Empowering women to improve food security – what works and why

Programmes in India and Bangladesh that aim to empower women show that to beat the odds stacked against them, strategies must be transformative

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Development actors may agree on the need to empower women, but it is hard to mobilise resources, and to target these resources, when the goal in question is so broad and diffuse. In my report to the UN on Gender and the Right to Food, I argue that one of the most promising approaches is to attach strong gender-sensitive elements to existing social programmes in order to make these into vehicles for transforming gender roles and empowering women, at the same time as they work to alleviate poverty. Examples from two Asian countries show just how complex, yet worthwhile, a task this is.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, adopted in India in September 2005, guarantees 100 days of minimum wage employment – or equivalent unemployment payments – to poor rural households. The programme benefited 52.5m households in 2009-2010, and put people to work building productive assets or providing environmental services, such as water harvesting and conservation and the digging of irrigation canals.

As such, it is one of the most ambitious working examples of social protection on a nationwide scale in the developing world: its beneficiaries are in the tens of millions and its goals encompass both poverty reduction and infrastructure building.

A further goal is the empowerment of women. In the act, a quota of one third of the work has been set aside for women, taking into account that rural unemployment is higher for women than for men (141 days of employment per year compared with 76 days on average – pdf, page 272). The participation rate of women has in fact exceeded that minimum every year, reaching 48% in 2009-2010 (pdf - page 276), figures no doubt buoyed by the promise of wage parity with men and the relative regularity and safety of the work.
A UNDP/ILO report on social protection concluded that the economic opportunities created by the act favoured the empowerment of women by allowing them to contribute to household income and decision-making, notably on food, consumer goods, children’s education, healthcare and debt management. Meanwhile, the scheme is seen to have allowed women to take a more active role in the rural public sphere.

However, even the highly progressive legislation is not immune from direct and indirect forms of gender discrimination. Many potential female participants cannot undertake any paid work because they are constrained by household responsibilities. The burden of looking after the young, sick or elderly or fetching water and firewood falls disproportionately on women; in India this unremunerated work is equivalent to 182% of total tax revenue.

The act provides that one female worker be deputed to look after children (and paid the same wage as others) if at least five children under the age of six are brought to a workplace. However, the implementation of this clause remains highly uneven: a survey revealed that 70% of the women interviewed had no access to childcare facilities at work, while 65% were unaware of this provision.

Bangladesh’s Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction - Targeting the Ultra Poor – is an example of how asset transfer schemes, another crucial form of social protection, can be shaped around women’s empowerment. The programme, launched in 2002 by the non-governmental organisation Building Resources Across Communities (Brac) and later expanded to cover up to 300,000 ultra-poor women and their households, aims to tackle poverty in gender-sensitive ways. The programme takes into account the fact that households headed by females are often time-constrained by providing assets such as poultry that require less labour to be maintained, while providing extensive asset management training as well as subsidised health and legal services, social development training, and water and sanitation.

The programme has been willing to innovate in order to overcome the multiple barriers facing women. A daily stipend was introduced until the assets were able to generate sufficient income for the household, based on the finding that many of the beneficiaries, even after they received some productive assets, continued to work in other peoples’ houses as maids, making it more difficult for them to focus on working on the assets transferred by the programme.

The lesson from these examples is that the odds are stacked against the empowerment of women, given the multitude of cultural, social and economic barriers they face in many societies. Individual measures are therefore susceptible to fail unless they address the underlying norms and cultural practices, in addition to providing assets, state-guaranteed work or any other form of support. Food security and anti-poverty strategies must be transformative and make the redistribution of roles between women and men a priority. This is the only way to make sure that the social investment intended to sustain the poor does not also sustain the gender divisions that characterise poverty and keep it locked in place.

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