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Women’s collective action in African agricultural markets: the limits of current development practice for rural women’s empowerment

Sally Baden

A wide range of development actors play a major role in initiating, supporting, and promoting collective action of various forms, which aims to secure economic and wider benefits to women, through improving their engagement in markets. But there is limited understanding of what works for rural women in terms of their participation in collective action, and the ‘empowerment’ benefits to be gained from it. Gendered power dynamics in mixed-sex organisations seeking to improve livelihoods through collective action often lead to different and unequal outcomes for women. Women’s motives for collective action often differ from men’s, and they bring different skills and qualities to it. This article draws on research in Ethiopia, Mali, and Tanzania, to assess recent experiences of development interventions supporting women’s collective action in agricultural markets.

Une variété d’acteurs de développement jouent un rôle d’envergure dans l’initiation, le soutien et la promotion d’une action collective sous différentes formes, laquelle vise à obtenir des avantages économiques et plus généraux pour les femmes, en améliorant leur participation aux marchés. Mais on ne comprend guère ce qui donne de bons résultats pour les femmes rurales en termes de leur participation à l’action collective, et des avantages sur le plan de l’« autonomisation » qui peuvent en découler. La dynamique de pouvoir basée sur le genre dans les organisations mixtes qui cherchent à améliorer les moyens de subsistance au moyen d’une action collective aboutit souvent à des résultats différents et inégaux pour les femmes. Les raisons pour lesquelles les femmes entreprennent des actions collectives sont souvent différentes de celles des hommes, et les femmes apportent des compétences et des qualités différentes dans cette action. Cet article se base sur des recherches menées en Éthiopie, au Mali et en Tanzanie pour évaluer les expériences récentes d’interventions de développement qui soutiennent l’action collective des femmes sur les marchés agricoles.

En el ámbito de desarrollo, una amplia gama de actores desempeña un rol importante a la hora de iniciar, apoyar y promover varias modalidades de acción colectiva, mediante las cuales se pretende asegurar que las mujeres obtengan beneficios económicos y otro
tipo de beneficios a través de su participación en los mercados. Sin embargo, la comprensión de aquello que funciona para las mujeres rurales en términos de su participación en acciones colectivas y de los beneficios de “empoderamiento” resultantes, es limitada. Las dinámicas de poder establecidas a partir de motivos de género en organizaciones mixtas que intentan mejorar los medios de vida a través de la acción colectiva, frecuentemente dan lugar a resultados diferentes e inequitativos para las mujeres. Las razones para participar en la acción colectiva expresadas por las mujeres, a menudo son diferentes que las que motivan a los hombres. Además, ellas aportan habilidades y cualidades diferentes en este cometido. El presente artículo se apoya en investigaciones realizadas en Etiopía, Mali y Tanzania con el fin de evaluar las experiencias recientes de intervenciones desarrollo destinadas a apoyar las actividades colectivas de las mujeres en los mercados agrícolas.

Key words: women; collective action; agricultural markets; sub-Saharan Africa; empowerment; Tanzania; Ethiopia; Mali

Introduction: the potential and challenges of supporting women’s collective action in agricultural markets

Known as Maimouna in her village, Maminè Sanogo, 50, was born in Kaniko village in Koutiala Circle, Sikasso region, in Mali. Her father was a prominent local figure and she married into the family of the Kaniko village chief. She went to school, engaged in community development activities from a young age, and is now a member of several women’s organisations at the national and international levels. After democratisation in Mali, in 1991, her village went through tough times, with social conflicts between opposing groups. In 2002, following her involvement in various external initiatives to bring women together, Maimouna became convinced that organising women could help bring peace back into the village.

I thought that if the women in my village were able to come together in a single development organisation, they would contribute to establishing social peace in the village and be better respected by their husbands and by men in general in the village. In 2005 we then created the ‘U pa u yè lo’ Women’s Association (Let us unite to take care of ourselves) which later became the multifunctional co-operative ‘U yè lo’ (Let us take care of ourselves)…Finally, I did some thinking, and I realised that until now the only economic resource that has been the exclusive preserve of women in Minyanka¹ society was Shea butter.² The training and information I received confirmed that the improved butter was economically more profitable. So I mobilised members of the co-operative to be trained in the production of Shea butter. Today all the women in the co-operative who produce Shea butter say they derive significant income from this.

(Oxfam women’s collective action (WCA) individual interview, Kaniko village, Mali, during fieldwork in Koutiala district, 6–12 June 2012)
Maimouna’s story is closely intertwined with the history of the Uyelo Co-operative, and highlights the importance of her vision as a leader, as well as the specific context and history of development interventions, to successful outcomes from collective action for rural women Shea producers in Mali. Establishing marketing groups in a women-specific sector has enabled women to become visible as economic actors through producing and selling improved Shea butter and other high-value Shea products. Women’s increased contribution to household incomes has been particularly important as other agricultural activities, particularly cotton-growing, have declined in the Koutiala area and has convinced men in Kaniko of the value of women’s collective activities. As a result, in 2008, with the support of the non-government organisation (NGO) Interco-opération Suisse (Swiss Interco-operation), village leaders agreed to allocate a three-hectare plot of land to the Uyelo association, so that women could plant Shea trees.3

Since 2001, gender equality principles have been enshrined in co-operative law in Mali. The formalisation of the Uyelo Co-operative since 2009, and the support by the NGO, has also allowed the co-operative to establish partnerships with government agencies, NGOs, and commercial buyers. Underlying this, however, is a tradition of informal co-operation and solidarity in Minyanka society, as well as a history of earlier interventions, which have enabled women like Maimouna to acquire skills and take on leadership roles, and have ensured both cohesion and strength as a collective, enabling them to challenge existing gender relations more widely.

Maimouna told researchers that, now, wherever she goes, men listened to her and agreed to attribute two to three hectares to women’s groups for planting Shea trees. She has also noticed that many men have begun to plant Shea trees in their own fields, which is ‘one of my greatest satisfactions in life!’ (interview, Kaniko, Mali, during fieldwork in Koutiala district, 6–12 June 2012). She reported that men in her village now support the women’s Shea co-operative in various ways, and that ‘the village chief says that: “the future is in women’s hands”’ (ibid.).

Increasingly, both states and development organisations are recognising the need to support women producers’ participation in different forms of collective action. From a gender perspective, a focus on women producers working either in their own groups or within mixed producer groups is a priority for many NGOs who focus on gender justice and the empowerment of women, and for governments that have a commitment to gender mainstreaming.

However, there is a lot of literature highlighting potential challenges, as well as benefits, of collective action, particularly in a market context: these include tensions between individual and group interests, and between solidarity and exclusion (e.g. Heyer et al. 2002). Aggregating products and combining efforts in marketing promises greater market reach and capacity for negotiation, as well as economies of scale, for example in transport, but to achieve these benefits requires members to be able to produce a surplus, and contribute resources. Because of the high degree of trust
they entail, marketing groups are often more successful where they build on existing social networks and capital within communities.

For these reasons, organised collectives can exclude poorer, minority, or marginalised groups, who do not meet the membership criteria, or because they are different. Indeed, women have historically been marginalised from formal marketing groups and initiatives aiming to support producers to market their produce, due to widely recognised biases and misconceptions about their economic role in their families, communities, and wider society (Boserup 1970/1997). Such gender biases are as pervasive in marketing as they are in production systems (Harriss-White 2000).

The rest of this article discusses these and other challenges faced by development policymakers and practitioners aiming to support women’s collective action in livelihoods programmes, based on key findings from Oxfam research undertaken into WCA in agricultural markets. 4

The Researching Women’s Collective Action project

Researching Women's Collective Action (RWCA) was a three-year research and learning project (2019–12) which aimed to understand the role of WCA in contributing to women’s incomes, control over assets and economic empowerment, in key agricultural sectors: honey in Ethiopia, Shea butter in Mali, and vegetables in Tanzania. The research asked: which women participate in and benefit from collective action? What are the economic and empowerment benefits for women? How have development actors’ strategies contributed to positive outcomes for women? Oxfam staff worked with country-based research teams and local stakeholders to design and conduct research in areas of Ethiopia, Mali, and Tanzania, where Oxfam has significant investments in market-based agricultural livelihoods programmes.

At each stage of the RWCA project, rural women leaders, representatives of formal producer organisations on the ground, and field staff of government as well as non-government development agencies, were involved, through stakeholder meetings. During these meetings participants helped identify priority sectors for research, provided feedback on preliminary findings, and advised which research questions were most relevant to them, to inform the research. Initial scoping research was carried out from January to May 2011, across a total of 15 sub-sectors making different products, in two regions per country. Based on the preliminary findings from this phase (Baden and Pionetti 2011), specific research questions were finalised, and one region and sub-sector was chosen for in-depth study in each country.

The final phase of field research was carried out in one or two districts of the chosen region in each country between January and June 2012. Researchers employed a mix of qualitative case study and quantitative survey methods to answer the research questions. They gathered data on: the legal and policy context in each country; the market structure and dynamics in each chosen sub-sector; women’s collective action
groups and associated interventions; and individual women – comparing economic and empowerment outcomes for group members with those for non-members active in the same sectors (Vigneri et al. 2013).

Case study evidence was also collected from a total of 14 WCA groups via focus group discussions as well as individual interviews. These were analysed to understand which types of collective action (that is, collectives which were formal versus informal; and mixed-sex versus women-only) work best for women in different contexts and to identify innovative and/or effective strategies of support to WCA by development actors.

In the following sections, findings from the research are discussed, drawing out the factors of success and promising intervention strategies for successful, market-oriented WCA. The next section looks at recent policy as well as grassroots initiatives aimed at promoting women’s participation in market-oriented groups.

**Not just a numbers game: promoting women’s participation in market-based collective action**

The WCA research revealed some key areas where progress was being made to promote women’s participation in market-based collective action.

Women-specific groups can provide a space for women to develop a shared sense of identity and confidence, to identify common interests and provide mutual support (Heyer et al. 2002), and often enable women to engage in a range of livelihoods activities. Informal savings and credit groups are widespread forms of WCA across all three countries involved in our research. They are often an important means for women, especially poorer women, to build up social capital and other assets, as well as skills and confidence. Such groups allow women to experience and become comfortable with other forms of collective action, not least because they provide access to limited capital for engaging in market-based activities or for paying membership fees in formal groups (Oxfam America 2010). However, the WCA research confirms views that there is not an easy transition from informal savings and credit groups to successful women-led agricultural marketing groups (Enria 2011a; Oxfam America 2010). For significant change to occur in women farmers’ livelihoods, groups need to support women members to increase the quantity and quality of their production, to add value to this, and to identify and access markets that are lucrative, to enable them to reap a greater share of the profits from agricultural value chains.

As groups develop marketing activities – and often become more formal as a result – the level of both investment and risk is significantly higher, and poorer women may drop out. Nevertheless, the research confirms that where women have some assets and already have some experience of separate organisation, supporting women-only producer groups can be an effective strategy for development organisations focusing
on gender equality and women’s rights, particularly in sectors that are traditionally women-dominated, to ensure that women retain control over benefits. The research suggests that in sectors where both men and women are economically active – and where access to household land and labour is a prerequisite – such as vegetables in Tanzania – supporting women’s involvement in mixed groups may be more empowering for them.

The importance of supporting women producers to further their interests via mixed-sex organisations is confirmed by recent changes made to co-operatives laws by some African governments, supported by the International Labour Organization and other international actors, to explicitly incorporate principles of gender equality. These – as well as formal targets for women’s participation – can provide a useful framework to promote greater participation by women, but they require action to translate them into meaningful change on the ground.

The WCA case study research identified some grassroots initiatives that are addressing the issue of women’s participation in collective action, with some success. In the West Gojam and Agew Awi zones of Amhara region of Ethiopia, NGOs have worked locally to address barriers to women’s participation in a number of formal honey producer marketing co-operatives on the ground. Since 2005, through their programme in support of honey producer co-operatives in Amhara region, SoS-Sahel had identified female heads of household as a ‘vulnerable group’ and begun targeting them as a way to increase women’s participation in honey co-operatives (Garomsa et al. 2012). In 2007, SoS-Sahel began working with male co-operative members and leaders to enable the adoption of the principle of ‘dual membership’ in co-operative bylaws – meaning both marital partners can be co-operative members, as opposed to the standard one member per household practice (Oxfam WCA focus group discussion, Agunta co-operative, 9 April 2012). SOS-Sahel’s efforts to expand membership to women included provision of training and hives, as well as awareness-raising with male leaders and members of the existing organisation. This, complemented by Oxfam’s organisation of women’s self-help groups from 2010, linked to honey co-operatives in Mecha and Dangila districts (Garomsa et al. 2012), has led to a dramatic increase in their female membership – from 6 to 47 per cent (Oxfam WCA survey data, collected May 2012, Amhara region, Ethiopia).

This case illustrates that women’s active participation in mixed groups requires not only changes to membership rules but proactive targeting of resources to women to bridge gender gaps and the support of male members of the household (Rowlands 1997). Across all three countries, the WCA research found that husbands in particular played a key role in women’s participation in collective action, both positively and negatively. In certain groups in Tanzania and Ethiopia, women readily acknowledged their husband’s support, including helping them free up time to attend meetings, by taking over domestic tasks for a few hours. Tibke Wassie, a member of Serto Menor self-help group, interviewed in Mecha, Ethiopia, asserted that:
The support of my husband and my family is what encouraged me most. [My husband] is always encouraging me not to miss any meeting, particularly self-help group meetings. Every Sunday, I attend a self-help group meeting for two hours, and then I go to church for prayer, which altogether takes four hours. Meanwhile, my children and my husband look after the household: getting water, collecting fuelwood, cooking, making coffee or tea, running some errands. (Oxfam WCA individual interview, Rim village, Mecha district, 22 March 2012)

On the other hand, the WCA research found that some husbands play a negative role: in Mali, it is clearly the husband who gives permission for wives’ participation in collective action groups. Yet there was little indication of the men in these communities taking on responsibility for women’s household chores, to enable their wives’ participation. In fact, the women who were able to participate actively in collective action groups in communities studied in Mali were older married women who had freed themselves from domestic chores, who could ask junior wives or daughters in the household to take these on. While few husbands openly opposed their wives’ participation, researchers heard of a number of cases where women had to drop out of groups because of their husband’s disapproval (Oxfam WCA focus group discussion, Kaniko village, Koutiala district, Mali, during fieldwork 6–12 June 2012). This highlights the crucial importance of understanding household gender relations, how these affect who can participate in collective action, and the implications of women’s participation for other household members.

The next section discusses findings from the research on gender dimensions of group dynamics, and how these affect the benefits that women derive.

Group dynamics, leadership, and the equitable distribution of benefits

Findings from the WCA research confirm that without a critical mass of women members, it is difficult for women members to attain influence in leadership and decision-making in mixed groups. However, our findings confirmed that such a critical mass of female members does not automatically lead to gender-equitable decision-making processes, or to gender-equal outcomes. Neither does having female leaders, who may find that gendered power dynamics undermine their titular leadership, compromising their authority and effectiveness. The following statement from the female Deputy Secretary of one of the groups studied in Tanzania illustrates this:

I have that right [to air my views], but no one listens to me. The current chairperson does not give me support and the opportunity to at least keep records and the keys [which are my responsibilities]. This started after the death of the former chairperson. So in this regard I do not have the power to make decisions. (Oxfam WCA interview with Fudaeli Gibron, ULT-Malindi Deputy Secretary, Lukozi ward, 27 March 2012)
This is illustrated by the experience of ULT-Malindi (Usambara Lishe Trust, Malindi), a vegetable producer and marketing group, which was formed in 1996 in Lushoto district, Tanga region, Tanzania. It is one of four groups affiliated to the ULT umbrella organisation, which markets horticultural produce on behalf of its constituent farmers’ groups, by developing direct market links with high-end outlets in Dar es Salaam. ULT-Malindi is a mixed group, which initially had 16 members (five women and 11 men), and grew to a peak of 82 members (50 women and 32 men).

A participatory timeline analysis with group members revealed that since its inception, ULT-Malindi had successfully secured access to a range of different markets, some of which were new to members; established medium- or long-term relationships with buyers, and negotiated higher payments, leading to important increases in profits for members – that is, until there was a change in leadership and a few members started to attempt to co-opt the group for their own purposes. Some of the group’s leaders, who were comparatively large-scale farmers, started acting as traders for the group and soon ended up ‘grabbing’ most of the market opportunities for themselves. Researchers were told that they had started taking large shares of the orders instead of distributing them equally amongst members. This sub-group of larger-scale farmers was all male, reflecting the tendency for men to control larger plots and equipment.

...the leaders favour themselves. There was a time when members were required to sell 1 kg each while the leaders sold about 100 kg of corn flour. (Focus group discussion with ULT-Malindi female members, Lukozi ward, 27 March 2012)

Women also reported that some men members had started to use their wives’ names to get orders and earn money for themselves, which had not been happening earlier. In other words, men had been appropriating benefits both at group and household level. Given men’s dominance in leadership positions, and their greater power due to the scale of farming operations they controlled, women reported that they have found it difficult to challenge men in the group. This inequity in the distribution of marketing opportunities – and ultimately of economic benefits – within the group led women to be disillusioned. There are now only five women and 13 men members after a change in leadership and deterioration in group dynamics, and women have been struggling to get their produce sold. Many have stopped being active in the group (Mhando and Senga 2012).

The WCA research showed that it is possible to develop strategies that minimise these kinds of conflict by fostering leadership among women. In Ethiopia, members of the women-only self-help groups were also registered as co-operative members, and sold their honey through the co-ops. These groups saved and loaned money to members and rotated the role of group leader among members. This resulted in a sense of shared leadership and mutual accountability, and the skills necessary to lead the groups developed among women who would not otherwise have this opportunity.
This innovative ‘rotational leadership’ put into practice within this women’s self-help group also created the conditions for increasing women’s leadership in mixed co-operatives – at least five women are represented in the Board executive and committees of Agunta co-operative – and a wider recognition of women’s positive contribution within the community (Garomsa et al. 2012).

For NGOs and governments seeking to support gender equality and the empowerment of women, favouring women-only groups may appear an obvious way to ensure this and avoid men assuming control. The WCA research revealed that women producers are well aware that women-only groups can have downsides. They may be missing opportunities for wider support of men in production and marketing, especially for tasks that are usually performed by men (e.g. land preparation, irrigation, looking for new buyers, and transporting goods to more distant markets). Sometimes they respond to this by a pragmatic decision to include one or two men in ostensibly women-only groups. For example, in the Mali research, sometimes one or two men are honorary members of groups, to enable access to village leaders in ways that would have been closed to women. One group was even named after the ‘token’ male member! (Baden and Pionetti 2011). Other benefits of having male members in groups included easier transport of goods to market, due to men’s ability to leave villages and travel more freely because of lower pressures on their time, and lack of cultural restrictions on their movement.

The next section explores the extent to which women participating in groups have experienced changes in their ability to engage directly in markets.

**Does current support to collective action address gender barriers in markets?**

The WCA research investigated women’s experience of barriers to market involvement, and explored which of them are being addressed by current collective action interventions. Overall, groups are clearly helping to some degree to reduce some of the well-known disparities in access to inputs, training, that prevent women from engaging in markets. But due to structural gender inequalities, women are also positioned differently in terms of the type, volume, and quality of the produce they market, the spaces they market in, and their motivations for sales (Harriss-White 2000). The WCA research suggested that current interventions tend to overlook these differences and the related need for specific strategies to increase women’s marketing (as opposed to production) capacity.

Women across the WCA study communities reported in focus group discussions that certain barriers to their engagement in markets were lessened for those involved in groups, compared to women trading individually (Baden and Pionetti 2011). These barriers included low volume, or poor quality, of production. Such barriers were frequently addressed by training in improved production techniques and increased
access to inputs, equipment, or finance to enable women who lack funds to acquire their own equipment. Women discussants also explained that training in business skills and other forms of organisational support had improved their access to information, and enabled links to a wider network of partners. The lack of secure markets for their produce which women experience was overcome via collective action in some sectors, where groups are linked to specialised producer unions or have an established relationship with a particular buyer.

Other constraints to women’s involvement in marketing highlighted by WCA focus group participants are only partly addressed – if at all – through existing interventions. The need to increase women’s access to farm land, to ensure female-controlled produce which they can market independently, by contrast, was not often directly addressed by the collective action groups involved in our research. In Tanzania, the requirement for group members to own land and for individual registration of members has led to some men registering land in women’s names. In Mali, collective action supported by external intervention of an NGO – has been instrumental in enabling women’s groups to negotiate with village authorities to secure access to land for Shea plantations – as explained in the introduction above (Pionetti 2012).

Similarly, while the practice of co-operatives buying goods from villages (e.g. milk in Ethiopia; sesame, tiger nut, millet, and sorghum in Mali) alleviates the challenge faced by women of getting goods to market, in other cases, instances were identified of women co-operating informally at a small scale to get goods to market: through travelling together in groups for safety (Mhando and Senga 2012, 19); pooling produce to give to one person to take to market (vegetables in Ethiopia); or using group savings to pay for transportation of Shea in Mali (Baden and Pionetti 2011).

As highlighted earlier, women’s lack of time and restricted mobility due to family responsibilities remains a barrier to many women engaging in markets as well as in marketing groups. Women’s groups accommodate this more, for example timing their meetings to suit members’ needs including caring responsibilities, since they are more flexible and responsive to women’s needs, but efforts to reduce women’s workload or address social attitudes to enable their effective participation in markets were not, in general, factored into the design of the interventions studied.

In the WCA research in Mali and Tanzania, analysis of survey data showed that the majority of women group members’ sales were not through the groups. Women’s particular need for regular flows of income to enable them to cope with day-to-day household spending means that they may want to sell more regularly or flexibly than group purchasing and marketing arrangements permit; thus they continue to trade individually, particularly in products for which there is high local demand. Even so, sellers received significantly more income from their sales than non-members selling privately. The data also suggested that women who belonged to groups have better access to market information and access a wider range of marketing outlets. They may
also produce higher-quality goods, and have more confidence in negotiating with
buyers (Vigneri et al. 2013).

Contrasting strategies from the WCA case studies in Mali shed light on which had
worked best to enhance women’s engagement with markets. In one case, a man was
put in charge of marketing in women’s co-operatives, but this had obviously limited
women’s opportunities to improve marketing skills. In another case from the Mali
research, support was provided to the local Women’s Union, UFROAT (Union des
Femmes Rurales de l’Afrique de l’Ouest et du Tchad – Union of Rural Women from
West Africa and Chad), thereby developing the Union’s capacity to address issues
faced by its member co-operatives, and aiming to develop marketing skills within
these organisations. UFROAT co-ordinated efforts to support members to shift their
scope and ambitions beyond the local market and reach more distant markets and
urban consumers, who recognised the value of improved Shea butter. Although some
Shea co-operatives still produced more than they could sell, due to limited market
access, this helped groups develop internal capacity to diversify their products,
markets, and networks.

The next section relates findings from the WCA research on the extent to which the
benefits of greater market engagement through WCA described above have wider
implications for gender relations.

Collective action, women’s empowerment, and the wider context of
gender relations

The WCA research found significant economic benefits to women of group participa-
tion across all three countries. However, the degree to which group membership
benefits women producers economically varies widely according to the context, the
sub-sector in which women are working, and the individual characteristics of both the
women themselves and the households to which they belong. In addition, the findings
remind development practitioners and policymakers of the danger of simplistic
assumptions about links between individual economic gains, and wider gains in terms
of either individual or collective empowerment of women.

A common finding from the qualitative research across the three countries is that
women involved in collective action had increased chances of controlling revenues
from the sale of Shea butter, honey, or vegetables. Azmina Omari, a member of the
Gare Horticultural co-operative in Tanzania, commented that:

>You just tell your husband the profit you made from the business but you don’t give him the
money. (WCA interview, Gare ward, Lushoto, Tanzania, 6 March 2012)

However, this increased control did not generally extend to other farm or household
revenues, even though some women interviewed in all three countries testified to the
fact that decision-making has now become more of a joint process (Pionetti 2012). The possibility of increased control of income leading to a shift towards joint decision-making within the household is, of course, influenced by a range of factors, including whether women and men have separate, or ‘joint’ rights over property and income streams, and by the relative share of women’s income contribution.

In Mali, there appeared to be growing recognition of the importance of women’s incomes within the household in a context where men’s incomes from cotton were in decline in the Koutiala Circle of Sikasso, the region of study. This is illustrated by the view of the President of the cotton producers’ co-operative in N’Gountjina, who explained that the men in the village now believe that:

*Women are an invaluable help to men when it comes to household management. So the woman should always be consulted on important decisions relating to the survival and future of the family.* (WCA interview, N’Gountjina village, Koutiala district, Mali, June 2012)

Similarly, women’s participation in groups seems to have influenced wider perceptions at community level: during a focus group discussion with co-operative leadership, a local leader in Rim Kebele, Mecha district in Ethiopia, commented that:

*Compared to non-members, [WCA] members are assertive, can explain their feelings, give ideas, and are punctual and disciplined. Actually, there are many men who are less assertive and participate less than women in the co-operative. There is big gap between [WCA] members and non-members.* (WCA focus group discussion and time line exercise with Meserethiwot co-operative leaders and member, March 2012)

Drawing on the methodology pioneered by the Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index, the WCA quantitative research found less consistent evidence of benefits from group engagement in terms of ‘women’s empowerment’. This underlines the wider understanding that there are huge differences in definitions and understandings of empowerment (Kabeer 1998). Women taking part in collective action have not increased their control over family assets, land, and equipment, or decision-making over all farm revenues, either systematically or significantly, according to this study (Vigneri et al. 2013). A possible explanation for the lack of consistent findings in this area may be – as the earlier sections suggest – that women’s motivation for and capacity to join groups is related to the degree to which they already experience empowerment in different aspects of their lives (Vigneri et al. 2013).

Overall, the impact of women’s collective action in economic activities on gender equality and the individual and collective empowerment of women requires much more in-depth research, as well as careful monitoring. Nevertheless, the WCA research findings support the widespread critique of a current tendency on the part of many governments and other development actors to focus their efforts on the ‘economic empowerment’ of women, and female entrepreneurship, at the expense of activities...
and policies which support gender justice and women’s rights more holistically. Unless broader attempts are also made to address gender inequalities, for example in property and resource rights, and marriage laws and practices, as well as to reduce or redistribute women’s unpaid family labour, these efforts are only likely to benefit a minority of women.

Conclusions: ways forward for more effective and empowering WCA

Development actors, through the formation of and support to groups, and wider policy changes, are beginning to address women’s participation in collective action (both mixed and women-only groups) as a means to tackle gender gaps in women farmers’ access to resources as well as markets. Current interventions, however, do not sufficiently take into account or address gendered barriers in marketing systems and the wider structural inequalities underlying these. To increase the impact of their support to women’s collective action, development policymakers and practitioners need to incorporate awareness of broader gender constraints such as women’s limited access to land, their time poverty, and constraints on their mobility due to social attitudes. Presently, these are rarely factored into interventions supporting women’s collective action.

The research also highlighted the importance of policies governing collective action in agriculture, to embed legal principles of equality and of strategies, and – potentially – targets for implementing these. Wider policy changes can also pose challenges to increasing women’s participation in collective action. The formalisation of collective action along prescribed models (such as marketing co-operatives) can contribute to the marginalisation of poor women, due to fees and other barriers to their participation. Alongside the formalisation of producer groups which offers better-off women the benefits of collective action as markets for their products develop, it is critical that development actors adopt innovative approaches to group formation and allow space for more inclusive, informal groups to flourish alongside formal ones (Enria 2011b).

While a plurality of models is more likely to ensure women are included as participants in collective action, there needs to be co-ordination and co-operation at the local level between the different actors involved in supporting groups. This can mitigate the risk that the more powerful sub-groups in communities capture the greatest share of development resources. Co-ordination is also important in order to minimise the duplication of effort, and to ensure that wider constraints to women’s engagement in collective action – such as land access and transport – can be addressed as effectively as possible. Local government, national ministries of women’s affairs, and co-operative bureaux, as well as NGOs and producer unions, all have important roles to play here.

The WCA research suggested there is no one blueprint for the most effective type of organisation. The most fruitful approach may be consider promoting ‘hybrid’
strategies, which recognise both the importance of women-only spaces to develop solidarity and confidence, and build up women’s assets and capacities, as well as the necessity of engaging with mixed organisations to ensure market reach and benefits. The WCA research has highlighted the importance of these links between informal and formal groups, especially to enable poorer women to participate, develop leadership and organisational skills, and access resources, information, and markets. Participation in informal women-only groups can also be important for women as a mechanism for them to retain control over the earnings from their activities.

Much more attention is required, however, to ensuring that membership rules are inclusive, and to group dynamics and leadership, if women are to benefit equitably. The WCA research suggested that development actors need to have a nuanced understanding of gender composition and power dynamics in groups. It also indicated that they need to put more emphasis on developing women’s capacity for leadership and, more broadly, capacity for gender-equitable and accountable leadership in marketing organisations. The research also highlighted the risk that where women’s groups are successful, in a context of limited resources, men often encroach on previously female activities, highlighting a need for development actors to closely monitor wider market trends, how these may be changing gender roles in agricultural sectors, and, related to this, shifting power dynamics in groups. These power dynamics may require development actors to support women to challenge bias in producer organisations, which leads to men’s particular interests and issues being raised at the expense of women’s (Gonzalez Manchón and MacLeod 2010, 383–385).

Finally, it is a key finding of this research that a narrow focus on economic benefits measured in terms of productivity, income, and sales, for example – is not adequate in considering the outcomes, potential or actual, of interventions supporting women’s collective action in markets. Some benefits are linked to improved production methods and improved market relations leading to higher returns (as evidenced in the case of honey), or to secured markets (very important in the case of perishable items, as the WCA research showed in the case of vegetables in Tanzania). However, profits from sales may not be the only or even most significant outcome for women. The flexibility to sell individually (or in informal groupings) in the local market remains attractive to women in terms of meeting immediate cash needs or selling products not purchased by the co-operative. This shows the need to understand in depth the different ways in which women use existing marketing channels, as a precondition for intervention. It also suggests that group sales may not always be either the best entry point, or even a necessary feature of market-oriented collective action that benefits women. Enhanced knowledge, networking, and strengthened social capital, as well as the potential for shared services such as transport or storage, should not be overlooked or underestimated. Yet other benefits have to do with factors like social support, increased influence over decisions, and group influence at community level (as in Mali).
or – more fundamentally – a transformation in perceptions of women’s economic role in market systems (Pionetti 2012).

These conclusions suggest a need for further research, to understand the mechanisms whereby collective action contributes to women’s empowerment (political and social, collective as well as individual) in different contexts. They also underline the considerable potential for further innovation to ensure that current development efforts in support of market-oriented collective action are, in reality as well as rhetoric, contributing towards transformative change for rural women.

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Notes

1 The Minyanka are the majority ethnic group in the area where the WCA research was carried out in Mali.

2 Shea butter is a yellowish fat extracted from the kernel of the Shea nut, which is a product of the African Shea tree (Vitellaria paradoxa). This tree grows profusely in the wild in savannah regions of West Africa, including southern Mali. Shea butter is edible and has been used for a long time in food preparation in Africa and for medicinal and other household purposes in West Africa (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shea_butter, last checked by the author April 2013). Traditionally, Shea nuts are collected and processed by women from trees over which they have recognised use rights. In recent years, demand for Shea butter has grown for use in cosmetics and chocolate production, requiring a higher quality of processing. This demand has stimulated a large number of development interventions supporting ‘improved’ butter production and marketing among women in Mali and elsewhere in the region, via training and improved processing technology.

3 In Koutiala, as elsewhere in southern Mali, few women have secure access to land in their own right. Most women only have access to land via small plots allocated to them by men in their households, or in agreement with village authorities, who have the power to allocate land (Dembélé 2012).

4 This research is documented at greater length in Baden (2013). To download a copy of the full report, and other research outputs, see http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/womens-collective-action-unlocking-the-potential-of-agricultural-markets-276159 (last checked by the author April 2013). See also http://womenscollectiveaction.com/Overview#keyresources for access to all project outputs including all unpublished reports that are cited in the reference list of this article (last checked by the author April 2013).
Sectors were identified where: women are economically active, and have some capacity to control benefits from the activity; there are significant and expanding market opportunities; and collective action is occurring within the value chain.

‘Vulnerability’ of female-headed households cannot be automatically assumed – although policymakers and practitioners often use this term. See, for example, Chant (2003) for a detailed discussion.

A critical mass for this purpose has often been estimated as around one-third female membership (Goetz 1995).

Usambara Lishe is a Swahili name. Usambara is the name of the mountain range in Lushoto area of Tanga region in Tanzania. Lishe means nutrition.

The Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) was developed by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Institute in collaboration with the International Food Poverty Research Institute at the initiative of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) as a tool to assess the progress of USAID’s ‘Feed the Future’ programmes in contributing to women’s empowerment. Launched in March 2012, the WEAI tracks women’s engagement in agriculture in five areas: production, resources, income, leadership, and time use. It also measures women’s empowerment relative to men within their households, providing a more robust understanding of gender dynamics within households and communities. In the Oxfam WCA research, aspects of this methodology were used and adapted in order to assess whether collective action participation empowers women in groups, versus those not in groups. For more details on the WEAI, see: www.ophi.org.uk/policy/national-policy/the-womens-empowerment-in-agriculture-index/. For more details on how Oxfam adapted the methodology, see Vigneri et al. (2013).

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