



Members of the women's milk marketing group waiting for the milk to be collected and taken to the milk marketing center at Bobor town, Dhas *woreda*. The plastic containers seen here were later replaced by more hygienic metal cans.

## BRIEFING NOTE 5: SUPPORTING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Borana society is patriarchal, and gender roles are strongly differentiated; women generally play a subordinate role in community decision-making and often experience harmful traditional practices. These include a very high prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM), despite recent declarations amongst community leaders to end the practice – and the fact that FGM has been illegal in Ethiopia since 2004. Similarly, there is widespread social acceptance of gender-based violence such as wife-beating, and the expectation that women should be passive and non-assertive. Most Borana women have had little opportunity to attend school, and therefore have poor literacy and numeracy skills compared to men, who are more likely to have had at least basic education. Women's knowledge of outside affairs and access to information is also restricted, especially as most do not own a radio or mobile phone. In this overall context of highly unequal gender relations, any interventions in support of women's empowerment must be conducted with special cultural sensitivity, working with both women and men to gain acceptance.

The NRM-Borana project sought to address women's empowerment through their explicit participation in community meetings and natural resource planning processes (see **Briefing Note 2**), but also through building their economic assets. Therefore, as part of planning solutions to natural resource development and management, income-generating opportunities suitable for women were identified. The project facilitated the establishment of groups of interested women, generally numbering some 20 individuals, to test and explore these different opportunities. In

addition, eight savings and credit and two multi-purpose existing cooperatives were strengthened by the project, thus reaching 387 women members. Collaboration was also established with the *woreda* Women and Child Affairs, Cooperative Promotion and Education offices to organize training for women in basic numeracy and literacy, as well as cooperative management and leadership. Literacy courses were organized in 27 different villages using locally hired resource persons with flexible schedules so that the timing of classes could be fixed according to group preferences. Attended by some 465 women in total, they resulted in 194 women managing to pass third level, as assessed by the *woreda* education offices.

Engaging in literacy courses and in savings and loans groups not only helped the women cooperative members to record their transactions accurately. It also motivated them to insist on their girls attending formal school. Furthermore, women's participation in different economic groups provided them with an opportunity to discuss wide-ranging matters of importance to them; to experience mutual support and understanding; and to learn about government services that they could access, if necessary. In all this, the project worked with the customary institution leaders and *kebele* administrations to ensure support from the women's husbands. Additionally, the risk of gender-based violence (GBV) was addressed through bringing together 95 representatives of relevant government services to promote better coordination. At the same time, existing gender forums were supported in making GBV a topic that could be discussed openly, broadly condemned, and addressed – including working with the judiciary.

The income-generating activities on which the different women's groups focused were as follows:

- Beekeeping for honey production and sale
- Cultivation of different types of cereals (maize, haricot beans, wheat and teff) on plots of land specifically registered in the name of the women's group
- Irrigated vegetable cultivation
- Bull fattening on non-ploughed portion of farmland by women's farming groups with embedded support services
- Poultry rearing
- Milk marketing

The first five of these activities suffered particularly during the three droughts that occurred during the project period (in 2017–2018, late 2020 and 2021–2022.). The women concerned spoke positively about the knowledge and sense of cooperation that they had gained through the group; however, the activities themselves had too high a risk of failure to be continued under recurrent drought situations. The input of labor needed was simply not worth the risk. The activity deemed most worthy of continuation and expansion was milk marketing, given the high potential returns – despite the varied level of supply from season to season. A market systems development

approach was taken, intervening as appropriate along the whole value chain. Although milk production cannot be maintained during droughts, providing the milk cows can be kept alive, the potential profit than can be made during good seasons justifies the overall investment.

### WHY MILK MARKETING?

Milk marketing is an activity traditionally associated with women, and one in which they already have considerable knowledge. If possible, Borana women aim to keep most lactating cows close to their homestead on *kallo* (enclosed grazing) land to produce milk for domestic consumption and marketing. In seasons of good rains and high fodder production, excess milk is supplied to the market – although as an isolated activity, this rarely brings much profit for a variety of reasons. These include the difficulty of transportation to local markets, lack of market linkages and suitable places for selling milk, and challenges in maintaining hygienic conditions, keeping the milking animals in good health, and providing adequate fodder. Meanwhile, there is a high demand for milk and milk products in local markets that is not met by the existing supply.



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Jilo Godana is the chair of the women's group at Melbana that aimed to improve their income from bull fattening and maize cultivation. They gained much group solidarity, and some additional income – but, she said, it involved a lot of work.



## THE PROJECT INTERVENTION

The project began by working with four women's groups, each with 20 members (thus 80 women in total) in four different *kebeles* of Dire, Miyo, Dhas, and Dillo. It also identified and established linkages with private milk collection centers in the nearby market towns. Working with the local government livestock development office as well as a private company offering business services, the project organized appropriate support to the women in terms of knowledge on animal health, veterinary inputs, milk quality control including hygiene, introduction of aluminium milk cans, and enhanced entrepreneurship and business skills.

In each group, the women pooled the milk produced and hired motorbike riders to take it to the local market in milk cans provided through the project. In this way, the milk was delivered quickly, in bulk, to the milk collection centers – saving the women time and effort. They also received a fair market price for their milk. The project supported the milk collection centers with appropriate equipment that was not locally available; the milk collection owners paid for other inputs necessary to expand their business. The equipment purchased through the project was clearly specified in the agreement made, the most significant items being refrigerators, thermometers, lactometers, and milk churners. Such equipment enabled



The milk marketing center at Bobor town, Dhas *woreda*.

the centers to ensure milk quality and to market it without any major losses (previously caused by poor hygiene). During 2020, when the long rains in the early part of the year were good, the four women's groups together sold just over 48,000 liters of milk to the four collection centers, generating in total some ETB 1,619,100 (at the time, approx. USD 18,000).



Members of the women's horticulture group of Soda *kebele* with their carrot harvest in 2020. Irrigated vegetable cultivation close to a reliable water source is feasible in years not stricken by major drought.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### General observations

- Initiatives promoting women's economic empowerment almost invariably require additional labor from the women, who often already have a heavy burden of unpaid care responsibilities. In Borana, for example, fetching water during dry seasons is highly demanding both in time and physical strength. Income-generating activities must be sensitive to this and seek to minimize additional labor demands – as was the case in milk marketing, where milk transport to market was streamlined and rendered less arduous to the women. Another feasible activity in non-drought years is irrigated vegetable production using water supplied from deep wells via solar pumps.
- Women's economic empowerment can sometimes lead to a rise in GBV, if men perceive their position to be weakened. Working through both customary and local government institutions to support women's empowerment and erode the social acceptability of GBV was an effective way of gaining men's acceptance and avoiding a negative backlash. Nevertheless, deeply held negative cultural norms must be constantly challenged; women's empowerment is an on-going process.
- The engagement of the private sector, notably the milk collection centers, was crucial for up-scaling milk production to a commercial level. It was these centers that were able to ensure the necessary standards for milk conservation, processing, and marketing.
- Ensuring adequate bulk transportation of the milk from the producers to the collection centers some distance away (generally ranging from 5–15 km) was another essential feature. Whilst the women managed to organize this themselves, they required project support to make the first step and access appropriate containers.
- Milk production is inevitably dependent on adequate rainfall; income is therefore seasonal. However, maintaining good animal health and investing in fodder supplies to keep animals alive over drought periods can ensure that milk production resumes once there is rainfall, and fodder production returns (see **Briefing Note 4** on hay making and baling).
- Given the very high market demand for milk, there is considerable potential for up-scaling, engaging more women's groups and facilitating the sharing experiences between them. Local government support for veterinary services and improved fodder resources will continue to be necessary. Meanwhile, the proliferation of milk collection centers should be encouraged to ensure that none establish a monopoly over producers; fair pricing is more likely if there is healthy competition.


### Specific observations on women's engagement in the milk value chain

- The market systems development (MSD) approach adopted in milk marketing was essential. It entailed a full analysis of the value chain, identifying weak points and solutions, and the promotion of linkages between the different actors. Within this approach, it was important to provide women with support in accessing market information, and in business skills including the confidence to negotiate effectively.

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