

# A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND FOOD SECURITY IN NICARAGUA



Agriculture is the main livelihood for most of the people residing in the department of Matagalpa, Nicaragua. Residents grow a range of crops that are either consumed in the household or sold on the market. Coffee and cocoa are particularly important commercial crops. However, 46.3 percent of the population in Matagalpa and 59 percent of the population of Pancasán live in extreme poverty. Men and women farmers are using outdated production techniques and lack the economic resources and technical knowledge to increase agricultural output. In addition, soil degradation and the loss of soil fertility have aggravated the effects of climate change.

Many families are unable to meet their basic needs through agriculture and struggle with food insecurity. The average family needs 10-25 quintals of beans and 20-25 quintals of corn per year to satisfy their most basic food needs, but farmers in Pancasán only produce seven quintals of beans and 19 quintals of corn per year. Very few alternative income-generating opportunities are available, which means that families are also unable to purchase food when yields are insufficient.

In 2013, Lutheran World Relief (LWR) and its partner the Asociación para la Diversificación y el Desarrollo Agrícola Comunal (ADDAC) came together to design an innovative project that would target agricultural development and food insecurity with interventions that adopt a gender perspective. Working in cooperation with the local cooperative, Flor de Pancasán, and targeting 409 members (143 women and 266 men), the project

## PROJECT DETAILS

**TITLE:** Production Development and Food Security – with a Gender Focus – for Members of the Flor de Pancasán Cooperative in 15 Communities of the Municipality of Matigüas

**DATES:** May 2013 – April 2016

**DONOR:** Foods Resource Bank

**LOCATION:** Flor de Pancasán, Matigüas, Nicaragua

is aimed at increasing coffee and cocoa production, diversifying agricultural production units and strengthening the cooperative in ways that provide the best opportunities for the benefit of both men and women members.

## TARGETING GENDER INEQUALITIES THROUGH POLICY AND PRACTICE

The needs assessment conducted prior to designing the project identified differences in men's and women's participation in the cooperative and the household. Differences existed in the benefits men and women members receive via the cooperative and in their knowledge of agriculture and marketing opportunities. The cooperative's policies resulted in unequal access to the services it provides to its members. Women did not have the same

access as men when it comes to the services provided by the cooperative - credit, training, marketing and technical assistance, just to name a few. For example, only 30 percent of women members were able to access credit. Furthermore, while 45 percent of the women members attended cooperative meetings, women were underrepresented in many of the cooperative's decision-making bodies.

At the household level, men were found to have more control over the resources that could be used to guarantee the food security of their families. For example, men controlled 42 percent of the income, compared to women who managed 33 percent of the income.<sup>1</sup> In households where there are additional off-farm income-generating activities, the large majority of those were managed by men.

To address these inequalities, LWR, ADDAC and the Flor de Pancasán cooperative are working to address gender issues at two different levels - within the cooperative and within the household.

- At the cooperative level, Flor de Pancasán has revised its policies so that all of its members are treated equitably. A gender policy to strengthen the cooperative's support of its women members has recently been approved. The policy identifies a number of challenges that women face in becoming more active and productive members of the cooperative, including their limited access to land and credit. The policy introduces new special mechanisms for women to access credit, such as accepting other forms of collateral besides land and favoring their access to credit to purchase or rent land. As a result of the new policy, women who access credit also benefit from lower interest rates.
- At the household level, Gender Champions conduct workshops for community members to discuss constraints men and women face. Workshops with cooperative members and their families address issues of masculinity, gender roles and relations, and household and farm decision-making.

Although both men and women are participating in the workshops, the number of men participating has been higher than the number of women. For example, **60 MEN AND 55 WOMEN** participated in a recent workshop on men's and women's contributions to the household economy, and **86 MEN AND 52 WOMEN** attended a workshop on men's and women's gender roles on farms. While women often have time constraints which limit their ability to attend these events, men's participation rates are surprisingly high given that in this region gender issues are often equated with women's issues.



**THE FLOR DE PANCASÁN COOPERATIVE** was established in 2006 and unites/connects small producers from 16 neighboring communities in the municipalities of Matiguás, Muy Muy and San Ramón. The mission of the Cooperative is to promote gender equity and business-oriented development using innovative technologies to protect the environment and improve the socio-economic capacity of its members. The Cooperative works with its members to improve productivity of agricultural products ranging from coffee and cocoa to staple grains. In 2014, the cooperative obtained UTZ certification for its cocoa, becoming the first cooperative in the country to receive this certification. UTZ certification indicates that business practices of the cooperative support sustainable farming, and protect the environment while also guaranteeing no child labor was used in the production of their coffee, cocoa or tea.

These activities have catalyzed a new dialogue on gender relations. The project participants report that women's work is being recognized more openly. For example, one of the exercises used during these workshops has participants calculate the operating costs of the farm. These costs are now calculated using both paid and unpaid contributions to the farm. In addition, women's indirect contributions, for example preparing food for farm workers, is also being included into the overall operating cost of the farm. In this way, men are becoming more aware of how women are contributing to the farm operations and women report that these trainings have lead them to start valuing their own contributions more. Both men and women report that because of the trainings, they are more aware of as well as more appreciative of their respective gender roles in the home.

<sup>1</sup> In 12 percent of households, income is managed by children and in another 12 percent, men and women report jointly managing the income.



## INCREASING YIELDS

Yields in Matiguás are low. Farmers use outdated agricultural technology and poor cultivation practices, and extreme seasonal weather contributes to decreased production. Many farmers are only farming one crop, which makes them highly susceptible to risk and causes soil degradation. Women farmers in Pancasán are especially vulnerable to these issues, as they have less access to training, inputs, land and credit, and do not participate in household or agricultural decision-making.

Trainings offered via the Flor de Pancasán cooperative are introducing new crops and agricultural techniques to members. Members also participate in trainings on coffee and cocoa crop management. **21 MEMBERS** (14 men and seven women) received training in coffee management and **41 MEMBERS** (32 men and nine women) participated in cocoa management trainings. The low participation of women in these trainings is a challenge for the project. One reason for this low participation is that women do not feel they are owners of coffee or cocoa plots and do not participate in the marketing of these crops. Women explain that because they are not involved in the decision-making on the income received from the sales of these crops, they also do not perceive the income from the crops as benefitting the family directly. This is despite their participation in the harvest and their role in preparing food for seasonal workers. Nonetheless the cooperative is making efforts to increase women's participation in technical trainings. For example, in the next round, timing of the trainings was changed to the afternoon, which was more convenient for women and thus allowed more women to attend. In addition, gender champions are visiting families and leading discussions with the communities and the cooperative's technical team to raise awareness about the importance of women's participation in productive activities.

Notably, cocoa yields have increased from 8.7 quintals per unit (approximately 1.72 acres) in 2012 to **10.8 QUINTALS** per unit in 2013, for both men and women farmers, with a higher percentage of yield increase achieved by women than men.

## DIVERSIFYING PRODUCTION

Farmers in the area also grow crops that are either consumed in the household or sold. Maize and beans are among the most common crops and make up a significant portion of people's diets. While most men and women know that vegetables and fruits are a good source of vitamins and minerals, few are growing horticultural crops. To improve food

security and diversify diets, the project is introducing new crops and encouraging farmers to grow a wider range of crops.

Women beneficiaries have been especially pleased with workshops related to staple grains. This is likely because they have more control over these crops, which they use for household consumption, than they do over coffee and cocoa. Men and women are being trained on grain and livestock production, use of native seeds, post-harvest handling and farm planning. Men and women members are diversifying their crops and beginning to see higher yields. They have increased the number of crops they are growing from two or three to approximately seven or eight.

In addition, the project is also introducing and upgrading irrigation infrastructure. Access to water is extending the availability of land for crop production over more months out of the year. The irrigation schemes also provide drinking water to the municipality of Matiguás' community. Water harvesting techniques benefit women and children who are primarily responsible for collecting water for household activities, like washing.

## ENHANCING FOOD SECURITY

With the increase in cocoa production and diversification of crops for both men and women, members of Flor de Pancasán have been able to generate more yields and income. These gains have been aided by infrastructure upgrades, for example water-harvesting and irrigation systems which have been introduced in the area.

Introduction of irrigation and adoption of new agricultural techniques also means farmers are able to produce more throughout the year. As a result, farm families have sufficient food for longer periods of the year. The project expects yields to continue to increase as farmers continue to diversify crops and production methods, and for gender relations to become more equitable as the cooperative and the Gender Champions continue to work with members and their households.

This project is a part of Learning for Gender Integration, an initiative of Lutheran World Relief to ensure that men and women have equal opportunities to benefit from LWR's work. The goal of the initiative is to enable LWR to better contribute to full human flourishing through gender-integrated programming. LGI projects are funded by LWR and the Foods Resource Bank. The initiative is also supported by Cultural Practice, LLC.