



Gender and participant selection in the EJASA project

To solve the problems related to the low employability of young people and food security in northern Benin, SNV Benin, with the financial support of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, implements the Youth Employment for Improved Food Security project (EJASA). This project puts inclusion of all social categories and gender equality at the heart of any intervention.

About SNV

SNV is a not-for-profit international development organisation that makes a lasting difference in the lives of people living in poverty by helping them raise incomes and access basic services. We focus on three sectors and have a long-term, local presence in over 25 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Our team of more than 1,300 staff is the backbone of SNV. For more information: www.snv.org

SNV in Benin

Founded in the Netherlands in 1965, SNV has operated in Benin since 1970 and carries out many activities in most of the country's regions. Its two offices in Cotonou and Parakou support Beninese organisations and territorial administrations by providing them with the tools, knowledge, and relationships they need to make and implement decisions.

About EJASA

Funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to create approximately 3,400 jobs for young people (50% of whom are women) in the agricultural sector, the project's objective is to improve food security. EJASA is implemented in Kandi and Banikoara (Alibori department) as well as in Natitingou, Tanguiéta, Materéri and Boukoumbé (Atacora department). The targeted sectors are vegetable farming, soybean production, poultry, and small ruminant farming.

Technical note:

Gender and selection without barriers

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Introduction

In northern Benin, the populations of the departments of Atacora and Alibori are faced with several difficulties: Their low capacity to meet basic food and nutritional needs is due to low agricultural production and widespread poverty, bleak prospects for an increasing number of youths, resulting in the rural exodus and rising tensions. Climate change and growing insecurity in the region aggravate the situation.

In this context, at the request of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Fisheries and funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Benin, SNV launched the «Youth Employment for Improved Food Security in Northern Benin (EJASA)» initiative in October 2020.

The project seeks to raise income for 3,400 young men and women working in agriculture in alignment with Benin's current agricultural development and anti-poverty strategies.

The EJASA project is implemented in Kandi and Banikoara (Alibori department), Natitingou, Tanguiéta, Materéri, Boukoumbé (Atacora department). The project follows SNV's gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) approach to development. The many gender gaps noted between active male and female agricultural workers within the two targeted departments justify this approach.

They are:

- The lack of visibility of women's contribution in farming, particularly on the production side;
- Women are not considered as farm managers since the land belongs to the male member of the household;
- Women farmers often lack time because of their multiple roles, which impact their freedom of movement. In addition, they must obtain their husband's consent for any travel;
- Men own means of transportation and control the household's financial resources.

Considering these disparities, the project set a selection target of 50% men and 50% women for the 3400 young people to be accompanied by the project. The project team therefore developed a selection approach based on gender equality. The implementation results, main challenges, and lessons learned, deserve to be shared.

Positive Discrimination and Gender equality-based selection

The selection of the youths to be accompanied by EJASA followed an inclusive process to achieve the target of 50/50 participation of women and men. Measures were taken at all stages of the process, to promote gender equality; (i.e., the wording and publication of the calls for applications, the composition of the selection committee, the communication channels, the review process of the received applications, the interview with shortlisted candidates, etc.).

Selection notice

The call for applicants is gender-neutral regardless of the chosen sector or value chain. The same opportunities are equally presented to young men and women for the sectors or value chains that meet their aspirations. Considering women's role in improving income and food security in their households and their limited ability to take full advantage of the support opportunities offered, the committee decided to increase the age limit for women to 40 compared to 35 for men. The decision reflects the burden of social constraints such as work overload, lack of freedom of movement, poor access to production resources, etc.



Local women's networks were used to facilitate young women's access to information.

Municipal selection committee

SNV insisted on an inclusive process that involved all youth agricultural entrepreneurship stakeholders at the communal level. Thus, a joint municipal selection committee (MSC) was set up to steer the selection process of youths to be supported. The MSC is made up of representatives from the agricultural training center, the town hall, the youth association, the municipal cell of the Territorial Agency for Agricultural Development (TAAD), the commune's union of producers, and the EJASA project partner NGOs.

Given the lack of women in leadership roles within the structures comprising the committee, SNV Benin decided to add the women farmers' association to this list in addition to the commune's union of producers. Nine (09) members, including two (02) women make up the committee which works under the supervision of the EJASA project team.

Testimonial

"I informed many women's groups about the project and I volunteered for a radio show to better explain its benefits for women's empowerment and the well-being of their households. I have also organised informal information-sharing sessions with households of association members to facilitate the application of female agricultural entrepreneurs."

Mrs. BIO KADOU Yakoua, President of the communal association of women farmers (ACFA)

Communication channels

The call for applications was posted in public places such as district offices, municipal offices of territorial agencies for agricultural development, town halls and partner NGO headquarters, ensuring that all young men and women in the targeted communities had access to information. Community radio stations also aired the calls in local languages.

The community radio stations produced and aired an interactive program detailing the project's opportunities, in the hopes of generating more applications from women and men.

Témoignage

"Women are better placed to understand women. As President of women farmers, I understood that women are very active in agriculture, but the fruits of their efforts are not visible. So I worked hard to encourage them to apply for this project, so that they can improve their production and transformation practices and hence their income. Also, I understand all the local languages spoken in the municipality. So, while interviewing the women, for all those that could not speak French, I translated what they were saying for the other committee members."

Mrs GNAMMI P. Monique,
President ACFA of Materi

Review of applications

While reviewing the submissions, the requirement of having a valid identification document was lifted for female applicants at the screening stage: Their numbers were already too low compared to male applicants, and not doing so could exclude more rural women who often have no ID documents. To promote more applications from women and more engagement in agricultural entrepreneurship, female candidates' applications received systematic a 10-point bonus.

Furthermore, the minimum score for preselection was lowered for women (30/60 versus 40/60 for men).

Interview with candidates

With women's long-distance travel constraints, their selection interviews were relocated to district capitals. This created equal opportunities between men and women at this stage of the selection process.



Women's local community networks were also used to facilitate young women's access to information.

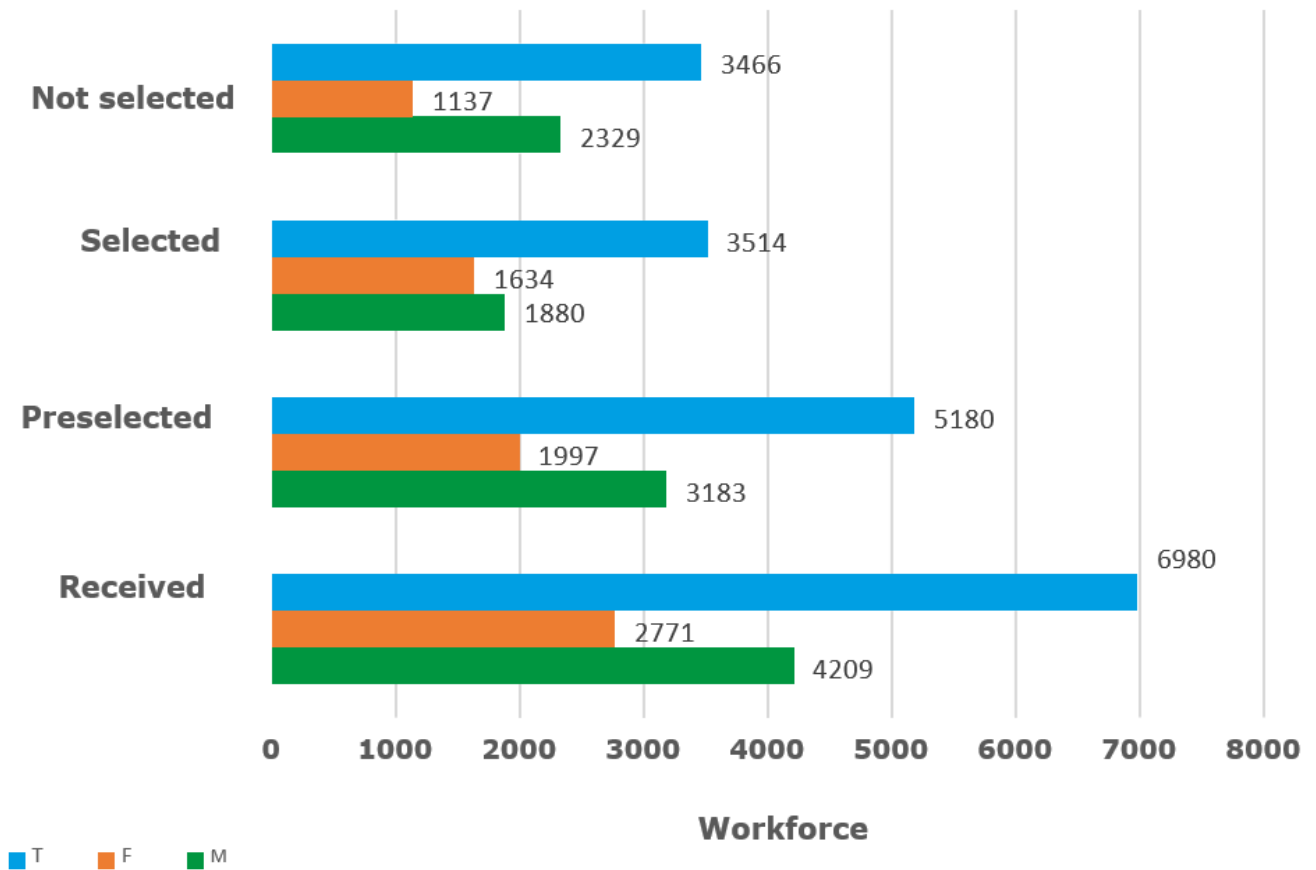
Results

The results of these different process steps are shown in the figure below.

Out of a total of 6,980 applications received, 4,209 were from men and 2,771 from women, i.e. 60% and 40% respectively. The lower proportion of women applicants reflects the reality of the municipalities involved in youth entrepreneurship in the four selected sectors: soya, market gardening, small ruminant, and poultry farming. Indeed, according to findings of the preliminary market study carried out in the planning stage of the EJASA project, the proportion of young women owning their agribusinesses is 47% (all value chains combined for the four targeted sectors) compared to 53% for men. However, they are found mainly in the processing side of the soya and market gardening sectors, where they represent 61% against 39% for men.

For these sectors, women do indeed have greater access to the primary resources needed for processing (pressing and cooking utensils, basins, firewood, water, etc.) than those for production (land, fertilizers, seeds) and for marketing (financial capital, means of transport).

To correct this gap, criteria for reviewing each application were defined taking women's constraints into account. These criteria made it possible to preselect 1,997 female applicants (39% of applications received) and 3,183 male applicants (61%). Similarly, the complementary criteria, defined at the interview stage with the candidates (female candidate = 10 points; Male candidate = 0 points), contributed to an increase in the number of women. At the end of the process, 3,514 applications were selected, 47% for women and 53% for men.



The rejected applications, particularly those from women, were due to a lack of details about the chosen sectors/value chains, to a mismatch between the candidate's sector of activity and those targeted by the project, and to the non-attendance in one of the process steps. In addition, the absence of some women in the interview phase was due to the failure to obtain their husbands' consent. As a result, the project team engaged in raising awareness and negotiation with their husbands, with the involvement of community leaders, in an effort to recover these young women for the selection process of the second cohort.

Success factors

The following factors facilitated the achievement of the above-noted results:

- The positive discrimination measures taken in favour of women applicants considering their social constraints.
- The decisive role played by women active in networks, in encouraging their peers to apply.
- The representation of women, albeit weak, in the Municipal Selection Committee (MSC) facilitated women's engagement in the process.

The testimonies gathered from these women members of the MSC provide insight into their pivotal role in engaging young female agri-entrepreneurs in the process.

Significant challenges and lessons learned

During the process, a significant number of preselected candidates were absent at the interview stage. In Banikoara, there were 87 absentees out of 794 total participants in the interview stages (of which 34 out of 221 women). The members of the MSC and some interviewees believed that these absences were due to limited access to the communication channels (telephone and radio announcement)

used to invite the candidates to their interviews. Also, the location for the group interview was too remote from the places of residence of some candidates.

From these challenges and the approaches implemented to solve them, we note that:

- The empowerment of women on the municipal selection committee facilitated the mobilisation of women candidates.
- Networks of women farmers (cooperatives, groups or associations of women producers or processors of agricultural products) are effective means for transmitting information to women.

Consolidation avenues

Some aspects of the process need to be improved in order to achieve the objective of "50% female and 50% male" in future cohorts. For instance, the selection committee, along with the SNV team and its partner NGOs will have to widen the "broadcasting" of the call for applications by adding new communication channels that are closer and more accessible to women, including the village crier and councillors, as well as women's groups at the grassroots level. Similarly, women members within the selection committees will need to strengthen information sharing about the project by organising information sessions for members of their cooperatives or production/processing associations.

In addition, to facilitate women's participation in all steps of the process, in relation to their travel constraints, meeting locations must be closer to the villages where these women live. This recommendation must be supported by organising social negotiation sessions, with help from community leaders, to obtain husband's consent for women who want to participate in the program.

Conclusion

The gendered selection process for young agri-entrepreneurs organized by SNV was based on observed gaps in accessing agricultural entrepreneurship opportunities between young men and women in the departments of Alibori and Atacora (access and control of land and other production inputs, participation in the decision-making process, access to information and training, etc.). Luckily, SNV's selection process made it possible to account for these gaps and select 47% of women and 53% of men for the project. The next cohort will benefit from new ways to strengthen these gender equality selection mechanisms.

In order to retain the number of women selected throughout the process, a certain number of actions are planned. This includes integrating them into business networks and exchange forums, in order to reduce their constraints, advocating with their spouses and policymakers, organising technical capacity-building sessions tuned to their needs, and facilitating access to markets and financial resources.

Note: Market Analysis Report of the Value Chains of the Soybean, Small Ruminant and Poultry sectors carried out under the EJASA Project, SNV, April 2021.

EJASA Technical and Financial Partners



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