



Women engaged in soybean farming- Nabulenje, Malawi

Pivoting mid-intervention: How MOST used sex- disaggregated data to adjust action and enhance gendered impact

Executive summary

This case study offers a tangible example of how the Malawi Oilseed Sector Transformation (MOST) programme used adaptive management, underpinned by robust sex-disaggregated data, to pivot an intervention to become more impactful for women. It is intended to demonstrate how iterative learning – evaluating results and adjusting action – can be used to radically improve the gender-responsiveness of interventions. The case study maps out the adaptive decision-making process, showing how the MOST programme firstly built proof of concept of a market for inoculant in Malawi, and then worked with its partner to adjust their marketing and dissemination strategy to better target female smallholders. Reflecting on learnings, the case study also presents key lessons for other market systems programmes wanting to adapt interventions to become more gender-responsive.

Background

AIM OF THE CASE STUDY

This case study aims to provide a tangible example of how the MOST programme used adaptive management, underpinned by robust sex-disaggregated data, to pivot an intervention to become more impactful for women. It is intended to demonstrate how iterative learning – evaluating results and adjusting action – can be used to radically improve the gender-responsiveness of interventions. Informed by interviews with MOST's private sector partner Agri-Input Supplies Limited (AISL), and focus group discussions with beneficiaries, the case study also aims to provide a more nuanced picture of the outcomes associated with women's use of inoculant.

INTRODUCING MOST

MOST is a DFID-funded market systems programme working across Malawi's cotton, groundnut, sesame, soybean and sunflower markets. Since its inception in 2014, the MOST programme has increased the incomes of 83,123 poor men and women (as at August 2017) by supporting private sector actors to pilot and scale up innovative and inclusive business practices. These practices – which include facilitating improved access to farm inputs, finance, and agronomic information, as well increasing rural value-addition opportunities – not only deliver meaningful developmental outcomes for poor smallholder farmers, but crucially also present commercially attractive

MOST
Malawi Oilseed Sector Transformation



**Incomes of 83,123
poor men and
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since MOST
inception in 2014**

**Target number of
women benefiting
from increased
income at August
2017: 29,000
Achieved: 37,048**

“Most women are the ones who are actually planting, and doing the soya and the groundnuts. If you don’t target the people that are involved in that, then it means that you have mistargeted” – Linda Dembo, AISL Sales & Marketing Manager

models for private sector actors. This ‘win-win’ model has been critical to ensuring that MOST’s impact is sustainable beyond the programme’s lifetime, avoiding the market distortions inherent in direct delivery, interventionist approaches pursued by conventional private sector development programmes.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAMME’S GENDER APPROACH

Beyond realising ‘pro-poor’ impact, MOST is committed to ensuring that women – the primary workforce in Malawi’s oilseed production – benefit from improvements in the competitiveness of market systems. To do this, MOST adopted a gender approach which recognises the central role of the family-based smallholding in Malawi, and women’s critical position within (not separate from) it. While many programmes have sought to isolate women from the wider household to adopt a women-targeted approach, in MOST’s experience this risks ignoring the complex interrelation between family-based and income-generating activities within smallholdings in Malawi. The programme was concerned that this approach could in fact undermine the potential overall impact for women and their families, and lead to tensions or even conflict within the household.

Instead, MOST’s interventions have been designed to recognise oilseed production as a family-based affair while simultaneously increasing women’s opportunity to participate in those activities with greatest value capture and personal agency, namely: engaging in transactions (e.g. purchases of inputs, sales of crop); registering as the signatory of a contract-based arrangement; and influencing decision-making as it relates to the business and the household.

The programme has also made particular efforts to understand the potential for gender-differentiated outcomes through the robust use of sex-disaggregated data and further qualitative enquiry. The results of this approach speak for themselves. The programme has consistently outperformed its target for reaching female beneficiaries, with 37,048 women benefiting from increased incomes as at August 2017, significantly above the target of 29,000 for that point in the programme.

Close-up on the intervention: MOST support in promoting inoculant to smallholder farmers

UNDERSTANDING THE MARKET CONSTRAINT AND INTRODUCING AISL

Smallholder yields for soybean are low in Malawi, at an average of just over 800 kg/ha equivalent against 2mT/ha – the figure that experts suggest is an achievable yield for smallholder producers. When the MOST programme began in April 2014, it identified access to inoculant – an agricultural input that, when applied correctly, can increase yields for smallholders by around 30 per cent – as a key constraint to soybean growers’ productivity.

At that time, the Department of Agriculture Research Services (DARS) was mandated to supply inoculant, but only supplied approximately 15,000 sachets annually, often to commercial or well-connected farmers. MOST identified this as a clear business opportunity, and started to explore the potential for private sector production and distribution of inoculant.

In addition to engaging with DARS, which recognised that it could not manage or develop the supply, MOST engaged with a small Malawian company, AISL, who had identified the opportunity to establish a commercial laboratory to produce inoculant. By facilitating meetings between the two organisations and helping to build trust, MOST accelerated the signing of an MoU between DARS and AISL to pilot the private production and distribution of soybean inoculant, using the DARS approved and released strain.

SEASON 1: TESTING THE MARKET FOR INOCULANT AND BUILDING TRUST WITH AISL

During the first agricultural season (2014/15), the priority for MOST and AISL was to test the market for commercially-produced soybean inoculant, targeted at smallholders. While positively impacting women was of course a priority for MOST from the very beginning, the programme team made a strategic decision to avoid explicit gender targets or pushing a ‘gendered agenda’ at AISL too hard, too

Access to inoculant can increase yields by around 30%

MOST interventions have been designed to recognise oilseed production as a family-based affair.



Soybean

“Before using inoculant, on my land I produced 10 to 12 sacks of soybean, but now I’m harvesting 24 sacks” – Female smallholder farmer

and through which channels. This revealed that although the agro-dealer model had been successful in its overall outreach to smallholder farmers (10,979) who bought 64% of the total sales, purchasing levels of inoculant were significantly lower among women (22%) than men (78%). When MOST shared the findings with AISL, they were shocked. Linda Dembo, Sales & Marketing Manager for AISL explained: “We were surprised...it was unexpected because soybean is mostly taken as a women’s crop [...] To see that women were not actually able to access the inoculant meant that their production levels were still the same, that they were still doing things the traditional way instead of adopting this new technology.”

AISL perceived this as a serious problem, recognising female smallholders as a prime target client base: “Most women are the ones who are actually planting, and doing the soya and the groundnuts. If you don’t target the people that are involved in that, then it means that you have mistargeted”, explained Linda Dembo.

AISL and MOST sought to understand the reasons for women’s lower purchasing rates. They identified two probable drivers:

- women’s more restricted mobility meaning they may have not been able to travel to agro-dealers, who are based in trading centres typically some distance away from villages;
- women’s more limited access to information meaning they may simply have been unaware of inoculant and its benefits.

soon. Instead, given the high risk associated with launching a new product into the Malawian market, MOST firstly chose to test the initiative to build proof of concept, then if successful, MOST intended to tweak the model to become more impactful for women. This incremental and iterative approach was considered essential to building trust with AISL, which in turn, would make AISL more responsive to subsequent suggestions.

In this first season, AISL produced 20,000 sachets, selling around 15,000 in a three-month period through agro-dealers and directly to institutional buyers. This served as the proof of concept needed to demonstrate a market for soybean inoculant among smallholder farmers.

SEASON 2: SUPPORTING AISL TO EXPLORE A RANGE OF DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS AND EVALUATING RESULTS

In the second season of the partnership (2015/16), MOST supported AISL to explore a broader range of marketing and distribution channels for soybean inoculant. While Malawi’s crowded donor environment meant that NGOs and development projects remain important buyers, MOST encouraged AISL to sell to agro-dealers, recognising this channel as a commercially sustainable, long-term alternative. In addition, farmer organisations were targeted as a third distribution channel. In this second season, AISL distributed 52,759 sachets, selling 49,214 sachets, further demonstrating the market for inoculant.

Consistent with its iterative learning approach, at the end of the second season MOST undertook a rapid survey to build a clearer picture of who was purchasing the inoculant

SEASONS 3 & 4: USING SEX-DISAGGREGATED SALES DATA TO PIVOT THE INTERVENTION TO TARGET MORE WOMEN

In the third season (2016/17), MOST then worked with AISL to adjust action based on the two drivers identified. This involved supporting AISL to adapt its distribution and marketing model to more effectively target female smallholder farmers, as summarised in the table below:

This concerted effort to diversify AISL’s distribution and marketing approach to better target women paid off, with 30,724 women purchasing inoculant in season 2016/17.

Result: win-win business model that delivers commercial value for AISL and real benefits for female smallholders

DELIVERING COMMERCIAL VALUE FOR AISL

For AISL, the commercial benefit of adopting a marketing

DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS CATERING TO WOMEN'S RESTRICTED MOBILITY

On the distribution side, AISL and MOST identified the potential to use farmers organisations (with members engaged in soybean production) as a parallel distribution channel, recognising their closer proximity to smallholders and high female membership base. Although some farmers organisations had bought inoculant through NGOs in seasons 1 and 2, AISL did not have a deliberate strategy to target female smallholders through this channel. However, seeing the low sales to women through the agro-dealer channel, MOST chose to proactively support AISL to distribute through farmer associations in high potential areas in season 3. According to AISL, this approach was designed to “bring inoculant where women are”. The commercial contract and pricing structure differed from those arrangements with agro-dealers as the particular storage requirements for inoculant (requiring cool storage) and the remoteness of farmer organisations (which make regular deliveries challenging) meant that AISL needed orders of inoculant to be made and paid for in advance. To incentivise cooperative members to purchase inoculant and to build trust in the pre-payment model, AISL offered a discounted price, making the inoculant more affordable for female smallholders.

MARKETING CHANNELS CATERING TO WOMEN'S LOWER AWARENESS LEVELS

On the marketing side, AISL and MOST developed a number of strategies to specifically increase women's awareness of inoculant and its benefits. The first step was targeting women's existing networks (e.g. savings groups and farmers organisations) as entry points for disseminating targeted information on the benefits of – and instructions for using – inoculant. In practice this involved educating cooperative leaders and government extension workers already engaged with farmer organisations, who then shared the information with female smallholders. Demonstration plots were also set up in the villages, with female staff demonstrating planting practices and how to mix inoculant at times when female smallholders could easily attend. Adverts were also run on local radio, featuring female voices and explaining the availability of inoculant at farmer organisations and the pre-payment model.

and distribution strategy that explicitly targets women has been significant. In addition to supporting business growth, AISL has now also captured a previously underserved client segment. While it is of course likely that some women will access inoculant by proxy (when bought by their husbands through agro-dealers and shared within the household), since adopting multiple distributing channels, AISL believes there is greater advantage in realising direct sales to women. As Linda Dembo explains: “For me, from a business perspective, I am interested in them buying the product and being able to use it correctly. So if someone goes to buy the product and there's someone else actually using it, there's a chance that the knowledge on how to use it is not going to be passed on”.

By selling directly to women, AISL minimises the risk of embedded information not being passed on, which in turn is likely to increase the effectiveness of use, and consolidate AISL's reputation and customer loyalty. Indeed, when meeting with female inoculant users, all the women demonstrated a strong awareness of how to use the product and the mixing technique.

REALISING GENUINE BENEFITS FOR FEMALE SMALLHOLDERS

The intervention's impact extends well beyond AISL's bottom line, with male and female smallholders unanimously reporting positive change in their incomes and resulting effects on their lives since using inoculant.

Female smallholders reported significant increases in their yield, with several women describing a doubling in their crop production: “Before using inoculant, on my land I produced 10 to 12 sacks of soybean, but now I'm harvesting 24 sacks”, explained one woman, to the agreement of other female smallholders present. Another was so impressed with the inoculant's effect on her yield that she asserted “I'm never going to not use inoculant again”.

Among all inoculant users that we spoke to, the increase in yield had translated into meaningful increases in income, which is borne out by the rigorous impact studies that MOST carries out using DCED methodologies. Both women and men stressed the critical influencing role that women have over how this income is spent. It was explained that typically, in households where women are married, whoever sells the produce to the cooperative (irrespective as to whether it is a man or a woman) then presents the earnings to their spouse, together with the sales receipt.

Once the money is presented, the tendency is for couples to discuss jointly how the income should be used. While men will occasionally make a unilateral decision, our discussions revealed that the majority of spending decisions are arrived at through dialogue, negotiation, and agreement. In the words of one woman: “We both bring money to the table, then we think about what our priorities are. We discuss it together”. Men mostly

KEY LESSONS FOR PROGRAMMES WANTING TO ADAPT INTERVENTIONS TO BECOME MORE GENDER-RESPONSIVE

An incremental, iterative approach to integrating gender can be a more powerful strategy to impact women, building proof of concept and establishing partner trust which gives them more confidence in co-creating strategies to improve the targeting of women.

Sex-disaggregated data has the potential to be more than just a ‘donor requirement’. When used in real-time, it can drive effective business decisions, including customer profiling, and shifting commercial models to more effectively target female segments.

Selecting partners who demonstrate a willingness to explore the potential commercial case for more gender-inclusive practices increases the probability of realising gendered impact.

mirrored this response, with one explaining: “I am responsible for selling the soybean, but I bring the money home and we decide together what to spend it on”. Although traditional gender norms and power imbalances do remain, the degree of communal activity and joint decision-making observed in our engagement with inoculant users suggests the smallholding/household as primarily a site of collaboration. This corroborates the MOST programme team’s original view on oilseed production as a family-based affair.

The additional income earned from using inoculant has been used both for enhancing the wellbeing of families and reinvesting into additional entrepreneurial activities. Women in particular spoke of being able to pay for school fees and initiation ceremonies for their children; using the earnings to finance agricultural inputs for the following season; as well as paying a proportion of their earnings into savings and loans groups. In addition, both men and women spoke of using the extra income to purchase land, buy bricks (for construction) and furnish their homes.

Towards wider systems change?

Beyond MOST’s involvement in the intervention, AISL has continued to independently invest resources into sustaining women-focussed distribution channels and targeted marketing to a female client base. Clear signs of adaptation and institutionalisation are also evident. Recognising the commercial value of timely sex-disaggregated sales data, AISL has now incorporated a tool to support agro-dealers to capture sex-disaggregated sales records, and has requested farmer organisations to share data on purchases of inoculant by member and their gender. This will help build a more sophisticated understanding of customer profiles over the long-term, to inform and adjust business strategies.

The AISL-MOST partnership demonstrates how market systems programmes can support a partner to transform a business model from being ‘gender-aware’ to ‘gender-responsive’, through adaptive management and rapid feedback loops.

Elsewhere, there is emerging evidence that other actors are adopting and responding to the commercial production and distribution of inoculant to smallholder farmers. Two further businesses are interested in establishing production in Malawi of inoculant, and MOST is now working with organisations to push the Government for the certification and release of two additional brands. A further value-addition that this intervention brings is clear and compelling evidence of the commercial gains realised by AISL through more inclusive business models and the specific targeting of women. It is this that is so essential for changing private sector mindsets in Malawi, to catalyse gender-responsive practices among other private sector actors, and drive broader systems changes.

Conclusion

The partnership between AISL and MOST presents a compelling example of how businesses can reach a new client base and increase their sales by marketing and distribution strategies that are tailored around women’s needs, preferences, and level of access. It demonstrates how market systems programmes can support a partner to transform a business model from being ‘gender-aware’ to ‘gender-responsive’, through adaptive management and rapid feedback loops.

This case study has been authored by Sonia Jordan, with additional technical input and research support from Towera Jalakasi, Tapiwa Chitwere, Cuan Opperman, Sushanta Kumer Sarker and Jason Agar. The data presented in this case study was captured through two Focus Group Discussions with female and male users of inoculant in Ntchisi District. A Key Informant Interview was also conducted with Linda Dembo, Sales & Marketing Manager at AISL in June 2018.

About Malawi Oilseed Sector Transformation

The Malawi Oilseed Sector Transformation (MOST) programme, a £7m, a five-year market systems programme, aims to increase the incomes of poor women and men working in Malawi’s cotton, groundnut, soybean, sesame and sunflower markets. MOST seeks a transformational impact by supporting changes in the market system that fundamentally alter the way business is done to ensure greater benefits for the poor. MOST works with a range of market actors – private, public and development – to pilot and scale up new business models and to stimulate a more competitive market system.