



GLOBAL JP RWEE CASE STUDY: **INSTITUTIONALLY STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY-BASED GROUPS**

Photo: Rural women in Kyrgyzstan
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Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations





ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

Photo: GALs methodology has been adopted in Guatemala
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The Rural Women's Economic Empowerment programme (known officially as the 'Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women; JP RWEE) is a global initiative that aims to secure livelihoods and rights for rural women. The programme is jointly implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), UN Women (UNW), and the World Food Programme (WFP). The JP RWEE is currently being implemented in seven countries: Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, Niger, and Rwanda.



Generating Momentum



Mobilizing Community Credit and Savings Groups



Getting Voices Heard: Adopting the Participatory Approach



Commercializing and Formalizing Community Groups



Resilience

GENERATING MOMENTUM: THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGAGING WITH COMMUNITY GROUPS

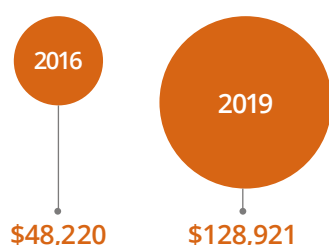
Photo: Entrepreneurial activities in Guatemala
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The goal of the JP RWEE is to secure rural women's livelihoods and rights in the context of sustainable development goals, and to tackle inequality in the economic sphere. To achieve these goals, the JP RWEE has taken an active approach to investing in community groups in all seven countries where the programme is being implemented. This has been a key strategy in providing support to women living in remote communities.

In **Guatemala**, strengthening community groups created positive forward momentum for the support of indigenous rural women's economic development. Indigenous women in the programme area suffer from high levels of violence, poverty and malnutrition and are marginalized from services. By supporting community groups in rural settings – such as Village Savings and Loans Associations

The total income from groups' entrepreneurial activities grew 167% in three years.



(VSLA), farmer groups, self-help groups, and artisanal cooperatives – the JP RWEE was able to engage directly with group members to offer interagency support such as trainings to improve productivity and increase knowledge and skills (including on nutrition), provision of timesaving technologies, and the establishment of community savings and credit.

Activities carried out at the group level led to important results in Guatemala, including **higher crop yields, more marketable products, and the increased availability of loans**. Evidence from JP RWEE annual reports in Guatemala show that the total income from groups' entrepreneurial activities grew from USD 48,220 in 2016 to USD 128,921 in 2019. Focus group participants also reported that higher incomes gave them the opportunity to think beyond immediate food security and subsistence needs and focus on longer-term goals, such as educating their children or improving their family's quality of life. Community groups offered moral, financial, strategic, and business support to put these plans into motion. Alongside these successes, the strengthened groups were motivated to become

formalized entities, enabling participants to build linkages to new markets and access existing services offered by Government or NGOs. The JP RWEE supports groups throughout these processes of legalization and formalization.

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‘There are many benefits we have had of participating in the partnership and savings group. We have learned how to manage our money better and to plan what to do with our income. For example: we want our daughters to study so they have a profession, not like us; we didn't have any education. We strive so our family has better health and nutrition. We have learned to care about ourselves, thanks to the training we receive we know more about our sexuality, our rights, and the nutrition we must have.’

– Community group participant from field notes in Guatemala (translated)

MOBILIZING COMMUNITY CREDIT AND SAVINGS GROUPS

Photo: Savings group in Ethiopia
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A key tool that the JP RWEE has used to promote women's economic empowerment, notably in Rwanda, Liberia, and Guatemala, is **the establishment and strengthening of community savings and credit through VSLAs**. This informal microfinance scheme – in which group members pool funds to lend to one another or invest in their communities – enable those with limited access to formal financial services to establish an economic activity on a scale that would not otherwise be possible. The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) baseline (2015) highlighted a lack of access to credit as one of the chief constraints on rural women, highlighting the importance of community savings and loans schemes. Within the JP RWEE, this tool has helped women in programme-supported groups to finance small enterprises and access emergency funds when needed.

In **Guatemala**, IFAD's Sustainable Rural Development Programme for the Northern Region (PRODENORTE) supported more than 150 savings and credit groups during its implementation between 2008 – 2020, and provided a framework for the formation and scale-up of these groups by the other implementing organizations. Such was the success of the

scheme that from 2016, in collaboration with PRODENORTE, activities to strengthen indigenous women's savings groups were integrated directly into the JP RWEE.

The support of the VSLAs has produced tangible results. Data reported in JP RWEE Guatemala Annual Reports shows that **total savings grew from USD 12,043 across 26 groups in 2017, to 106,062 across 46 groups in 2019**. In several JP RWEE country programmes, participants reported enhanced self-esteem, and identified links between capacity building activities in community groups, and enhanced leadership and participation in decision-making.

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'That is why the economic empowerment is so important, because women have recently begun to make decisions, small or large. The important thing is that they are always subject to making decisions about the things that affect their life.'

– Local government stakeholder, Guatemala (translated)



GUATEMALA

In Guatemala, members of community groups noted that they felt more able to participate and voice their concerns in community development councils as a result of their activities within the group. Women also reported that men are more understanding and engaged in decision making.



RWANDA

Participants in Rwanda reported feeling more confident when consulting with husbands and male relatives, particularly on household spending. Women also said they have more confidence in taking out loans, acquiring formal land rights, and developing businesses.



ETHIOPIA

The 2018 evaluation of the programme in Ethiopia found that 108 rural women had assumed positions in the administration, audit, control and loan committees of their cooperatives, whereas at baseline no woman was found to be holding such a position.

GETTING VOICES HEARD: ADOPTING THE PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

Photo: Women participate in evaluation in Nepal
©JP RWEE, 2021



Engaging with community groups also allowed JP RWEE to adopt different participatory approaches to engage with all members of a community. This ensured that each group was given an opportunity to speak out about issues that affected them.

Dimitra clubs have been widely used in Niger to promote reflection and dialogue among members of a community. First developed by the FAO, Dimitra clubs are made up of 20-25 members supported by a local facilitator. The clubs – organized into men, women, and youth – meet regularly to discuss the challenges they face, and identify possible solutions. The results of these discussions from each individual group are then brought to a community level, where group leaders collectively share the outcomes and possible solutions with local authorities or project partners. Dimitra clubs are also used as a port-of-call for interventions: for example, agricultural training is provided to all members, and groups can select participants to receive additional support (for example, the women's groups may choose specific members to attend leadership training). The Dimitra approach is key to providing a safe space for men, women, and young people to speak about the challenges they see in their community.

Community Conversations, first developed by the WFP, are integral to engagement in Ethiopia. Exercise-based conversations examine the distribution of household work between men and women. For example, men are asked to list the household and farm activities of men and women, then attach a monetary value to each. This helps create an appreciation for the contributions that women make to the household economy. These activities have led to shifts at community level in attitudes about men and women's work, with increasing support given to the women's engagement in leadership roles.

The Global Action and Learning System (GALS) is a community-led empowerment approach based on the principles of social justice, gender justice, inclusion, and mutual respect. Using visual tools and participatory processes, GALS teaches participants to negotiate their needs and interests and identify innovative and gender equitable solutions to household and livelihood planning. The approach uses visual material and tools to enable people to start thinking about their current situation and visual changes needed for their future. The JP RWEE has used GALS in Rwanda, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Guatemala, and Nepal.



GALS SUCCESSES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

- ✓ IFAD introduced GALS in **Kyrgyzstan**, where it is now rolled out by a local JP RWEE partner through a Training of Trainers model. Local community champions are trained to strengthen existing self-help groups and provide training on agricultural production and small business development. The champions are provided with ongoing refresher training and mentoring, which have proved essential to ensuring the GALS implementation is as strong and effective as possible.
- ✓ The GALS approach was introduced in **Rwanda** in 2016, with 16 staff from 10 implementing partners being trained. An additional 119 GALS champions were trained in 2017; around 40 percent of them were men. GALS created a space for women to engage more with household decision-making processes.

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'The Joint Programme is important to us because it has meant a way to change our lives. Because we feel safer to start initiatives and we also have the recognition of our husbands and families to do so. We did not know about sexuality or rights, nor of a way to make money and also contribute to our family, not just the men. Giving us this opportunity, so that we can express ourselves and decide also in our lives the changes we need, is something that has been very important, and the joint programme has given it to us. We have received a lot of training that has taught us to work better, to organize us better, to contribute financially to our families. We did not have that before.'

- Community group participant from field notes in Guatemala (translated)

COMMERCIALIZING AND FORMALIZING COMMUNITY GROUPS

Photo: Community discussions in Liberia
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Commercialization offers incentives to community groups to strengthen and formalize their organizations with the goal of capitalizing on strategic opportunities, such as building links to wider and more lucrative markets for their products. Formalizing groups also ensures that groups can access Government and NGO services that will help improve production and business opportunities, thereby ensuring that the impacts of the JP RWEE extend beyond the lifetime of the programme itself. These opportunities are critical to lifting women out of poverty.

In Guatemala in particular, there was optimism that these services would be willing to continue supporting and engaging with women's groups beyond the end of JP RWEE. One stakeholder indicated that groups that reach a certain level of organizational development have more voice and space to bring their concerns to the local government. There is, therefore, a correlation between the formalization of women's groups, the continuation of activities, and the perceived sustainability of results.

There have been formalization successes in Guatemala:

★ **Shampoo** produced by the Campur community group is now for sale in local pharmacies, after six savings cycles to help launch the

product into these stores. Campur aspires to widen their market further and sell in other parts of the country.

★ **Fabric** produced by a group of artisanal fabric producers called Cucanha is now being sold by Casa de los Gigantes, an international retailer based in Antigua Guatemala, a popular tourist destination. Cucanha received training in new techniques and design from the JP RWEE, which also helped facilitate the connection between Cucanha and Casa de los Gigantes.

★ **Surplus agricultural outputs** produced by the Canlun community group are sold to the Ministry of Education for use in local school meals programmes. Local ministry of Agriculture representatives help navigate the legal requirements of supplying products such as eggs to the schools, and the group seeks more formalized legal status to fully benefit from this market.

★ A **Centro Certificado (production centre)** established in collaboration with the JP RWEE and an artisanal community group in Polochic will enable the group to sell their products in supermarkets and pharmacies. The group is now working with the Ministry of Finance to add the centre to the national environmental and health registers, clearing the way for sale in these markets.

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'When the programme stops, we are going to continue. We have organized our next saving cycles and we improve the sale of shampoo. We are looking at how to have new products and we want to stay in personal care and home products.'

– Community group participant from field notes in Guatemala (translated)



FORMALIZATION – SUCCESES FROM OTHER JP RWEE COUNTRIES

✓ In **Nepal**, the local authorities of a rural municipality decided to donate land so a newly formed cooperative could construct a storage centre for agricultural goods.

✓ Between 2014 and 2019, the **Rwanda** Cooperative Agency formalized 22 groups in Rwanda into legal cooperatives. Manuals developed by UNW and WFP were used to support training on cooperative management, conflict resolution, and gender policies during the registration process to obtain legal cooperative status.

✓ In **Kyrgyzstan**, there have been moves to integrate self-help groups into formalized regional cooperatives to ensure they are able to access state resources and provide community support in future.



Photo: Dimitra club in Niger
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RESILIENCE

Evidence from the countries where the JP RWEE is implemented indicates that group membership helped women withstand different types of shocks, including natural disasters (for example, the hurricanes that hit Guatemala in late 2020), the failure of a business venture, or the global economic downturn that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. As members of an organized structure that offered mutual support, several women's group participants in Guatemala reported being able to better confront adverse circumstances compared to non-member peers – something that inspired other community members to join the groups. The group activities improved access to emergency savings (critical in moments of stress and crises), as well as diversified business activities.



Working through groups can be a powerful tool to advance rural women's economic empowerment.

In Guatemala, community savings and loans arrangements were often cited by stakeholders as central to enabling women to meet their needs and take steps towards entrepreneurial objectives. The VSLAs in particular were perhaps one of the most visible and recognizable to those outside the JP RWEE. Field- and national-level data collection conducted under this evaluation revealed that VSLAs were particularly impactful because of their integrated approach – a key strategy adopted by the JP RWEE. With support from the implementing partners, the groups offered women access to credit, training on an array of topics, spaces for participation and decision-making, diversification of business activities, improved production, and linkages to markets. The groups also acted as the social mechanism through which this support was delivered, ensuring in turn that it reached the entire programme's target audience: rural women living in hard-to-reach locations.

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'We know that if we are organized, we can continue with our projects. Our community was born from community projects, we have paid the land on which we live because we were organized. This has helped us to cope during the first months of COVID-19.'

- Community group participant from field notes in Guatemala (translated)

The JP RWEE emphasis on organizational strengthening sought to develop the cooperative structures through which women's groups could take advantage of new opportunities, increase resilience to crises, and look towards operating sustainably following the intervention. The evidence suggests that the groups methodology can be a powerful tool to advance rural women's economic empowerment. **As one informant put it: 'Everything begins with organization.'**

JOINT PROGRAMME ON:
**Accelerating Progress towards the
Economic Empowerment of Rural Women**



This case study has been produced by Mokoro Ltd as part of the Global End-term Evaluation of the Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, Niger and Rwanda from 2014 to 2020.

Photo: JP RWEE participants receive training certificates in Ethiopia
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