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Approaching the MDGs: Working with the Resource-Poor Farmers

A Policy Brief from Heifer International

By September, 2010, only five years will remain for the international community to come together to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. The available statistics show huge gaps to achieving the MDGs by 2015. With over 65 years of cross-cutting programming that empowers rural communities to build sustainable livelihood systems, Heifer International has worked with over 16 million families in communities around the world to help them reach their self-defined poverty reduction goals.

While defining *out of poverty* is debatable, Heifer fully recognizes and values the indicators set by the 'poor' themselves for defining *out of poverty*. Recent evidence from impact evaluations of Heifer International's work in 20 countries, involving 5,000 respondents from 139 projects, indicated that those families assisted by Heifer have reached 62% of their self-defined *out of poverty* target. This impact evaluation employed a tri-level inquiry that assessed changes in values and behaviors, visible and tangible results on the ground and influencing the larger community at local, regional and national levels which leads to changes in practices, systems and policies. The concept of self-defined *getting out of poverty* is established against six value groups namely, basic needs, livestock care, environment care and management, education, empowerment and influence on the larger community. The contributing factors to this change are transfer of skills, knowledge, and promotion of equity among women and men and different classes and castes, and creation of assets that have increased income and improved food security.

Heifer International pre-dates the MDGs but implements projects with parallels to all of the MDGs, with particular attention to MDG #1, MDG #3, MDG #7, and MDG #8. From this experience base, Heifer recommends several actions to boost capacities of resource-poor farmers, especially women, for the MDGs to become reality.

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Policy Recommendations

While this section breaks down recommendations by the four MDGs mentioned above, Heifer International applies and promotes cross-cutting poverty reduction interventions in all its work around the world.

MDG #1: Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger

To reduce hunger and poverty concretely, investments need to be made in the capabilities and assets of the resource-poor. With modest support, the resource-poor, particularly women, are able to invest in dynamic and cross-cutting ways in their own and their families' well-being. Empowering the resource-poor confers the dignity and skills to develop in the most context-appropriate manner. Since agriculture is the livelihood source for the majority of the rural resource-poor, investing in this sector will reduce extreme poverty and hunger. Because livestock provide diverse goods—including food, draft power, organic fertilizer and economic and social security—to smallholder farmers, investment priorities should consider livestock-based agriculture within ecologically-sound systems, as was done in Cameroon.

From 2004 to 2009, Heifer International worked with smallholder dairy farmers to promote dairy farming and institute improved animal management. The result was a more than 18% increase in liters of milk / cow / day! With greater production, farmers met household consumption needs and sold surplus milk. Over 200 families participated in the Heifer International-supported dairy development scheme and saw their annual household incomes increase by at least 50 percent. By 2009, these original families had “passed on the gifts” Heifer International gave them to their neighbors; thus over 400 families saw their incomes and food security levels dramatically improved.



Photo Credit: Jake Lyell

MDG #3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women

Educating, equipping, and empowering women to serve as agents of change within their households, communities, and nations can have amazing effects. Women need greater legal and secured access, control, and ownership rights over productive, household-related, and consumable resources. Investments in technological innovations should focus on increasing the productivity of resource-poor women while decreasing the drudgery of their tasks. Recognizing women's roles throughout the agricultural value chain is just one necessary step in ensuring their effective access to local, national and global markets, where they can reap greater returns on their labor and investments. Capacity-building assistance should target women farmers and their organizations, so that women can become leaders and advocates for themselves. Importantly, including men and boys in addressing gender equity prevents gender-based resentment, which can undermine the sustainability of women's empowerment. Women's empowerment can spur holistic development, as Teresa Otiep's story illustrates.

In the traditional Kenyan society, men control every aspect of women's lives. “I could not afford to buy anything on my own... I had to beg from my husband, and this at times brought tension in the family,” Teresa Otiep said. The family struggled to survive, but Teresa saw hope in a self-help

group partnering with Heifer International. With a gift of a goat and diversified training from Heifer International, Teresa started to change her life and those around her.

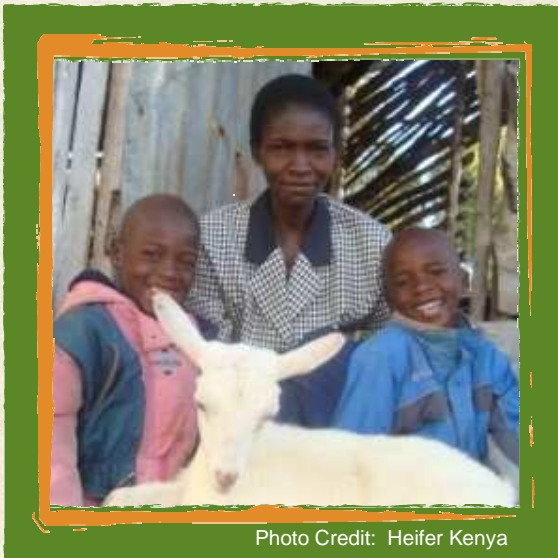


Photo Credit: Heifer Kenya

As Teresa re-invested her profits, she grew her enterprise to 14 animals! Because of Teresa, the family's annual income increased by over 82% in just two years! With the livestock, the family's food security significantly improved and the family can afford the children's school fees. Teresa paid for her husband's education, so that he could become a teacher.

"I owned nothing just two years ago; it is amazing how much I have now, and life is a lot different. My husband values and respects me. Owning a cow has earned me lots of respect from this village," Teresa says. She is committed to giving back to her community and she mentors three other women farmers. Today, Teresa changed not only her economic, but also her social status, which gained her respect from women and men of her community.

MDG #7: Ensure Environmental Sustainability

To catalyze environmental stewardship, secured access and ownership of land and productive assets is critical. Insecurities in tenure and access arrangements can aggravate resource over-exploitation. Special attention needs to be paid to gender-differentiated resource management priorities. Climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies must also focus on the needs and capabilities of the resource-poor. Given adequate training and inputs, the resource-poor can become powerful environmental activists and advocates committed to long-term environmental health. Development interventions need to utilize indigenous knowledge and address the impacts on resource-poor women and men for environmental sustainability. All of these components are illustrated in Heifer International's work in Cambodia.

In 2002, Heifer International partnered with a local organization to promote sustainable development among marginalized communities, including those impacted by the war with the Khmer Rouge. Community groups were formed and made responsible for project management. In addition to livestock and non-technical training, each project participant received fruit-tree saplings and trainings related to environmental awareness and agro-ecological farming. The groups were also encouraged to start savings schemes and to work together as a community.

A few years later, these once resource-poor families had transformed their lives, including how they managed local resources. Besides the expected results of substantial increases in annual family incomes and food security, project participants, on their own initiative, created a community forestry to protect local forests, wildlife habitats, soils, and watersheds. The trees also sequester carbon in the soil. In addition to



Photo Credit: Heifer Cambodia

“passing on” their first-born livestock to needy community members in two communities to fulfill their obligations of benefiting from Heifer International, the families also provided their recipient neighbors with tree seedlings and skills and training related to forest management. “During the war time, we faced very difficult life...We lived in a jungle and we ate wild products and hunted. Now we are not armed to fight against humans...we are equipped by Heifer [International] with agriculture, equipment, and resources to fight against poverty and hunger.” Environmental sustainability is recognized by these community groups as vital to maintaining their new living standards.

MDG #8: Develop a Partnership for Global Development

Direct partnerships with the resource-poor are extremely important for poverty reduction. Farmers’ organizations are critical partners that can serve as pivotal points for collective development and, hence assistance should be provided to build their capacity for service-delivery and advocacy at all levels. In particular, ensuring the effective participation of women throughout policy formulation and programming is necessary. Successful partnerships require sharing of resources and skills between governments, non-governmental organizations, private organizations, and community-based organizations. An example of a successful multi-stakeholder partnership is the East Africa Dairy Development project.



Photo Credit: EADD

Heifer International has been working in East Africa to promote dairy production for many years. The success of these interventions attracted the attention of the Gates Foundation, who sought to assist Heifer International scale-up these programs through a two-year initial grant. The organizations worked together to promote local business associations and build five milk chilling plants, which allowed over 47,000 local farmers to better store, process, and market their goods. With the financial support of the Gates Foundation, Heifer International was also able to help local breeding services conduct more than 56,000 artificial inseminations and to

explore ways of replicating and more widely disseminating the successful interventions. The partnership facilitated local farmers in boosting their collective marketing to 118,000 liters of milk per day—which will have a significant impact on the livelihoods of these farmers and their communities.

Heifer International, as an organization that has benefited from partnership and collaboration, strongly believes in the need to create space for multi-stakeholders role in achieving MDGs. The role of the resource poor women and men should be recognized and their priorities should be the center point of MDG interventions. NGOs and civil society have been playing and continue to play critical roles in bridging the gaps between policy and practice, especially by way of capacity building and making the voice of the resource poor reach policy and decision makers. Hence this role needs to be recognized and strengthened in order for MDGs to be achieved.

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