

Invest in Africa's farmers - the women

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Originally Published by [The Des Moines Register](#), July 13, 2008



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Each day, as food becomes more expensive and less available, the stomachs of the poor grow louder. And hungry people cannot work, hungry farmers in the field are less productive, hungry children cannot learn, and hungry parents cannot produce healthy children.

World leaders are trying to decide what to do. More money, they say. More food aid. More investments. Some brave leaders even recommend changing trade policies and domestic agriculture subsidies.

But one resource is almost always overlooked - women.

Women represent 80 percent of Africa's farmers and account for more than 60 percent of the farmers in Asia. Yet as predominant as women are in agriculture, dialogue about farmers seldom takes women's needs and preferences into account - as if farmers were all the same. Imagine campaigns trying to reach Iowa caucus-goers as if they were all the same, and not seeking to understand the needs of different genders, generations, professions and interests.

Likewise, development policy cannot be effective if leaders in Washington or Brussels fail to take into account the interests and concerns of those they seek to help. In the case of agriculture, since the vast majority of people involved are women, policymakers must find ways to hear women's voices.

This is not an easy task. Women seldom hold leadership positions. They don't go to community meetings very often, and when they do, they often defer to the men. But without listening to women and understanding their needs, the international community can never be as effective as it would like - and will not make a big enough dent in the growing number of hungry poor.

While visiting rural Angola, where fields were newly cleared of land mines and farmers were ready to go back to work, I met with women who complained that they had been sent only male hoes. They showed me stacks of hoes, standing unused - long wooden poles attached at 90-degree angles to rectangular spades. "What is a female hoe?" I asked. A woman brought forward an implement with a shorter wooden handle attached at a 50-degree angle to a pointed, shovel-like spade.

The smaller, female hoes could only be used by squatting close to the ground. They said they preferred this to standing, as they often strapped babies to their backs while they worked all day in the field. Almost no work was being done because the women did not have usable implements and because aid workers had not understood the real needs of the real farmers.

In Africa, as in Iowa, extension provides help to farmers in the field. Yet women there receive only 5 percent of extension services, and less than 15 percent of extension workers are women. Studies by the International Food Policy Research Institute show that women farmers are more likely to follow the example of other women farmers. When 80 percent of farmers are women, and extension isn't talking with them, this is a self-fulfilling prophecy of ineffectiveness.

Education - perhaps the single most important development tool - is also still not consistent between girls and boys in many countries. Educating girls has positive benefits throughout society, and in agriculture, educated women are more productive than unschooled girls. So why not ensure that girls and women receive education to help improve their farm productivity, among many other desirable outcomes?

So yes to more money, spent wisely. Yes to more food aid. Yes to more investments, and to changing trade and subsidy policies. But if we really want to improve the world's agricultural productivity, especially in the poorest communities in Africa and Asia, and if we really want to ensure that more food is available to the poorest people on Earth, then we must listen to the farmers and invest in them - invest in women.