

From thousands to millions: Ways forward for Gender Action Learning for Sustainability at Scale

Blog post and personal view by Linda Mayoux – full version July 2016

Forum on Empowerment through Household Methodologies organized by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Oxfam and Hivos, IFAD headquarters, Rome, 27-29 June 2016

The Forum brought together practitioners of Household Methodologies from many countries in Africa and Asia, sharing their experience and considerable achievements in inspiring and supporting men as well as women to change gender inequalities that constrained their lives. Many poor women, as well as men, who did not have a voice have been able to become leaders of change in their communities. Some being elected to boards of cooperatives and government office. The Forum also enabled a more complete assessment of numbers of people involved – estimated at over 130,000, though outreach has included very many more who have not yet been counted. Participants discussed not only how women, men and their families and communities benefit, but also private sector companies, financial service providers and local economies. Local and national governments are also increasingly involved as government actors see the possibilities and benefits for change, and the way it can help their work and the democratic process.

At the same time the Forum provided an opportunity for like-minded people to come together to discuss the many challenges. In order to make a really significant impact on global gender inequalities household methodologies need to reach not thousands but millions of people. Policy-makers, global companies and international aid agencies need to be convinced to go beyond small ‘women’s empowerment projects for the girls’ and box-ticking gender-disaggregation to meaningful gender mainstreaming. Working at household level to promote women as well as men’s human rights needs to change from being seen as ‘too sensitive’ and ‘feminist interference in culture’ to being recognised as the essential basis for all sustainable development, an integral part of pro-poor growth and the pre-requisite for participation and democracy.

If implementation of Household Methodologies is to move from the thousands to millions of households reached, then there is also a need to reconsider some of the established methodologies – including Gender Action Learning System (the currently predominant approach in most of the organisations participating). Basic tools are now well-established – Visioning, Vision Journeys, Gender Balance Trees, Gender Diamonds, Gender Challenge Action Trees and Change Leadership Maps. Advanced tools for leadership and livelihood strengthening have been successfully piloted. The tools have also been widely used in multi-stakeholder initiatives in multiple value chains and are starting to be further developed for rural finance. Further applications discussed include conflict resolution, reproductive rights, health, nutrition, climate change interventions and good governance.

However, in order to reach significant scale innovation is required to reduce costs, handover skills more quickly to the promoter champions and ensure that more of the funding goes to supporting initiatives at community level. This means streamlining the integration of tools to fit tighter schedules of private sector role out. It also means new methods of facilitation – if the aim is rapid upscaling and sustainability then those catalysing and advising the process need to learn to ‘facipulate’ – ‘manipulating’ rather than leading discussions in such a way that they can even leave the room without participants being aware so they continue discussing and facilitating their participatory process without external support. Experience has shown that it is possible to facilitate

hundreds of people simultaneously – strengthening the facilitation skills of women and men who never attended a meeting before – and at minimum cost.

At the same time the ‘gender DNA’ must not be lost in the process. This involves use of specific tools like the gender balance tree early in the process, but also raising gender issues across all the tools – asking questions about power relations and ownership in the initial visioning, including gender roots and/or gender colour-coding on challenge action trees and strategic decisions about when women and men should be given space to discuss in separate groups and when and how they are best brought together. It requires facilitators to be very careful about all the language they use – implicit meanings of words like ‘farmers’ and ‘youth’, and continually questioning stereotypes not only of women but also women’s stereotypes of men and boys that reinforce acceptance of male superiority or make fun of men who want to be rounded human beings with their families.

A key element in maintenance of the gender DNA is a change in monitoring and evaluation from policing and mechanical ‘measurement of impact’ to a much more participatory and analytical discussion and learning around ‘improving practice’ – and targeting resources on an empowerment approach to action learning rather than wasting budgets and resources on conventional baseline/follow-up comparisons. GALS in organisations like Bukonzo Joint in Uganda has established participatory ways of establishing gender indicators, and very cost-effective ways of aggregating information on changes in areas like land agreements for thousands of members of cooperatives – feeding these in turn into advocacy strategies. Where in-depth research is needed, this cannot be done through short external impact assessments, but would be better done through linkages with MA and PhD programmes in academic institutions and research institutes – particularly those locally in the country concerned.

As things move to scale, there is a need to think of new ways of knowledge management so that the information link with champions in communities is not lost in the need for ‘quality documentation’. The rapid expansion of use of mobile phones with cameras and video capabilities, spread of affordable Internet and social media like WhatsApp and Facebook, increased availability of cheaper tablets and laptops opens up an exciting array of possibilities for multimedia communications between women as well as men champions at community level, as well as from communities outwards to development organisations. All these have been used in GALS processes – women who previously could not see much point in learning IT or upgrading phones are now joining in. There are also possibilities of providing loans to champions to buy equipment so that they can become ‘communication managers’ as part of their job as champions. Though there is a need for specific training, or systems for skill sharing and multiple languages can entail costs for translation.

Finally in the move to scale there is a need to rethink ways of networking, stakeholder involvement and organisational collaboration so that innovation, creativity and dynamism are maintained. It would be a big mistake in my view to move too quickly to organisational hierarchies in an attempt to ‘control quality’. This is likely to privilege too much people and organisations using the main international languages – some of the very best organisations practising GALS are smaller organisations with little English or French. There is a need for strong local and national level organisation and networks to be built up first, upscaling as they are currently doing through ‘osmosis’ with very little funding. Then a proper taking stock of the diversity and creativity that exists at community-level to share with other replications in the same region.

The aim of the upscaling is to achieve significant and sustainable gender changes, building on the progressive aspirations of women and men themselves judged by the standards of women’s human rights in CEDAW. There may be many different ways of doing this – established GALS tools and

techniques being one. But this should not be reduced to rigid rules and top down certification. Scale is best achieved through inspiration and example and encouraging as many people as possible at all levels to become leaders of change in whatever effective ways they discover, and exchange their ideas and experiences – as long as they lead in direction of the overarching vision:

*A world where
**women and men of all ages
realise their full potential**
as economic, social and political actors,
free from all gender discrimination,
for empowerment
of themselves,
their families, their communities
and global humankind*