

SUSTAINABLE DIETS FOR ALL

REFLECTIONS  
SERIES

# Promoting women's influence in their food systems

Womens' influence within  
food systems outcomes in the  
Sustainable Diets for All programme

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# ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CAG	consumer advocacy group
CoW	Coalition of the Willing
DACO	district agricultural coordinating office
KRC	Kabarole Research and Resource Centre
MEL	Monitoring, evaluation and learning
SD4All	Sustainable Diets for All
ZAW	Zambia Alliance of Women

# SUMMARY

Despite playing multiple key roles in all food systems, as producers, processors, sellers, consumers, and preparers of food, women's voices are often not heard. Women are often absent from spaces where decisions are made that impact their lives, including those relating to food systems and policy at different levels. And where they are present, they often are not able to speak up, and when they do, are often not heard. When decisions are being made that impact women, especially those from marginalised groups, women's representatives with substantive voice and leadership need to be included beyond just being merely present, but as equal leaders and decision makers.

This paper presents a collection of cases where, with support from SD4All, women demonstrated enhanced advocacy capacity. SD4All partners worked with them to develop and harness their individual and collective capacities, and channel them towards the change they wanted to see. As activists, educators, advocates, knowledge-bearers, decision makers, researchers and leaders, women were themselves influencing other food system actors, including powerholders and duty-bearers. The paper also highlights key lessons emerging on what worked well in supporting women's advocacy capacity, that can be used to inform future work.

# INTRODUCTION

Women play multiple key roles in food systems – as producers, processors, sellers, consumers and preparers of food. But their voices are seldom heard. Women are often absent from spaces where decisions are made that impact their lives, including those relating to food systems and policy at different levels. And where they are present, they are often unable to speak up, and when they do they are often not heard.

When decisions are being made that impact women, especially those from marginalised groups, women's representatives with substantive voice and leadership need to be included as leaders and decision makers rather than merely being present. For women to be able to express themselves and effect the change they want to see, they need to have individual capacities, including their health, self-confidence, aspirations and knowledge, and they need the conviction that they can make a difference. As groups of individuals with common concerns, these individual capacities can be pooled. Through mutual support, solidarity and collaboration, the collective capacities can be channelled to advance their interests by organising and engaging in joint action in advocacy. In an enabling environment, and with sufficient resources, women can translate their individual or collective capacities into action to influence the decision making in social and political processes (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007; Zanella and Maassen, 2011; Klugman, Jeni et al., 2014).

## **SD4All's intervention**

The Sustainable Diets for All programme (SD4All), funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2016 to 2020, sought to improve access to sustainable, diverse, healthy and nutritious food for low-income citizens in Bolivia, Indonesia, Kenya, Uganda and Zambia. The programme was coordinated by Hivos and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), as part of the Citizen Agency Consortium, under the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs' 'Dialogue and Dissent' programme. Central to SD4All was putting the voices and choices of

consumers and producers at the heart of food systems, through strengthening the advocacy capacity of civil society organisations and citizens to shape discourse around food, and the policies and practices of different food systems actors at different levels – from household to international (Hivos and IIED, 2019; Lartey, 2020).

Although it was not designed as a women-specific programme, it was important to ensure that SD4All met the gendered needs and priorities of women and advanced their empowerment and gender equality within food systems. The programme sought to achieve this through standalone women's empowerment interventions and through mainstreaming gender, in line with Hivos' Gender Equality and Diversity Inclusion Strategy. However, the programme faced difficulties in integrating gender. Efforts to better integrate gender throughout the programme were hampered by various significant factors, including limited access to technical gender expertise and the types of information and insights necessary for designing, implementing and measuring progress in a gender responsive manner. (I&S Consulting, 2020). However, SD4All generated cases where women demonstrated enhanced advocacy capacity because of its interventions. SD4All partners worked with women to develop and harness their individual and collective capacities, and channel them towards the change they wanted to see. As activists, educators, advocates, knowledge-bearers, decision makers, researchers and leaders, women were themselves influencing other food system actors, including powerholders and duty-bearers.

This paper presents a collection of such cases identified through a review of SD4All literature and project documentation, and through consultation with partner staff. There is a particular focus on examples from Zambia and Uganda, where SD4All partners are likely to continue to be involved in this work, through other projects. This is followed by key lessons emerging on what worked well in supporting women's advocacy capacity, that can be used to inform future work.

### Box 1. Key gender terms, as used in this report

**Gender equality** refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men, girls and boys, irrespective of being born male or female. Gender equality recognises the diversity of different groups of women and men. It is not just a women's issue; it must also involve and fully engage men.

**Gender mainstreaming (integration)** refers to the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in any area and at all levels. The ultimate goal of gender mainstreaming is to achieve gender equality. It is a strategy for making girls' and women's, as well as boy's and men's, concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes so that girls and boys and women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated.

**Empowerment** refers to increasing the personal, political, social or economic strength of individuals and communities. Empowerment of women and girls concerns women and girls gaining power and control over their own lives. It involves awareness raising, developing self confidence, expansion of choices, increased access to and control over resources and actions to transform the structures and institutions which reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and inequality. The core of empowerment lies in the ability of a person to control their own destiny. This implies that to be empowered women and girls must not only have equal capabilities (such as education and health) and equal access to resources and opportunities (such as land and

employment), but they must also have the agency to use these rights, capabilities, resources, and opportunities to make strategic choices and decisions (such as is provided through leadership opportunities and participation in political institutions).

**Gender-responsive** refers to projects, programmes, plans, actions, budgets, workplans, etc that reflect an understanding of and response to identified gender relations and roles in ways that try to address gender inequalities, including encouraging equal, active participation, equal opportunities and fair distribution of benefits. Gender responsiveness is accomplished through gender analysis and gender inclusiveness.

**Gender analysis** refers to the critical examination of how differences in gender roles, activities, needs, opportunities and rights/entitlements affect men, women, girls and boys in certain situations or contexts. Gender analysis examines the relationships between women and men and their access to and control of resources and the constraints they face relative to each other. A gender analysis should be integrated into the humanitarian needs assessment and in all sector assessments or situational analyses to ensure that gender-based injustices and inequalities are not exacerbated by humanitarian interventions, and that when possible greater equality and justice in gender relations are promoted.

Sources: Hivos Gender Equality and Diversity Inclusion Strategy (Lucy W. Mung'ala, 2018); UNICEF Gender equality: Glossary of terms and concepts (UNICEF, 2017)

# OUTCOMES

## Women, as members of their vendors association, influencing the local municipality

### Context

In Fort Portal, Uganda, informal street food vending has provided employment to many people (80% of whom are women and mostly single parents) despite the colonial era Public Health Act of 1935, which outlawed it. It also plays a key part in the region's urban food and nutrition security (Businge and Shariff, 2020). Women also dominate in the sale of some of the most affordable street food, especially the traditional bean and vegetable stews served with maize meal, peanuts, matooke (a starchy variety of banana) or potato, which was also found to be more nutritious than the dishes sold by men (Vorley et al., 2016, 2020; Businge and Shariff, 2020). Although informal street food vending played a major role in providing food to people in the town, including those with low incomes like students, motorcycle riders and taxi drivers, the vendors faced various challenges. Relations with municipal authorities were hostile, with local health authorities perceiving the food to be unhealthy and unsafe and the vendors non-compliant with food safety regulations. And although they paid the local taxes, the vendors were often harassed by authorities for illegally occupying public space and not holding health certificates (Vorley et al., 2020). Despite being assertive and confident individuals, the vendors had limited influencing power, as they operated independently and were not organised as a collective with a united voice. A 2015 study also found that women vendors and their children were at high risk of gender-based violence and sexual exploitation, especially at night and when walking long distances to fetch water (Vorley et al., 2016; Businge and Shariff, 2020).

Before the SD4All programme started, KRC mapped and profiled the street food vendors in Fort Portal and established relationships with five of them, who were considered to be enthusiastic and proactive in mobilising others for meetings. KRC also established the Kabarole 'food lab' (see Box 2), which as a multi-actor platform, provided a space for the street food vendors to raise their concerns with other food system stakeholders and actors, including those in local government. KRC supported them through training in addressing food safety and hygiene issues and in developing their advocacy capacities so they could lobby

the local government for desired services. KRC and other food system stakeholders involved in the food lab, including the food vendors, lobbied local councillors and the law enforcement team.

### Box 2. The Food Change Lab approach in the Sustainable Diets for All programme

The Food Change Lab approach is a multi-actor innovation process that lies at the heart of the SD4ALL programme. It brings together a diverse set of stakeholders – from low-income consumers, farmers, producers, processors, vendors and traders to private sector, market and political actors who do not normally come into contact with each other – in a safe space to address pressing issues in the food system. By inviting all participants to speak and listen with an open mind to differing voices and perspectives, the food lab gives actors who are seldom listened to a voice, enhancing stakeholders' collective understanding of the food system and allowing them to reflect on their own role.

The labs take a systems approach that integrates thinking, relating and doing, aiming to catalyse not just tangible, immediate change – such as new or adapted policies or new investments – but also longer-term transformational outcomes such as strengthening capacities, relationships and trust between actors. The labs help foster multi-stakeholder dialogue to build coalitions of change. They also contribute to generating new ideas and testing these on the ground.

Source: *Advocacy toolkit. People centred advocacy for a more sustainable food system* (de Toma, 2018)

### SD4All intervention

KRC worked with the vendors, the majority of whom were women, and called a general assembly of 200 food vendors to raise awareness of the benefits and process of establishing a vendors association. KRC supported them in establishing themselves as an association, developing a constitution and formally registering as a vendors association (Vorley, Guarín and Nicolini, 2020). In a second general assembly, attended by 350 food vendors, 70% of whom were women, KRC worked with the membership to identify the main challenges they

faced and propose how to address them. Lack of space to conduct business free from harassment, and limited access to clean water emerged as the priority issues. KRC also trained the participants in advocacy planning and execution, including identifying targets for their advocacy efforts and engagement methods.

### **Resulting women's capacity for influencing**

As mentioned above, the street food vendors established and registered with the local authority as a collective, with women elected to executive positions including treasurer and vice chair. Unlike before, when they operated as individuals and were often written off as law breakers, the street food vendors were able to operate as one, towards a common cause. The chair and vice chair attended a SD4All multi-actor meeting, where they represented the interests of the mostly women association members through a presentation. They made public commitments on food safety and hygiene and shared the experiences and priorities of the members. The association subsequently acted on the priority issues affecting its members. Along with a petition that KRC had supported them to formulate, the association members lobbied the Fort Portal Municipality to designate sites for trade and to install streetlights and running water facilities on the sites. The Fort Portal municipality recognised street food vending for its vital role in the nutrition security of low-income consumers and allocated 11 new sites to the informal food vendors and included ten water points in the municipality plans. These measures would be good for business as they would enhance food hygiene and safety through improved access to running water. They would also contribute to reducing gender-based violence and reducing the risk of harm to vendors, particularly women and their children at night. And with representation in the KRC-facilitated multi-stakeholder coalition – the Coalition of the Willing (CoW) – food vendors had a voice in shaping the calls for policy reform. This resulted in the review of local policies and the passing of the Kabarole Production and Environment Ordinance in February 2019. The coalition was also supported by SD4All to target the outdated national Public Health Act, which remains a major issue (Vorley, Guarín and Nicolini, 2020).

In addition, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and to address the challenge of accessing capital to revive their businesses post lockdown, the women members decided to establish a women-only credit savings and loan group. With support from KRC, they submitted a concept note to Hivos for a grant, which was successful. The women reported a 100% rate of repayment over three months between August and November 2020.

### **Women members of consumer advocacy group taking action in Rwenzori, Uganda**

#### **Context**

Rwenzori is an important agricultural region in Uganda with a tradition of exporting food, mainly via informal channels, to the capital and neighbouring countries. But despite this the Rwenzori region is food insecure. According to a Ministry of Health indicator survey, one of its districts, Kabarole, was one of the districts with the highest number cases of malnutrition, accounting for more than 65% of cases of stunted growth and 53% of cases of anaemia among children aged between six months and four years.

Prior to SD4All, KRC had approached a group of women who had self-organised and mobilised to establish a listeners' club of three thousand listeners. These women emerged as leaders taking action to address issues of food security and promote traditional foods in their communities. Each month, one of the women would use her personal resources to host a family food fair which other group members and members of her community could attend. During these food fairs, the women would conduct demonstrations on how to prepare traditional foods, and share information to promote household food security, including through traditional storage approaches, based on what they had learnt from their elders.

#### **SD4All intervention**

SD4All sought to increase household production and consumption of nutrient-rich indigenous crops to promote diversity in household diets and protect them from extinction. A key strategy was to support the establishment of a critical mass of people and communities promoting consumption of the traditional foods, by supporting the



Onion seller, Mugusu weekly market, Uganda (Bill Vorley)

listeners' club leaders to scale up their approach. KRC supported the women to establish as a consumer advocacy group (CAG) and provided them with training on nutrition, improved food presentation and reflection on the seed system and production, so that they could incorporate these issues into their messaging. KRC also provided the women with mentoring support to help them scale up their approach through demonstrating and supporting others to apply it in their communities.

### **Resulting women's capacity for influencing**

The CAG members continued to champion practices to improve household food and nutrition security, including through incorporating traditional foods into their diets and educating their peers and communities. In doing this they were also training potential trainers and champions, which would cascade their approach to other villages. CAG members also played an active role shaping and participating in KRC's TV programme. Two members also represented women's interests in a two-day multi-stakeholder forum event attended by food system stakeholders, including

representatives of key groups (local, district and national politicians; farmers; religious leaders; informal food vendors etc). As a result of this event the CoW, to which the two CAG women were appointed, and 18 other local food systems actors and stakeholders shaped amendments to local food policy.

### **Women from low-income neighbourhoods in La Paz voice their collective needs and concerns**

#### **Context**

In Bolivia, women lack voice in private and public spaces. Men's voices tend to dominate while women's perspectives and ideas are often overlooked, including in decision-making processes related to food. A gender assessment commissioned by Hivos highlighted the need for SD4All to investigate the different living conditions of the women interacting with the programme and to create spaces for collective analysis and reflection on the specific needs of women and on their status and position in the current system.



Market diner, La Paz (Mauricio Panozo/Hivos)

#### SD4All intervention

In response to this finding from the gender assessment, SD4All conducted a women-only food lab initiative. This involved a mini-lab session, followed by a women-only food lab. The latter involved women government representatives, cooks, representatives from youth and gastronomic movements, researchers, entrepreneurs, nutritionists, urban producers, consumers and NGOs, as well as strategic stakeholders and potential donors, coming together with women from low-income neighbourhoods for dialogue (Szucs, 2020). During the mini-lab session, SD4All supported these women to identify, as a group, their priority food system concerns. Their representatives then went on to present these concerns during the women's food lab.

During the mini-lab session, SD4All supported 60 women from low-income neighbourhoods in La Paz, Bolivia to share experiences and identify the priority issues they wanted to be addressed. The programme also helped them identify representatives and provided public speaking and deep listening training to enable their meaningful engagement and participation during a women-only multi-stakeholder forum facilitated by the programme. Eight representatives from the group participated in the forum and represented the interests of their peers. They worked with 19 other food systems stakeholders to propose solutions to their priority issues.

#### Resulting women's capacity for influencing

Using the mini-lab process, SD4All generated a constituency of women from low-income neighbourhoods establishing common ground and shared priorities for action. The programme also supported the strengthening of leadership skills for the women participating and democratic appointment of individual leaders to represent them.

Women, as consumers and food preparers, went on to voice their own shared priority concerns with women powerholders and influencers, including within the programme, and worked with them to analyse their main challenges in achieving healthier food consumption, and identify multi-actor solutions. SD4All had expected issues of access to healthy, affordable and varied food in the neighbourhoods to be the primary concern for the women. But this was not the case. Women prioritised concerns about unequal distribution of labour in 'food work', with women taking on more of the burden in purchasing and preparing, while often having limited decision-making power over the household diet. Men's preferences often determined what foods households ate.

Rather than SD4All partner staff appropriating their voices, women from low-income neighbourhoods were able to represent their own interests as key actors in the local food systems with other food system stakeholders whom they



Women street vendor selling food, Bolivia (Mauricio Panozo/Hivos)

would not usually interact with. They were also able to play an active role in deciding on the priority areas to be addressed and in shaping the solutions and the direction and language of SD4All's intervention. In so doing, SD4All not only saw women as beneficiaries of its interventions, but also as knowledge-bearers, decision makers, leaders and actors in addressing the food system problems they and their communities face (Szucs, 2020).

### Women food vendors conducting research in La Paz

#### Context

In La Paz, traditional market eateries are important sources of cooked food for working class people. Despite this, the perspectives of market cooks, most of whom are women, are typically overlooked in policy discussions and by the public eye. Women running these traditional eateries in two La Paz markets are facing increasing competition from western fast-food outlets.

#### SD4All intervention

SD4All obtained the consent of women cooked-food vendors in the markets to work together. They conducted interviews, focus groups and workshops with them to gather information about their experiences and identify possible topics of interest for the research. Their priority concern was how to increase sales in light of the decline in customers due to increasing competition from the nearby fast-food

outlets. To address this, the research focused on gaining a better understanding of customers' views and preferences. SD4All worked with the women to decide on the research approach. The cooked-food vendors distributed to their customers survey questionnaires whose design was based on the information gathered during the workshops and conversations, and which were validated by the women. SD4All then discussed the results with the women vendors to ensure that they would be useful to the vendors and their businesses.

It is worth noting that the research conducted by the women was oriented towards improving market competitiveness, rather than towards influencing public food policy – as envisioned by the programme. SD4All adopted a flexible approach, compromising on its research agenda and letting the food vendors define the objectives of the research.

#### Resulting women's capacity for influencing

By conducting research and being actively involved throughout the research cycle, the women gained a new tool to support any influencing that they might want to do, targeting actors who respond to evidence. From the evidence generated, as business owners, the women gained insights about the clients and how to sustain their businesses in the face of competition and inability to adapt without lowering their prices further (Vorley, Guarín and Nicolini, 2020).

## Twabuka Women's Club members asserting their priorities to local government actors

### Context

Zambia Alliance of Women (ZAW) is a women's organisation that takes a women's rights-based approach to promote gender equality, development and peace. Twabuka Women's Club, a member of the Zambia Alliance of Women (ZAW) in the Chikupi area of Kafue, is a women-led club with a mostly women membership. Members, who mainly grew maize, reported having limited access to technical services offered by the Ministry of Agriculture. Extension officers were not visiting their area and land was therefore not being prepared on time. There were also delays in the delivery of necessary farming inputs, which were dispatched far from the communities. Limited access to extension services also meant that women were limited in the choice of crops they could grow, because they lacked the technical knowledge of how to grow other crops successfully.

### SD4All intervention

SD4All Zambia sought to work with the members of the Twabuka Women's Club to ensure that the members had access to technical services and agricultural inputs, by creating a platform for members to engage directly with Ministry of Agriculture officials. ZAW held a one-day training to which it brought the crop specialist, extension methodology officer and block officer from the Kafue district agricultural coordinating office (DACO) of the Ministry of Agriculture, to provide information about the services they provide and the priorities for agriculture in the area. They presented this information to 100 people including club members and others from other clubs in the area. In the plenary session that followed, club members were invited to share with the officials their experiences as farmers, including their challenges and opportunities, and to share their demands with the DACO officers.

In the concluding part of the session, without prompting from ZAW, some of the women members used drama to re-enact, as a recap, the challenges and priorities they had shared, as well as the newly acquired information on services and practices. It was reported that Twabuka's members routinely used drama and song as an information sharing modality during their meetings.

## Resulting women's capacity for influencing

The women cooperative members and others from the community interacted and shared their knowledge with government officials whom they did not usually have an opportunity to meet and influence, asserting their needs and priorities. The government officials came away better informed about the challenges affecting the women farmers and ways to address them. This resulted in improved access to the preferred agricultural inputs for farmers and an observable diversification of crops in the area. Farmers reported that their households were in a better food and nutrition security position than before.

## Tusole Cooperative's leadership commit to a gender equitable leadership structure

### Context

In Zambia, SD4All is supporting women's participation in decision making in their agricultural organisations. ZAW developed a training manual for use with cooperatives to encourage greater women's involvement in farmer cooperative decision-making processes, including as cooperative executives. ZAW's approach includes providing assertiveness training for women cooperative executives to ensure they can express their views in institutional decision making. The Tusole Cooperative in Kafue is one such cooperative that ZAW worked with. Despite the majority of members being women, the cooperative, whose executive committee was chaired by a retired military colonel, was very male dominated. On a visit to the group, ZAW staff noted a patriarchal and hierarchical dynamic between the leadership and the mostly-women membership. Although women were present, often as a majority, women wouldn't speak in the first meetings with ZAW staff, which posed a major challenge in ZAW's delivery of training.

### SD4All intervention

ZAW prioritised the need to address the imbalance in the gender and power dynamics where women had limited voice, and sought to raise awareness of the issue among the members, including the leaders, and identify ways to address it. In a one-day session ZAW staff conducted gender training for the whole membership, followed by a facilitated plenary during which women and men were able

to share their experiences of their respective genders within the institution.

### **Resulting women's capacity for influencing**

In May 2020, the chair of the executive board announced the executive board's commitment to making it more gender balanced. The COVID-19 pandemic prevented the planned elections that would bring on board women, but three women were co-opted onto the committee of seven members. ZAW staff also observed during their follow-up visits to the cooperative that women were more vocal during meetings, and that the chair was supportive of gender equality.

In this example SD4All sought to address women's limited voice within the cooperative by focusing efforts on creating an enabling environment for women to speak up and be

heard. ZAW facilitated a process of dialogue between women and men members, to lay bare the gender issues within the cooperative, and to share their aspirations for the institution and the changes that would enable them to achieve them. ZAW supported key powerholders to develop their critical consciousness of the unfairness of gender inequality and shift their attitudes towards women. Through the process, the powerholders recognised women's abilities and the value and need for their representation and participation in the cooperative's leadership, and the importance of ensuring the perspectives of the membership, the majority of which is women, are taken into account. This shift was also necessary to create space for ZAW to support capacity strengthening to enable the cooperative to meet the needs and priorities of its women farmer members.

# KEY LESSONS

The previous section showcased how, despite the challenges in systematically tracking and documenting how the SD4All programme led to positive changes in women's advocacy capacities, advances were made. Below we highlight some key lessons that emerged from these cases for improving the individual and collective capacities to influence others within food systems.

## **Create safe spaces for women to develop relationships and capacities**

SD4All created safe spaces for women to prepare for participation in formal processes. In contexts and settings where women are often not heard, or are even absent or excluded, it is necessary to create safe spaces for women to be able to assert themselves to others, including project staff. Such spaces can be critical for women to share experiences with others, find common ground and establish relationships, as a starting point for establishing a collective and developing necessary advocacy-relevant skills.

In the La Paz food lab initiative, the women-only space supported by a gender expert, enabled women to share experiences and go through a process of identifying shared priority issues for them and their peers, and asserting themselves to SD4All staff. It was also a safe space for orienting women on the food lab process and selecting those who would represent their interests in the lab process. Women were also trained in public speaking and deep listening to ensure their meaningful participation during the food lab sessions. The food lab sessions, also women-only spaces supported by the gender expert, served as safe spaces for women to assert themselves to a diverse group of stakeholders and work with them in identifying solutions to the issues that mattered most to them.

## **Draw on context-specific gender information to shape interventions**

SD4All gained a good context-specific understanding of gender relations and gaps, and the challenges and opportunities for women in their various roles as food system actors, and in participating in agenda setting and policy influencing. This enabled SD4All to take a holistic approach to optimising women's agency during the La Paz food lab process. The project in La Paz was able to identify the barriers to women participating in projects and engaging

in decision-making processes, and was able to plan for implementation that would address these issues.

With a solid understanding of issues based on gender analysis, projects supporting women to enhance their advocacy capacity will be able to tailor interventions reflecting and responding to the gender disparities, and also facilitate the strategic use of the distinct capacities, knowledge and skills women and men possess. When used from the outset, such insight will enable improved costing of necessary activities and outputs, and facilitate resource allocation to enable the interventions needed to build women's capacity to influence others. Such gendered insights will also be crucial in developing monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems, with follow-up processes, to enable access to timely programme management information to monitor change, including negative impacts on women and their status and safety.

## **Include technical gender expertise within the programme team**

While every member of a project team has responsibility for identifying and addressing gender issues in their areas of responsibility, it is critical that interventions seeking to ensure equitable reach, benefit and empowerment for different groups of women and men are supported by sustained gender expertise. Technical gender experts bring high-quality technical advice based on experience and a theoretical background that other members of the project team will not necessarily understand. They can conduct gender analysis, support the development of gender-responsive research questions, objectives and M&E and follow-up processes, and pinpoint problems and provide solutions. They can also serve as champions for gender equality and provide support to programme staff, including through training, mentoring and coaching. They can support engagement of women and men and their communities on gender issues. Because they can consistently view every aspect of an intervention through a gender lens, their sustained involvement can enhance the gender-responsiveness of M&E and documenting throughout the project or research cycle.

The value of gender expertise was demonstrated in the La Paz food lab process and in ZAW's work in Kafue. The food lab process benefited from context-specific gender data

collected and drew on the insights to inform implementation with support from the gender technical expert. By ensuring that implementation was based on sound knowledge and understanding of gender-related issues, it was more likely to achieve change that genuinely met the needs and priorities of women from the low-income neighbourhoods. In Kafue, staff from ZAW were able to identify and respond to a structural issue contributing to relations between women and men, which limited the former's voice and leadership representation in their organisation.

### **Collaborate with others to establish contact and trust with women**

For projects or programmes where the organisations involved do not normally work with women, it helps to engage and work with other actors and/or organisations who have access to and experience of working with women. In Kabarole, KRC had to overcome suspicion before the street food vendors would engage with the programme. KRC staff drew on personal and family networks and links to find a few individuals who could become champions and persuade their peers to engage with SD4All and mobilise them for meetings. For example, one staff member approached food vendors whom his mother had trained, and worked with them to persuade others to engage with him and the project. In La Paz, SD4All assessed the existing structures and identified the dining area elders as the leaders in the market dining areas and collaborated with them.

In La Paz, for the food lab process, the programme worked with the Fundación Centro de Culturas Populares and Barrios de Verdad, organisations that had access to people living in low-income neighbourhoods, including women. Collaboration with women's rights organisations and activists can also serve to enhance the technical gender capacity of projects.

### **Remove barriers to women's engagement in project activities to enhance their influence over others**

Women's productive and reproductive responsibilities, limited access to resources such as transport or time, and mobility restrictions, are some of the factors that can hamper women's effective engagement with projects. It is important for projects seeking to work with women to be able to respond to issues that may prevent women from participating in project activities. ZAW holds most of its

sessions late in the morning to avoid times when women would usually be in the field. The sessions were also held outdoors and in locations where the communities lived, to ensure women did not have to travel far and could have their children with them during the sessions. ZAW also ensures that lunch and refreshments are served in the same locations and at carefully chosen times to ensure that participants stay for the full session. For the La Paz food lab initiative, SD4All used child-friendly venues with childcare services and provided transport to ensure lack of time due to childcare responsibilities and lack of financial resources did not prevent women's participation in mini-lab and food lab sessions.

### **Be prepared to allow for misalignment to secure women's buy-in for developing advocacy capacities**

In La Paz, engaging with food vendors in research and with women from low-income households in the food lab highlighted and challenged a crucial SD4All assumption that women's priorities would align with those of the programme. This misalignment can deter women from engaging with project interventions, thus undermining project reach, which in turn limits benefits to and empowerment of women. Interventions strengthening women's advocacy capacities as a key strategy towards advancing specific agendas need to be flexible and be prepared to secure buy-in and 'prove the concept'. A starting point could involve directing advocacy action towards meeting women's priorities, which may not be in direct alignment with those of the project. The priority of the women food vendors was addressing the immediate need of increasing income from business, while in the women's food lab, the immediate need was addressing unequal distribution of labour, time and decision making between women and men in households.

Such projects would also benefit from strategies to ensure sustained support for women to consolidate their advocacy capacity, so that with more confidence and time they will be able to channel it towards issues aligning with the projects. Ultimately, they could independently direct their advocacy capacity towards other issues affecting them such as gender inequality in gender-based violence, access to and control over land or other resources, and leadership in formal and informal institutions.

### **Build on women's existing capacities and initiatives**

It is not always the case that development projects build the capacity of women from nothing. As demonstrated in, though not limited to, some of the cases presented in this paper, despite the magnitude of the challenges women face, there often are existing assets, strengths, structures and initiatives that can be drawn on or built upon. In Kabarole, despite the cultural norms that mean women are often voiceless, lack of confidence and ability to assert themselves as individuals in public was not seen as a challenge. This was in stark contrast to the experience in the La Paz food lab. In this context, it was therefore most useful for SD4All to support the food vendors to consolidate these strong voices

and channel them towards a common purpose. In Kabarole, with the CAG, SD4All support built on an existing innovate initiative by a group of women who had self-organised and mobilised to address an issue that was important to them. Here SD4All's role was to support the scale-up of the approach by the women, to other villages in the district, albeit with some refinements to incorporate additional yet aligned messaging on nutrition, which had been missing. In Kafue, ZAW observed members of the women's club using their drama approach to recap to meeting attendees the insights shared and the new knowledge acquired during the community meeting. This provided ZAW with a useful opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of the session.

# CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges faced in systematically integrating gender across the programme, SD4All did contribute to women's influencing capacity, successfully supporting the translation of women's new and existing capacities into advocacy action, albeit modestly in some cases. Women were able to work collectively to identify their priority concerns, based on their needs and aspirations. They were able to speak up and make known their preferences, demands, views and interests and shape and share in discussions and decisions that affect them, in some cases representing the interests of their peers who had entrusted them with the role. They sought to influence household dietary choices through educating and persuading members of their communities. In other cases, they spoke up to duty-bearers, powerholders, and decision makers they had not previously had good relations with, and came away having found common ground and even building alliances with them towards a shared purpose. They also shaped and conducted SD4All research and generated their own evidence to identify opportunities for enhancing the competitiveness of their businesses and for influencing duty-bearers.

SD4All supported women's engagement beyond the stereotypical and limited roles that development policies and interventions in the food and nutrition sector often portray them as: smallholder producers, food preparers within households, mothers, research subjects, beneficiaries and victims. In one case, SD4All even supported women to scale up an already existing initiative that they had independently developed and implemented. The programme helped demonstrate to other food system actors, and the women involved themselves, that women can effect the change they want to see, as development partners and implementers, activists, educators, leaders, advocates, knowledge-bearers, decision makers, researchers and leaders on issues that matter most to them. It also highlighted the need for women to be recognised and included in food system discourse, debates, and decision-making processes in all these conventional, and non-conventional, often undervalued, roles.

By contributing towards women's capacity to influence decisions and decision-making processes related to food systems, SD4All's legacy could be that the women from disadvantaged or underserved backgrounds will continue to develop their advocacy capacities and channel them towards other issues that are important in other areas of their lives, including gender inequality and under-representation of women like them in leadership at all levels. In addition to showcasing the advances achieved under SD4All, it is also important to note what could have been done differently, particularly as work is likely to continue in Zambia and Uganda. Despite efforts to develop the capacity of staff in gender mainstreaming, SD4All faced challenges across all the regions. The programme's capacity to plan for and track changes in women were limited, as was its ability to track changes in the social, economic, and cultural factors and mechanisms keeping them in situations of disadvantage and subordination compared to other actors in food systems and other areas of their lives. Thus, SD4All may have achieved additional changes unrecorded in the programme. With access to gender expertise and gender information, the programme could have designed interventions that were better tailored to gender issues in lobbying and advocacy for sustainable diets or food systems. This could have contributed to more ambitious outcomes for women within the same timeframe, in terms of breadth and sustainability. It is hoped that, as part of SD4All's legacy, projects seeking to enhance women's influencing capacity, whether they be women-focused or not, will draw lessons from the experiences of the SD4All programme.

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