

Women in Agricultural Co-Operatives for Poverty Alleviation in Mpumalanga Province: Challenges, Strategies and Opportunities

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Abstract: The study analysed the success of cooperatives in alleviating poverty amongst female headed household who are part of cooperatives within Mpumalanga Province. The Department of Rural Development and Land Reform introduced the one household one hectare and one household two dairy cows programme in 2016 in line with the Agri-Parks initiative meant to achieve rural economic transformation. All the three districts within Mpumalanga Province (Gert Sibande, Nkangala and Ehlanzeni) were targeted beneficiaries. Cooperatives have potential to increase rural women purchasing power to meet market demands and bargaining power. They are drivers of women's economic development in the rural sphere, however there are challenges such as low literacy levels which limit them to understand market information, lack of agricultural inputs, access to markets and gender dynamics. This is a desk top analysis of agricultural cooperatives within the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform's ability to alleviate or eradicate poverty amongst women. Information was gathered from the department's reports on cooperatives and also on the extensive literature on the ability of agricultural cooperatives to alleviate poverty. The study discovered that the majority of women benefited from accessing land through cooperatives, are able to secure food security at household and community levels.

Keywords: Agriculture, Cooperatives, Land, Poverty, Women

1. Introduction

Post 1994, the African National Congress being the ruling party had the political mandate of creating a land reform programme to address land disparities in South Africa. Three motivations led to the development of the land reform programme which was to foster reconciliation and stability, promote economic growth as well as the reduction of poverty especially at household level. The country's land reform programme was thus market-based as it was based on upholding and protecting private property ownership and at the same time expropriating land when necessary through the payment of market-related prices (Walker, 1998; Sebola & Tsheola, 2014). The allocation of land happens within the space and limit of public administration practice in a country.

South Africa just like many other countries ratified laws that deals with the prevention of discrimination against women such as the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Gender and Development Protocol adopted in 2008. The Comprehensive Rural Development

Programme (CRDP) as a strategy for rural development was approved by the Minister of Rural Development and Land Reform in 2009. The CRDP strategy aims at driving agrarian reform with the aim of establishing rural business initiatives, agro-industries and cooperatives in villages and rural towns. It is in line with the CRDP strategy that the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform introduced the one hectare one household and one household two dairy cows programme in 2016 in line with the Agri-Parks initiative by the department meant to achieve rural economic transformation (DRDLR, 2015). All the three districts within Mpumalanga Province, namely: Gert Sibande, Nkangala and Ehlanzeni districts were targeted where households had access to one hectare of land for cultivation or one hectare of land and two dairy cows. The idea of the cows is that they should provide milk for a family. In most instances cooperatives were already in existence even though some were not functional due to lack of inputs. In areas where there were no cooperatives, families and communities were then encouraged to form such. The formation of cooperatives is a poverty reduction strategy meant for improving household food security (Republic of South Africa, 2016).

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the cultural feminism theory which is an ideology that attempts to revalue undervalued female attributes. It is a theory that commends the differences of women and men. The theory emerged in the mid 1970's where it exposed women's oppression in gendered constructions that devalue feminine attributes. Cultural feminism seeks to understand women's social locations in society by concentrating on gender differences between women and men. This theory of feminism commends the positive aspects of what of the female character or feminine personality. Cultural feminism is a variety of feminism which emphasizes essential differences between men and women, based on biological differences in reproductive capacity. The liberation of women can only come through individual change where women recognise and create of women-centered culture, and the redefinition of femininity and masculinity (Bingham *et al.*, 2009; Alcoff, 1988). This paper intends analyzing women's access to land and how that assists them in alleviating poverty at household and community level.

3. Cooperative Defined

A co-operative is defined as "*an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise*" (ILO, 2002; Njoku *et al.*, 2003). Co-operatives enforce social inclusion, political and economic empowerment of members, especially women. They have a potential to assist rural women to have purchasing power and thus meet market demands, this give them bargaining power. Women are able to share labour and accomplish more in a short space of time. Co-operatives are drivers of women's economic development in the rural sphere (Republic of South Africa, 2012-2022). Co-operatives play a role in ensuring food security in the rural sphere. Food security is defined as "*When all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life*" (World Food Summit, 1996).

4. Women and Cooperatives

Agricultural cooperatives have the ability to promote the participation of women in economic

production since women seem to work well when they are together because they are able to organize themselves in an effort to assist one another. This assists government, communities and women themselves in securing food security in the rural sphere. Through co-operatives, women are able to provide a network of mutual support to overcome cultural restrictions. This is evident in the South African culture where women form groups called "ilima" or "letsema" to assist each other in planting, harvesting and storing of food. Women are able to increase their productivity and income by collectively negotiating better prices for inputs like fertilizer, seeds, transport and storage through cooperatives. It is through cooperatives that women are able to access markets (Republic of South Africa, 2010; Woldu *et al.*, 2015). Cooperatives create safe spaces for women to build their own social solidarity and problem solving capacity as they feel accepted and understood by their own unlike if they were in mixed cooperatives with men who do not necessarily have to deal with reproductive work.

Women who own land can access capital and other resources such as extension services to assist them with their farming activities (Kameri-Mbote, 2005). Land can help elevate the status of women in communities and help shape them as agricultural producers. It has been confirmed by several studies that there is a relationship between access to land and lowered incidences of violence against women. When women have access to land, there is reported improvement of families' nutrition, education of children from families that own land, decrease in fertility rates and bargaining powers by women within a home environment (UNECA, 2007; Gomez & Tran, 2012).

5. Challenges Faced by Women Within Cooperatives

Even though women play a significant role in the production of food around the world, it is said that few women have access to land (Lorber, 2010; UN, 2012). Agricultural cooperatives play a role in poverty reduction and rural development. Despite the ability of cooperatives to enhance the position of women with regard to poverty alleviation, most cooperatives still face challenges. Below are some of the challenges faced by women in cooperatives and how the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform assist women to deal with their challenges.

5.1 Low Literacy Levels

Membership in cooperatives is predominantly constituted by the elderly and women with low literacy levels. Low literacy levels have an impact on capacity building and this is one of the serious constraints limiting the success of women cooperatives. This is because the inability of cooperative members to read and write has the ability to weaken management, governance and business skills in cooperatives. The low literacy levels are hindrance since it makes it impossible for women to understand market information such as consumer preferences, marketing strategies, standards and market requirements. The knowledge of processes and legislation regarding market information acts as a barrier for most women. Technology such as computers which women use to access market information, are not easily available for rural women (Okwu & Umoru, 2009; Mehra & Rojas, 2008; Roney *et al.*, 2011; World Bank, FAO, IFAD, 2009; AfDB, 2015; Mawazo & Kisangiri, 2015). Low literacy levels amongst women has the ability to make women fail to negotiate contracts and thus rely on middlemen or agents (Mehra & Rojas, 2008; Hill & Vigneri, 2009; Okwu & Umoru, 2009; Mawazo & Kisangiri, 2015). Using middlemen is very costly for women as it affects profit and has a tendency of making women vulnerable to exploitation (Doss *et al.*, 2012). The majority of the women within cooperatives established and supported by the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform have low literacy levels which supports what literature asserts about rural women's low literacy levels.

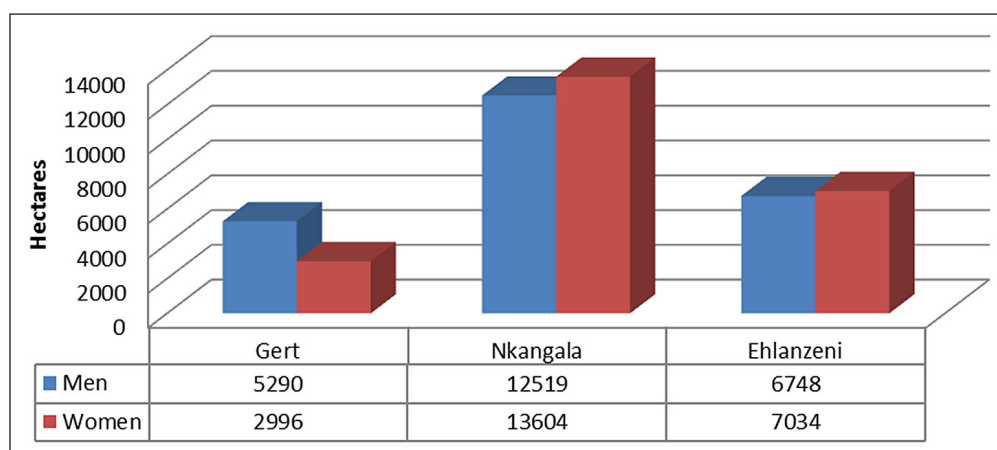
5.2 Access to Agricultural Inputs

Within the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform all the cooperatives have benefitted from recapitalisation programme in the amount of close to R800m for the purchasing of farm implements such as tractors, ploughs, seeds, fertilizers and other production inputs (DRDLR, 2017). The recapitalization programme assists with purchasing the capital assets and mechanization required for the farm to produce at its maximum potential capacity. This makes it easier for women within cooperatives to utilize the hectares of land bestowed to them. In cooperatives that are in close proximity, implements bought through the recapitalisation programme are shared. Women also need information on new technologies and systems to increase their produce (Prakash, 2003; Steinzor, 2003; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005; Collett & Gale, 2009; World Bank,

2012). Technology is useful in assisting women to access markets and also network within value chains. Women struggle to move from being subsistence farmers to commercial farming because they still depend on old farming techniques and outdated technology which do not help them increase their yields at the same level and speed as their male counterparts. According to Ishemo & Bushell (2017), access to capital has the ability to enable women within cooperatives to buy implements and move from subsistence farming to commercial farming. The lack of access to agricultural inputs makes it impossible for women to meet the requirements of producing good quality products fit for markets (Okwu & Umoru, 2009; World Bank *et al.*, 2009; OECD, 2007; Grassi *et al.*, 2015).

5.3 Access to Markets for Goods and Food Distribution

Majority of the women led cooperatives have no access markets. Access to agricultural markets by rural women has the ability to reduce poverty, malnutrition and ensure food security in rural communities. Cooperative members only sell their vegetables at local markets. The drawback about local markets however is that they do not encourage competitive profit but instead emerging farmers loose profit because they are forced to sell at low prices due to stiff competition and the highly perishable nature of their goods. Most of the time their goods spoil, leading to wastage and thus loss of profit due to lack of storage facilities in rural areas. The Department of Rural Development and Land Reform has identified a strategy called agri-parks model which is aimed at revitalizing rural economies in order to assist farmers to access markets. Agri-parks are agri-hubs which will stimulate economic growth both at provincial and national levels which will boost employment, food security and reducing poverty. They will also serve as both supply and market centers in the local environment. Agri-parks have been identified as the vehicle that will kick-start rural economic transformation and encourage growth of the smallholder farming sector, an area that has seen slow growth due to a lack of resources, including markets for the sale of produce, livestock, skills and infrastructure. It is envisaged that the creation of agri-parks will breathe new life into South Africa's rural areas, revitalise small towns, increase employment and contribute to food security (DRDLR, 2015). Markets are defined as places where producers buy agricultural inputs, sell products and use income for stuff

Figure 1: Land Allocation According to Gender

Source: Authors

like non-agricultural products to buy food requirements for consumption (Baden, 1998; IFAD, 2003). Access to agricultural markets by rural women has the ability to reduce poverty, malnutrition and ensure food security in rural communities. Markets are said to be male dominated because according to Baden (1998:20) and UNIDO (2013), men frame the rules regarding access to markets to suit their needs which unintentionally excludes women.

5.4 Gender Equality within Mixed Cooperatives

Socialisation determines household division of labour. There are responsibilities for men and women which are determined by one being female and male. This kind of socialisation reinforces the position of women as inferior. There is a need for women to have enhanced influence over household decision-making, especially over household division of labour and the use of household income. According to perused literature on the gender division of labour at household level, reproductive roles performed by women disadvantages them because these roles are not seen as important and hence relegated to women whilst productive roles are relegated to men. Customary practices relegate reproductive roles like taking care of the family, fetching of firewood, water, taking care of the sick, attending community engagements like funerals, to women. These roles are important but do not have financial value placed on them unlike productive roles like making decisions about what crops to plant, access to the markets, profit made from sale of crops, which are assigned to men. It thus becomes important that the gender division of labour in the household does not disadvantage women and make it difficult for them to participate in the broader economy (Brown, 1994;

Reeves & Baden, 2000; Prakash, 2003; ECA, 2004; Blackden *et al.*, 2006; UN, 2009; World Bank, 2012). Access to resources like land, credit and education by women has an influence on how household labour is divided. It improves women's bargaining powers both within the house and outside. Better educated women are said to have more bargaining and decision-making powers than women with low literacy levels (Brown, 1994; Argawal, 1997; Marks *et al.*, 2009; Rao, 2012; Domingo, 2013; Murugani *et al.*, 2014). Issues of gender equality within mixed cooperatives cannot be ignored as it remains a challenge. Gender issues may act as obstacles for women's active participation within cooperatives. These are often rooted in socio-cultural norms at the community and household levels and thus spill over into the functioning of cooperatives. Since men are regarded as heads of households and are recognized as such by law and custom, chances of them dominating cooperatives whilst relegating women to be on the periphery is very high. Male dominance has the ability to weaken women's self-confidence, resulting in women seldom reaching prominent positions in mixed cooperatives.

6. Results and Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that the majority of women have accessed land through the one household one hectare (1hh1ha) programme. In total, all the three districts were allocated 48 191 hectares of land through the one hectare one household strategy, which was accessed by 47 761 households. Below is a column chart indicating land allocation district (DRDLR, 2017).

Figure 1 above denotes that women do have access to land within the Department of Rural Development

and Land Reform. A majority of women who had access to land through the one household one hectare (1hh1ha) programme are said to be heads of households (DRDLR, 2017) and this means that they are able to cater for the nutritional needs of their children in the absence of the traditional heads of households who are traditionally regarded as men. Since according to perused literature poverty has a female face (Bridge, 2001; Moghadam, 2005; Harrington & Chopra, 2010), for women, having access to land through the 1hh1ha strategy mean they are able to alleviate poverty and hunger within their families. South Africa is a signatory to international instruments with regard to gender equality, having women headed households access land is in line with the Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which was ratified by the country in 1979. Article 14 of CEDAW is more relevant to rural women and their access to land. It also addresses issues that have a bearing on the inability of women to access land or property such as education and training, economic advantages with regard to agrarian reform as well as modern marketing facilities and technology. Article 14 obliges states to:

"Take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas in order to ensure on the basis of equality of men and women that they participate in and benefit from rural development" (CEDAW, 1979).

The highest number of women who accessed land through the 1hh1ha programme are within the Nkangala district where they accessed 13604 hectares, followed by Ehlanzeni with 7034 and the least being Gert Sibande with 2996. In total women accessed 23634 hectares when compared to men who accessed 24557, which then means that there was an almost equal access to land between men and women (DRDLR, 2017/18).

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Cooperatives are drivers of women's economic development in the rural sphere because they are a vehicle for social inclusion, political and economic empowerment of women. The intention of the study was to analyse the success of cooperatives in alleviating poverty amongst female headed household who are part of cooperatives within Mpumalanga Province. According to the findings of the study, a majority of women have had access to land through

the one household one hectare (1hh1ha) programme especially in Nkangala and Ehlanzeni districts. Due to the increasing number of female headed households, a majority of women were allocated 48 191 hectares of land which was accessed by 47 761 households which are female headed. The study indicates that a majority of women benefited from accessing land through cooperatives, are able to secure food security at household and community levels. The United Nation's Committee on World Food Security refers to food security as a condition where "all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient and safe nutritious food that means their food preference and dietary needs for an active and healthy life". By having access to one hectare of land then means that women are able to plant crops of their own choices to meet the nutritional needs of their families. Based on the literature surveyed in this paper on agricultural cooperatives as a poverty alleviation strategy for women within Mpumalanga Department of Rural Development and Land Reform, the following recommendations are put forward:

- **Encourage women to participate in cooperatives:** Cooperatives seems to be one of the successful strategies that allow a large number of women to access land and thus create food security for women headed households. Besides empowering women with enhanced skills and improved access to productive resources such as land and capital, it seems like women feel safe in women-only groups where there is a tacit shared understanding of women's difficulties, grievances and strengths.
- **Link women to markets:** The advantage of women cooperatives is that women will be able to buy agricultural inputs and sell their commodities as a collective which also gives them bargaining powers. This also assists them in meeting market demands in terms of quantities needed by markets. It is recommended that the branch Rural Enterprise and Industrial Development within the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform work hard in linking cooperatives to markets.
- **Strengthening gender roles and relations:** Mainstreaming gender within cooperatives has the ability to ensure that both women and men command equal respect for each other's opinion and space. Getting the mainstreaming right may also impact positively on their

relationships both at work and at the household level. Mainstreaming gender within cooperatives also strengthen gender equality and women's active participation in mixed cooperatives.

- **Align women's literacy levels to extension services:** Most of the women who have accessed land within the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform through the one hectare one house household strategy have low literacy levels. The majority of them have never been to school and are pensioners. It is thus recommended that trainings be tailor-made for women in order to make trainings or programmes suit the educational levels.

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