

# Digital Green's Video-based Extension Approach in Ethiopia: Promises for Gender Inclusive Extension

Gashaw T. Abate,<sup>a</sup> Tanguy Bernard,<sup>b,c</sup> Simrin Makhija,<sup>b</sup> and David J. Spielman<sup>b1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *International Food Policy Research Institute, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*; <sup>b</sup> *International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, DC, USA*; <sup>c</sup> *LAREFI, University of Bordeaux*

## Introduction

Despite women's extensive involvement in most aspects of agricultural production, the general view widely held in Ethiopia remains that farming is an essentially masculine subject and women engage little in either farming or decision-making on farming matters (Gella and Tadele 2014; Frank 1999). As a result of this cultural perception, Ethiopia's extension system is not impartial with respect to gender. Women's access to agricultural extension services is low, extension agents are predominantly male, and extension agents direct their advisory services to male farmers. These issues are further constrained by issues related to the limited mobility of women in certain communities and geographies, cultural sensitivities about (male) extension agents providing advice to women farmers, and other such concerns (Mogues et al. 2009). These constraints are well-established in both academic literature and practical development experiences related to Ethiopia, and present an important challenge for the government's efforts to strengthen extension service provision and increase agricultural productivity in the country.

This brief note documents the potential offered by a recent intervention designed by Digital Green and its partners that uses women's groups to link extension agents with women farmers. The intervention makes specific use of video-based dissemination sessions with women's groups to provide information about new agricultural technologies and practices. These women's groups are typically groups with membership that corresponds to membership in male development groups, such that dissemination sessions reach both spouses of the same household. This note aims to answer whether the participation of both the male household head and its female spouse affect adoption decisions and the way in which technology or practice is used.

## The intervention

As indicated above, there is an important gender gap in access to agricultural extension services in Ethiopia due mainly to cultural barriers and the lack of incentives for reaching female farmers. Under current structures in the extension system, extension agents are required to reach members of development groups who are mainly male household heads. A development group is an informal administrative structure below the kebele level that comprises about 25-30 farm households and is routinely used as a forum to discuss local development agendas including new agricultural technologies and practices.

Together with IFPRI, Digital Green designed and implemented an intervention that included the participation of female household heads and female spouses of male household heads in the video-based extension system being introduced in the country. The intervention was specifically designed to disseminate videos on agricultural technologies and practices to members of development groups (who are mainly male household heads) *and* their spouses. Disseminations were done separately for male and

---

<sup>1</sup> We are thankful to colleagues at Digital Green, Tadele Fayso in particular for his crucial support during the field work. All errors are our own.

female participants, but were typically conducted on the same day and did allow for female household heads to participate in either of the video dissemination sessions.

The intervention was rolled out to approximately 135 randomly selected kebeles (excluding the 67 kebeles where only members of the development groups were trained and the 151 control kebeles) across the four main regions—Amhara, Oromia, SNNP, and Tigray. Within the kebeles, the intervention reached the members of 10 randomly selected male development groups and their spouses. The videos were produced and disseminated following the Digital Green approach—featuring local farmers, using pre-existing group structure, and based on a human mediated learning model—and focused on main production activities (i.e. planting, weeding, fertilizer application) of major crops that farmers cultivate in the locality. This video-based approach is a shift away from standard extension practice in which extension agents conduct trainings at kebele-level farmer training centers (FTCs) and make occasional visits to individual farmers or local groups.

The main goals of the intervention were to increase women’s participation in agricultural extension provision and understand whether the adoption and proper use of agricultural technologies and practices increases when *both* spouses in a single household participate in the learning process. While quantitative measurement of the intervention’s impacts is still under development, this note discusses initial qualitative observations from focus group discussions and key-informant interviews conducted with development group members, women groups, extension agents, and subject matter specialists in four selected districts of SNNP and Tigray regions during November 2016. Approximately 50 people<sup>2</sup> were interviewed as part of this qualitative analysis.

## Main Observations

*Women’s participation in agriculture.* In stark contrast to the common social and cultural construct that farming is a man’s job, the vast majority of informants (including members of the primarily male development groups) indicated that women take an active role in agricultural activities ranging from production harvesting, threshing, processing storage, to marketing. This was found to be the case not only for women who were household heads (i.e., female-headed households) but also female spouses of male-headed households. Nonetheless, most of the discussants agreed that assigning the identity of “farmer” to women was controversial because of their limited involvement in primary (and more symbolic) farming operations such as ploughing or tilling, despite the fact that women do take part in most other farming activities.

*Participation in agricultural extension meetings prior to Digital Green’s intervention.* Our observations confirm the view that the perceived gender division of agricultural activities has considerably constrained women’s access to extension services. Discussions with women’s groups clearly indicates that women’s participation in agricultural extension meetings is low. Women reportedly participate in few agricultural extension meetings and when they do participate, those meetings mostly relate to poultry production and home gardening. This was corroborated by the extension agent and subject matter specialists. In short, women farmers’ interactions with the extension system is limited to topics that are conventionally viewed as being in the “domain of women.”

*Women’s experience with video based extension.* Although the participation of women in agricultural extension trainings or meetings prior to the Digital Green’s intervention were found to be low, we

---

<sup>2</sup> All participants in focus group discussions and key informant interviews provided their informed consent to participate in this study, in accordance with IFPRI’s requirements for human subjects’ research.

queried women on their impressions of video-based extension compared to the conventional extension practices. Feedback from these discussions indicated that the two approaches differ significantly in terms of participation rates, delivery methods, and their ability to induce farmers to trial or adopt the technology or practice being promoted.

- (i) **Participation rate.** Women respondents indicated that conducting video screenings in their neighborhood in development groups increased both attendance and the participation by women. It was indicated that the approach reduced travel time and mobility challenges associated with attending training sessions at an FTC. While the majority of women appreciated the idea of organizing video sessions for women's groups, only a few of the women respondents were open to mixed group, and only if the group size remained small.
- (ii) **Delivery method.** The video-based method of delivery was appreciated by all of the participants. The visual aspect, featuring farmers in general and in some cases women supporting their spouses, and the focus on specific technologies or practices, were specially mentioned by women's groups. The visual presentation helped them to better understand and imitate the technologies and practices. It also addressed the challenges that women often face in understanding new technologies or practices that require basic literacy and numeracy. They also noted that the use of local characters in the videos provided a sense of trust in the information being provided. They indicated that they felt more confidence in information provided by fellow (i.e., similar) farmers than any other party, and are easily able to receive, trust, accept, and materialize extension messages from fellow farmers.

However, some indicated that the featured farmer should not be "too local" or from the same village; rather, there was a preference for featured farmers from neighboring kebeles. This may be an indication of a positive heterophily effect on information provision, and may relate to well-documented effect of weak ties in reaching and persuading individuals than strong ties (Granovetter 1973).

Finally, women respondents appreciated the fact that the video dissemination tended to stay focused on the topic at hand and avoided unrelated discussions and announcements—something they commonly experienced in FTC based trainings. This focus considerably increased their interest in the video-based extension approach.

- (iii) **Inducing adoption.** The focus group discussants (members of development groups and the corresponding women's groups) and key informants (extension agents and subject matter specialists) unanimously indicated that the video-based extension approach induced more trialing of the technology or practice screened in the video than the conventional extension system. They attribute this to: (a) the visual aspect—they can easily imitate how it is done; (b) the local characters—they trust the featured farmer because he is similar to them; and (c) the participation of both spouse—both groups indicated that the participation of both spouses in the video screening enable them to discuss the technology or practice and its use afterward, which facilitated adoption decisions. In fact, some spouses were able to correct their husbands during implementation of some of the messages.

*Time allocation and training content.* It is also worth mentioning that the intervention has somehow changed women's time use allocation, in particular, in areas where the screened videos feature the women spouse taking an active role. There is no reported differences by (male) farmers, extension agents, and subject matter specialist on training content due to the video-based extension, as expected since the messages are based on existing extension manuals. However, the video-based intervention introduced women farmers to content that was otherwise considered a male domain, such as extension messages related to the production of field crops (e.g. wheat, teff).

*Demand to participate in upcoming screenings.* We observed a strong interest expressed by both (male) development group members and women's group members to participate in future video screenings. We asked the women's groups in particular about the risks and costs of participation given their busy days, but they believed the benefits of participation were much greater than the costs.

## References

- Frank, E. 1999. Gender, Agricultural Development and Food Security in Amhara, Ethiopia: The Contested Identity of Women Farmers in Ethiopia. USAID/Ethiopia, Addis Ababa.
- Gella, A. A. and Tadele, G. 2014. Gender and farming in Ethiopia: an exploration of discourses and implications for policy and research. Future Agriculture, Working Paper 084.
- Granovetter, Mark S. (May 1973). The Strength of Weak Ties. *American Journal of Sociology*. 78 (6): 1360–1380.
- Mogues, T., Cohen, M. J., Birner, R., Lemma, M., Randriamamonjy, J., Tadesse F. and Paulos, Z. 2009. Agricultural Extension in Ethiopia through a Gender and Governance Lens. IFPRI-ESSP, Working Paper 007.