

Case Study: The Gambia

The Unintended Consequences of Women Empowerment Interventions in The Gambia: The Case of the Sosolaso Forums

About the Sosolaso Forums

A three-year collaboration between United Purpose and Caplor Horizons in The Gambia commenced in August 2018. This focuses on capacity development of six Marketing Federations in the six main regions of The Gambia. Each Marketing Federation represents around 80-100 women groups, each with 70-150 members. Thus, in total, they represent around 30,000 rural farmers, mostly women.

Every three months, Caplor Horizons facilitated a 'forum' with an apex body called Sosolaso to build their capacity and strengthen resilience. As part of the programme, participants are expected to take the training back to their regions to cascade the learning to their communities.

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We were keen to collaborate with United Purpose and others in The Gambia to facilitate this research due to cultural sensitivities and best practice, as well as the implications of COVID-19. As a result, in early 2021, a core team was established of Baai Jaabang (TARUD), Isatou Ceesay (WIG) and Fatou Jaiteh (University of the Gambia), along with Sam Bishop (University of Bath). We are very grateful to to Baai, Isatou, Fatou and Sam for their time and commitment!



Introduction

Empowerment is underpinned by power and expressly the transformation of existing power relations. Resistance to such transformation is often intrinsic and any intervention risks highlighting and exacerbating existing social tensions and power imbalances. It is essential that women's empowerment interventions are recognised for what they are: agents of change within a much wider set of local contexts, gendered power structures, and social relations.

As a result, in March 2020, as part of the eighth forum, Caplor Horizons facilitated a one-day workshop which undertook an initial exploration into unintended consequences (UCs) of the Sosolaso Forums. The workshop identified several UCs, but perhaps more significantly, participants were very positive

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Over the course of a month, **40 one-on-one interviews** and **33 focus group discussions** were carried out, with **over 750 diversely positioned research participants** including intervention beneficiaries, household stakeholders, community leaders, and local development practitioners. Risks around COVID-19 were mitigated throughout

Key findings

Unintended consequences identified were predominantly negative and included impacts such as **bigotry and verbal abuse, gender-based violence, time poverty, co-option of income, social exclusion, and household disputes**. However, positive effects were also identified at the household and community levels including **improved household food security and nutrition, improved incomes, and community support**.

Many of the UCs identified are due to systemic subordination and control due to patriarchy and are not due to the training. However, as a result of the context that the training is happening in, the full benefits of the programme are unable to be realised. See below for some quotes:

Verbal abuse as a result of individual engagement in the Sosolaso Forums:



"In our society we can be more vulnerable as a result of development activities"

"Men are always involved in the decision-making on expenditures; they could ban women from economic activities."

"Federation members are not coming to our village to give us any support or engage us in any meaningful development as expected."

Recommendations

Research participants provided well-informed, actionable recommendations as to how any negative UCs could be mitigated in the future.

Overall, the research study was very successful as an exercise with research participants describing their involvement as "motivating", "educative" and that it "highlighted issues and solutions".

A full report will be published in coming months

