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Are we there yet? The quest for women's economic empowerment at scale in agricultural market systems, part 2



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All blogs

Part 2: Beyond partnerships

As we explored in the [first part of this two-part series](#), for many market systems development (MSD) practitioners, understanding the scale of impact is not merely a question of tallying up results and seeing bigger as better. When considering women's economic empowerment (WEE) at scale, it is just as important to think about how it happens.

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.

In the previous post, we highlighted several private sector partnerships that focused on scale through a strong business case and within a larger market facilitation, systems-based implementation approach. In this post, we highlight projects and approaches that identify opportunities for WEE at scale and explore the enabling environment conditions necessary to sustain it. 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 representing work in 17 countries. 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).

Enabling environment and corporate-level behaviour change

Formal laws and policies and informal rules and norms are critical dimensions in determining whether impact at scale will be sustained. Scaling WEE, therefore, requires a focus on the broader enabling environment and behaviour change at multiple levels.

The UK Aid-funded **Arab Women's Enterprise Fund** (AWEF) acknowledges that many women's empowerment interventions struggle to reach scale because **they ignore the enabling environment**. In Jordan, women-run home-based businesses, **such as dairies**, were constrained because their lack of a formal business license limited their access to formal markets, finance, insurance and social protections. By catalysing improvements in the enabling environment for business licensing of home-based businesses in Jordan, AWEF shifted perceptions of these women-run businesses to be seen as more legitimate and provided the necessary conditions to sustain and scale product certification and market access interventions that promote WEE.

The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) funds the **Market Development Facility (MDF) programme**, which operates in five countries in the Pacific and Asia, shares AWEF's perspective and has facilitated opportunities to engage private sector actors in corporate-level behaviour change that promotes enabling environments more conducive to WEE. This work includes identifying corporate behaviours that transcend single sectors and embedding those behaviours in partnership design, such as integrating WEE in a company's national and sales marketing plans, helping develop human resources policies related to female distribution networks and incorporating WEE-related business metrics into companies' management information systems. These types of interventions have allowed MDF to make significant strides to scaling WEE interventions year after year. In its **2019 annual report**, MDF reported being able to double the number of women benefiting from activities from the previous year to more than 100,000 (44 per cent of total individuals), resulting in almost \$40 million net additional income generated for women.

Identifying opportunities for WEE at scale

The issue of how we frame or identify opportunities for WEE at scale also matters. MDF found that the greatest improvements in WEE are not necessarily through partnerships with women-owned industries, which offer deep impact but are limited in scale. It found that jointly-led sectors or predominately male-led sectors, which

have a greater concentration of existing or potential female workers, offer a greater potential to reach scale and a range of impact depth for WEE.

The USAID-funded Punjab Enabling Environment Project (PEEP) identified opportunities to reach scale by looking beyond individual partnerships and seeking to facilitate multi-actor partnerships that were more likely to drive systems change, benefit more women and deliver on more comprehensive and lasting results that have mutually reinforcing impacts on WEE. The programme identified public and private sector actors that entered into a joint partnership agreement to provide a comprehensive set of services to women livestock farmers, resulting in more than 2,000 women trained on animal husbandry best practices, 6,000 women accessing veterinary services and 35,000 women receiving microloans.

"The project stepped back to analyse the incentives of the market system actors that touched the livestock sector - many of them already project partners - and addressed their pain points in providing more inclusive services. USAID PEEP's role was to convene and align the incentives of all its partner market systems actors for achieving women's economic empowerment. Most critically, these actors entered a formal joint-partnership with one another, not just the project. These partners, now engaged with one another through an initiative dubbed WEinSPIRE, provided well-rounded services to women livestock farmers in southern Punjab."

Muhammad Junaid, COP, PEEP

Similarly, there is an overwhelming amount of focus on advancing women's positions as suppliers, employees and business owners in MSD programmes, with less emphasis on the transformative effects advancing women's roles as consumers can have at scale. AWEF mapped the entire financial sector in Egypt and shared with digital financial service providers that 23 million women are unbanked or underbanked - presenting a huge market opportunity and entry point to finance women. AWEF used these data as a way to convince large e-payment network providers and mobile wallet providers to introduce gender-smart outreach strategies.

In closing...

Partnerships with individual private sector partners can make a significant impact on scaling WEE in agriculture. But addressing systemic constraints also requires a wider approach that addresses the enabling environment and corporate-level changes. In this two-part series, we have explored several projects and how they've approached the challenging topic of WEE at scale through context-based approaches. However, many issues remain that constrain scale.

As noted in [Part 1](#), 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 so important for advancing WEE at scale.

[Read Part 1 of this blog series](#) which highlights approaches that incentivise private sector partners to consider women's needs.

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