



# THE ROLE OF WOMEN PRODUCER ORGANIZATIONS IN AGRICULTURAL VALUE CHAINS

**PRACTICAL LESSONS FROM AFRICA AND INDIA**

by:

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\* Aziz Elbehri is a Senior Economist in FAO's Trade and Markets Division and Maria Lee is an FAO consultant



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is based on the outputs of a one-week Exposure and Exchange Programme (EEP) in India hosted by the Self-employed Women's Association (SEWA) with African women leaders of producer organizations from West and Central Africa. The EEP was organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in collaboration with SEWA in India, in the framework of the European Union-funded All-ACP Agricultural Commodities Programme. Following the EEP, a workshop was organized at FAO headquarters on 6 December 2010 by the Trade and Markets Division (EST) in coordination with the Gender, Equity and Rural Employment Division (ESW). The workshop was funded through the All-ACP Agricultural Commodities Programme and the IFAD-funded Regional Capacity Building and Knowledge Management for Gender Equality Programme.

We are grateful to the team of SEWA's grassroots organizers Jyoti Meckwan, Reema Nanavaty, Smita Bhatnagar, Chhaya Bhavsar and Ami Shelat. We are also grateful to the African women leaders who participated in this programme and shared their experiences and aspirations, namely: Antoinette Ouedraogo, Burkina

Faso; Dienaba Diallo, Burkina Faso; Bintou Guido, Mali; Fanta Diamoutene, Mali; Fatoumata Diallo Sirebala, Mali; Oumy Seck, Senegal; Jeanne Ngane Diatara, Senegal; Adie Diatta, Senegal; Esther Oman Njomo, Cameroon; and Christine Andela, Cameroon.

The authors acknowledge and thank the rest of the FAO team that contributed to the EEP and to this report, including: Kirsten Hayes (Consultant-EST) who provided technical assistance, especially handling and processing the surveys of the African women organization prior to the EEP; Emily Carroll (EST) who provided all the needed administrative support during the planning phase with SEWA and ensured successful travels from many African countries into India, Italy and back; Carina Hirsch (ESW) who made valuable contributions to the EEP in the field. Ilaria Sisto (ESW) who provided additional administrative support to FAO for the post-EEP workshop and Rita Ashton who designed and formatted the report.

Finally, special thanks are due to Nora Ourabah Haddad and Denis Herbel, Gender and Rural Employment Division of FAO, for their review of this report.





## ACRONYMS

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<b>AFDB</b>	Association Féminine pour le Développement Buayaba (Burkina Faso) [Women Association for Development in Buayaba, Burkina Faso]
<b>AOPP</b>	Association des Organisations Professionnelles Paysannes (Mali) [Peasant Association of Professional Organisations (Mali)]
<b>CEEDD</b>	Centre d'Ecoute et d'Encadrement pour un Développement Durable (Sénégal) [Listen and Coaching center Sustainable Development (Senegal)]
<b>COSADER</b>	Collectif des ONG pour la Sécurité Alimentaire et le Développement Rural (Cameroon) [Collective of NGOs for Food Security and Rural Development]
<b>ECOWAP</b>	Agricultural Policy of the Economic Community of West African States
<b>ECOWAS</b>	Economic Community of West African States
<b>EEP</b>	Exchange and Exposure Programme
<b>EIG</b>	Economic Interest Group
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
<b>FEPPASI</b>	Fédération des Professionnels Agricoles de la Sissili (Burkina Faso) [Federation of Agricultural Professionals in Sissili (Burkina Faso)]
<b>FNAFER</b>	Fédération Nationale des Associations des Femmes Rurales (Mali) [National Federation of Rural Women (Mali)]
<b>IFAD</b>	International Fund for Agricultural Development
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Office
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organization
<b>RUDI</b>	Rural Distribution Network (of SEWA)

SEWA  
SHG  
STFC

Self-employed Women's Association  
Self-help groups (of SEWA)  
SEWA Trade Facilitation Centre



AFDB

AOPP

CEEDD

COSADER

ECOWAP

ECOWAS

EPP

ELG

FAO

FEPPASI

FINAFER

IFAD

ILO

NGO

RUDI





African women group visit to SEWA cooperative during EEP

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## 1.

**INTRODUCTION**

The last three decades have seen tremendous economic, political and environmental changes, which have affected the roles played by different stakeholders in agricultural and rural development (including fisheries, livestock and forestry). In the 1980s and 1990s, there was a global consensus that liberalization and global trade would pull development and create wealth for the vast majority. As a result, governments, encouraged by the international community, reduced their investments in agriculture and withdrew from many rural areas, leaving private sector and producer organizations to provide agricultural services. Since then, a wide variety of producer organizations – mainly cooperative organizations – have emerged worldwide, including across Africa. They have been supported by donors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and have been playing an important role in providing inputs, finance, extension and marketing services to farmers, including small-scale producers.

The recent years – especially since the 2007/08 food crisis – have shown that the anticipated benefits from agricultural liberalization have failed to translate into a significant reduction in poverty and that concerted efforts among different stakeholders are crucial to reduce the risks of future crises. As the international agenda places greater weight on food security, sustainable development and

climate change, producer organizations are increasingly recognized as central players. This shift focuses greater attention on staple and other food value chains, where small-scale producers, especially women, tend to be more active.

This increased attention on the role of small-scale producers and their organizations raises many debates (Murphy, 2010). Many producer organizations face important challenges in assuming their primary role, which is to respond to their members' needs in increasingly competitive, open and unstable markets. Often, they still struggle to move away from the traditional top-down approach to development and adopt a more participatory and needs-based approach to economic self-empowerment. They face constraints such as the lack of efficient management and organizational capacity, the absence of good governance systems, and insufficient capital and technology to meet market quality standards.

Women producers, who are often excluded or have their participation restrained in organizations, face additional challenges, such as cultural and legal discrimination, which prevent them from accessing productive assets, finance, education and technology. Establishing their own organizations or becoming more active in integrated organizations can help them overcome these constraints, increase their



economic and social power and improve access to needed services. While women represent the majority of producers, they still are often concentrated in the less profitable stages of the value chain and struggle to engage in the value chain's more lucrative activities.

Innovative institutional and operational mechanisms and business models need to be developed to enable small-scale producers, especially women, to seize market opportunities along agricultural value chains, while taking into account issues of gender-based power inequalities and access to choices and resources.

This report offers a cross-cutting comparison of different models of women producer organizations from India and Africa in order to draw broad lessons about best practices in institutional development within producer organizations, including women-based organizations and their potential role in the development of staple food value chains. The report looks at how different women producer organizations support poor small-scale women farmers and workers to better market their products, improve their position in the agricultural value chains and influence policy.

This report first presents the approach and achievements of the Self-employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India and how it has been successful in facilitating women's access to markets and promoting women as competitive entrepreneurs. It then gives an overview of the experiences and accomplishments of a representative sample of women organizations in agricultural value chains in West and Central Africa. Based on the analysis of the initiatives and strategies of these different organizations as well as the challenges they face, the fourth chapter looks at how SEWA's model and its proven best practices can apply to African organizations, especially in relation to appropriate institutional settings and human and financial self-reliance mechanisms.

The report concludes with some broad lessons to consider when designing and implementing programmes to mainstream small-scale women producers in value chain development. By doing so, this report does not intend to promote the exclusion of men, but rather to advocate for interventions that will give women and men equal opportunities and ultimately support the performance of the whole value chain to the benefit of rural households and local and national economies.

## SEWA'S MODEL TO PROMOTE WOMEN'S OPPORTUNITIES IN AGRICULTURAL VALUE CHAINS

### 2.1 SEWA's origins

The Self-employment Women's Association (SEWA) was founded in 1973 as a trade union for rural women. SEWA started in Gujarat, India, among poor, and then extended to rural areas. Members include labourers (39.7 percent), petty traders (19.9 percent), home-based workers (19.9 percent), service providers (0.5 percent), and small-scale farmers (19.9 percent). SEWA's total membership over the past few decades evolved into a network of women's organizations that brings a total of 1.24 million women across 17 districts in Gujarat state and nine states of India (SEWA, 2010). Seventy-five percent of SEWA's members live in rural areas.

#### Overcoming rural women's poverty

SEWA's philosophy is inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's principles of non-violence and self-reliance. Poverty is a form of violence. Often, poor women and men are quick victims of poverty and are more vulnerable to external shocks. Every misfortune, social injustice or

injustice is a source of violence. SEWA's philosophy is to help women and men to overcome poverty and violence through self-employment and collective action.

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## 2.

## SEWA's MODEL TO PROMOTE WOMEN'S OPPORTUNITIES IN AGRICULTURAL VALUE CHAINS

### 2.1 SEWA's mission and organization<sup>1</sup>

The Self-employed Women's Association (SEWA) was founded in 1972 by Ms Ela Bhatt as a trade union for poor self-employed women workers from the informal sector. SEWA started in the city of Ahmedabad in Gujarat State, India among the urban poor, and then extended its activities into rural areas. Members work as manual labourers (79.7 percent), producers (18.4 percent), home-based workers (0.9 percent), service providers (0.6 percent) and vendors (0.5 percent). Agriculture workers and small-scale farmers constitute 54 percent of SEWA's total membership. Over the last three decades, SEWA evolved into a network of women's organizations that brings together 1.24 million women across 17 districts in Gujarat State and nine states of India (SEWA, 2010). Seventy-five percent of SEWA's members live in rural areas.

#### Overall mission and philosophy

SEWA's philosophy is inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's principles of non-violence and self-reliance. Poverty is a form of violence. Often, poor women and men are chronic victims of poverty and are more vulnerable to external shocks. Every misfortune, natural disaster or

illness leaves them increasingly powerless and takes them into deeper poverty. For SEWA, only work and a steady source of income can break this cycle.

Women are more vulnerable and powerless because they have unequal access to information and technologies, they have to pay exorbitant interest to moneylenders and they often do not own their tools of production. However, they play a crucial role in feeding their families.

This is why SEWA places women at the centre of its strategy against poverty. SEWA's main objective is to support women to achieve full employment and economic and social self-reliance so they can move their families out of poverty. Self-reliance refers to economic or financial self-sufficiency as well as collective self-reliance.

*"With collective strength, the woman is able to combat the outside exploitative and corrupt forces like traders and money lenders."* (Ela Bhatt, 1992, Cooperatives and Empowerment of Women).

SEWA's approach includes different entry points and multiple interventions in order to give women the tools to change and lead their own lives. Its process involves:

<sup>1</sup> For more information on SEWA, visit: <http://www.sewa.org>



- organizing women at the individual and household levels into groups, helping them to identify and address their needs, access productive assets and build their capacity to own and manage their organizations (i.e. committees, groups or cooperatives) and be self-reliant;
- linking women's organizations with public or private service providers. When needed public services are not available locally, SEWA helps the women create organizations that will provide these services. In addition, SEWA facilitates partnerships with local, state and national governments to allow the women to benefit from government schemes, and with private actors (e.g. research institutes, universities and private companies) to enable the women to benefit from financial and technical assistance, when it fits the needs and capacities of the women;
- lobbying at the local, state and national levels to promote policies and rules that recognize women workers, take into account their needs and concerns and support their efforts to develop local economic initiatives.

### Organization and structure

SEWA combines a women's union, cooperative sister organizations and a series of supportive services. The **union** is made up of elected representatives from different trades in both rural and urban areas; their role is to defend the rights of women workers and lobby to improve their situation.

In 2006, Ela Bhatt explained, "SEWA is a family of organizations, similar in structure

#### SEWA SISTER ORGANIZATIONS

Shree Mahila SEWA Sahakari Bank Ltd.
SEWA Academy
Gujarat State Women's SEWA Cooperative Federation Ltd.
SEWA Insurance
SEWA Mahila Facilitation Center
SEWA Gram Mahila Haat
SEWA Research
SEWA Manager ni School
SEWA ICT
SEWA Sanskardendra
Video SEWA
Shri Mahila SEWA Anasooya Trust
SEWA Eco Tourism
Hansiba
SEWA Kalakruti
Saundrya Safai Mandali
SEWA Bharat
Homenet South Asia
SEWA Nirman

to a banyan tree that spreads its branches". Currently there are 20 SEWA **sister organizations** or affiliates. Each organization is independent and autonomous, both financially and in their decision-making processes. Each organization develops activities and services based on its members' needs and its own capacity to support these activities. Most SEWA sister organizations are cooperatives, such as the SEWA Bank and trade cooperatives built around products or services (e.g. midwives' cooperatives, vendors' cooperatives, milk cooperatives, gum collectors' cooperatives).

SEWA provides **support services** for its members, such as education, health





Surendranagar – one of SEWA's many multi-functions district centres



SEWA's Rural Distribution network for agro-products (Rudi)

#### **Member-based organizations in SEWA**

- UNION
  - COOPERATIVE FEDERATION
  - TRADE & SERVICE COOPERATIVES
  - MARKETING ORGANIZATIONS
  - DISTRICT ASSOCIATIONS
  - VILLAGE-BASED GROUPS
- (Savings & credit groups, Self-help groups, etc)*

#### **SEWA's services to members**

- FINANCIAL SERVICES
- SOCIAL SECURITY
- EDUCATION
- HOUSING
- MARKETING SERVICES
- LEGAL SERVICES

Figure 1: SEWA's member-based organizations and services

and child care, insurance, housing and communication. These services are considered critical for women members to achieve full employment and self-reliance. When these services are available locally and at an affordable price, SEWA links its members with the service providers. If the services are non-existent or not accessible, SEWA trains its members to provide these services for themselves. Support services are then provided by SEWA members in a

decentralized and affordable manner and can become a source of self-employment opportunities. In some cases, supportive service providers have formed their own cooperatives, such as the cooperative SEWA Bank. Members pay for the services they receive from SEWA, thereby guaranteeing the financial viability of the service providers and/or cooperatives.



### *Building from the grassroots level*

SEWA focuses on strengthening grassroots-level capacity to solve problems by organizing individuals into **self-help groups** (SHGs) or farmer development groups. Usually, SEWA's organizers first will visit the village council, or **panchayat**, to explain what SEWA is and the benefits it could bring to the whole community. They will then organize a meeting to talk with women, identify some potential leaders and raise awareness about the importance of organizing.

SHGs can include from 10 to 15 women. They have four core activities:

- *Capacity-building:* Capacity-building activities address topics including livestock, agricultural techniques and health and are organized with SEWA district associations or other competent institutes.
- *Access to financial services:* A savings and credit group obtains credit from SEWA's Bank, which is then redistributed to the individual members of the group. The group decides collectively about the priority beneficiaries.
- *Market linkage services:* These are supported by SEWA at district and state levels through fairs, Rural Distribution Network (RUDI) marketing networks<sup>2</sup> or linkages to private companies.
- *Access to inputs:* SHGs communicate their needs for the quantity and quality of inputs (e.g. seeds and fertilizer) to the district association. SEWA then

negotiates contracts with companies to provide the inputs in bulk and the inputs are distributed through the district and the SHG to the members.

SHGs are also crucial in the empowerment of women members. Women in the SHG share their experiences on microcredit, productive activities and commercialization, and this interactive process improves their knowledge and builds their self-confidence. It also enhances their capacity to understand and analyse their problems and environment and to identify solutions. Women develop a culture of learning by doing through experimentation and local adaptation. Within the SHG, women encourage each other to think in an entrepreneurial manner and to identify income-generating activities. Ultimately, the SHG is a space where women can develop a greater sense of competence and control over their future. The SHGs offer the first step in building women's self-confidence and autonomous capacity to drive their own development.



One of SEWA's thousands village level self-help groups

<sup>2</sup> RUDI marketing network is described in Chapter 2.4.