemic change, balancing scale of impact with the depth and sustainability of changes that lead to that impact. For these reasons, MSD approaches seem to be well suited to scaling WEE.

Women's economic empowerment at scale using an MSD approach

In this **two-part blog series**, we are highlighting projects and innovative approaches that advance our understanding of how to achieve WEE at scale. In this post, we highlight approaches that incentivise private sector partners to consider women's needs.

These projects were profiled in a recent Advancing Women's Empowerment in Agriculture (AWE)-led, [USAID-funded review](#) of women and youth inclusion in 15 agriculture and supporting market systems development programmes, spanning multiple donors. Although scale was not a specific focus of this study, the analysis discussed scale as part of its review of how programmes measured impact (or didn't). In fact, the study found that few tracked scale and depth of change in women's inclusion and noted the challenges of measuring and achieving scale.

All of the projects featured in this blog series have embraced market facilitation tactics and are aiming to scale results in WEE using locally-led approaches that minimise direct delivery of services and build on market incentives for more durable impact at scale. In this way, the programmes are conscious of balancing a focus on scale with other qualities of systemic change like depth and sustainability. In fact, a powerful statement from a 2016 report on [scaling impact through input and output models in agriculture](#) underlined this:

"Our ex-post assessments in Zambia and Cambodia reinforced that gains from basic sensitization and training activities will tend to recede and revert to the pre-project baseline without a change in the way embedded members of the market system interact with smallholders."

Four years later, the AWE report reinforced this perspective, observing that the way to encourage market system actors to change their relationships and interactions with women and youth is to help them understand the business case for targeting them:

"Calibrating partners' incentives and aligning those incentives with the needs of women and youth is foundational to ensuring that MSD approaches can achieve sustainable inclusion results at scale."

ÉLAN RDC

The UK Aid-funded [ÉLAN RDC](#) programme, which supports market systems development in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), provides a great example of this process. The programme developed [inclusive business cases](#) informed by

market, political economy and specialised gender analyses to demonstrate the business value of pursuing economic empowerment for women employees, suppliers, distributors and customers in agriculture. Furthermore, the programme wanted to go beyond just the number of women reached through inclusive business practices, transitioning to a WEE strategy that prioritised focusing on both the terms and nature of women's participation as well as the benefits derived from it.

Starting in 2016, the programme used a role-change framework to identify six role changes (e.g. women's labour rewarded and recognised; improved status; new position acquired or role upgraded) that mark women's advancement into upgraded roles or functions. Then, to operationalise the framework, it developed sector-specific role change sheets. These sheets provide descriptions of women's current roles in the sector, a vision of how women's roles will change as a result of ÉLAN RDC's engagement, whether it is a targeted or desired outcome, and suggested indicators and guidance on how the outcomes can be measured.

This framework can be applied across sectors and partnerships and complements programme-level results chains, allowing ÉLAN RDC to measure reach and benefits to women and understand how interventions are contributing to impacts and broader systemic change pathways.

This blend of intentionality and market facilitation is reaping results: three years after the framework's introduction, ÉLAN RDC had facilitated upgraded roles for nearly 55,000 women. Overall, by the end of 2019, ÉLAN RDC benefited more than 265,000 women (31 per cent of the total 855,000 individuals benefitted) through net positive income change and has seen changes in business practices benefiting nearly 400,000 women (30 per cent of the 1,306,000 total). For more discussion and examples, see a full case study on ÉLAN RDC in Annex 2 of the [AWE report](#).

Australia-Indonesia Partnership for Promoting Rural Incomes through Support for Markets in Agriculture (PRISMA)

In Indonesia, [PRISMA](#)'s approach facilitates links to buyers for smallholder farmers and between private sector partners (both domestic firms and multinational corporations) in order to create networks across the system for coordinated sector development. Like many projects featured in the AWE study, the PRISMA programme conducts market research and segmentation to develop the business case for partners to promote women's inclusion.

One approach PRISMA recently examined was the input and output agricultural sales agent model. Over 6,000 women are involved as sales agents to date. Although the model has not yet fully reached scale, because it is a common model used to address last-mile distribution constraints to scaling impact in agricultural

development programmes, recent PRISMA research offers interesting insights into how this model could contribute to certain dimensions of WEE in large-scale ways.

The programme works with partners in different sectors to build customised business cases in areas such as identification of women as an important potential customer segment; improvements in productivity, quality or supply chain reliability; opportunities to supply niche markets; diversification of distribution channels; and enhanced brand reputation.

For example, in the Indonesian pig sector, women are responsible for feeding pigs, so, for cultural reasons, feed companies can reach more women pig farmers at home by hiring more female sales agents. To better understand how this contributes to women's economic empowerment, [PRISMA surveyed women sales agents to assess how participation as agents was affecting their economic empowerment](#) as part of a larger, multi-faceted study of the direct sales agent model.

Although the sample size was small - 43 women agents across 10 firms - the insights were revealing. PRISMA found a direct impact on several dimensions of WEE, most notably on economic advancement, leadership and networking opportunities and access to assets, services and needed supports:

"Findings showed that income earned as an agent and the public-facing and relationship-based nature of the role directly contributed to economic advancement and leadership and networking opportunities. Additionally, some agents also participated in trainings that they found useful in increasing their confidence in performing their work, which illustrate impact on access to assets, services and needed supports."

Findings on three other dimensions - access to opportunities and life chances, improved decision-making authority and manageable workload - were mixed. PRISMA also surveyed 511 farmers (41 per cent female) to understand the impact these agents were having on farmer performance, as well as the perception of agent marketing activities. The study found that 91 per cent of the farmers who interacted with a woman sales agent applied the training they received, a figure six points higher than farmers who interacted with a male sales agent. These insights reveal that the sales agent model may have further potential to achieve WEE at scale both for women employees/entrepreneurs and for women customers.

In closing...

The thorny issues that constrain scale in general - such as sustaining the models without ongoing project support; how to incrementally get to scale one partner at a time; building adaptive capacities; finding routes to copying and crowding in that

are independent of a project's direct intervention - are just as present in any discussion around scale of WEE. In fact, this is one of the biggest motivators for using a market facilitation, systems-based approach, as it guides implementers to design for scaled impact that is long-lasting.

Furthermore, the desire to reach scale quickly can have unintended negative impacts on WEE, as we know that risks are not something that are well measured or monitored in many MSD programmes. Layering strong monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems that include monitoring for unintended (negative) consequences, alongside the focus on piloting, testing and evolving models that is already inherent in market facilitation, is also important for advancing WEE at scale.

[Read Part 2 of this blog series](#) to learn about projects and approaches that are identifying opportunities for WEE at scale and exploring the enabling environment conditions necessary to sustain it.

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