

Women smallholder farmers in Nigeria secure investments in agriculture

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In Nigeria, agriculture is responsible for roughly a quarter of the gross domestic product, the second-highest contributor in the country. Although the Nigerian government has reaffirmed its commitment to allocate 10% of its annual budget to agriculture as a signatory to the Maputo Declaration, it has not allocated more than 2.2% over the past 7 years. Women smallholder farmers especially are overlooked by officials overseeing agricultural policy and decision-making, which is surprising when they make up 70% of the workforce and produce 60% of the food Nigerians consume.

In just two and a half years the Smallholder Women Farmers Organization in Nigeria (SWOFON), with the support of IBP, secured three critical budgetary changes to bolster their livelihoods and contributions to the country's agricultural sector. As a result of data-driven advocacy, the national government increased its spending on agriculture by 18.5% and made new federal budget allocations towards the sector in the five focus states targeted by the program. Crucially, 111,000 smallholder women farmers gained access to new or improved seeds and fertilizer to grow crops, and lighter and more modern equipment to increase production.

Background

Small-scale farmers are the poorest part of Nigeria's agricultural sector due to longstanding underinvestment. Women farmers are especially hard hit. Women are not only five times less likely to own land than men, but they also do not have the financial resources to invest in farming supplies and services. This means that they cannot increase their yields or earn as much as their male counterparts.

To redress this injustice, SWOFON formed in 2012 with 500,000 women farmers across the 36 Nigerian states and Federal Capital Territory. SWOFON organizes and empowers women farmers' associations and groups to demand their rights, spur rural village economic development and increase food production. Before their partnership with IBP, SWOFON already had a track record of mobilizing their

massive member base and engaging and lobbying officials, but their demands were not being met. We believe this was due, at least in part, to the demands being very broad and lacking evidence about the impact that inadequate allocation decisions had on the sector. In 2018, IBP joined forces with SWOFON under the SPARK program. This program leverages the budget analysis expertise of IBP, and the organizing capacity and local legitimacy of grassroots movements, to advocate for budget decisions that reflect the needs and improve the lives of underserved communities.

“No farmer, no food on the table. No food on the table, no nation. We advocate for more increase in the agriculture sector [and] that a percentage of that increase go to smallholder women farmers so that they can be able to produce the food we can feed this nation with.”

Mrs. Mary Afan, National President, SWOFON, during a press briefing after their submission of a mass application for assistance to the federal Ministry of Agriculture in February 2020.

Together, IBP, SWOFON and other support organizations¹ pursue three main goals in five focus states:² address the budgetary causes that are leading to underinvestment in agriculture; support equitable access to fertilizer, seeds, and lighter and more modern equipment; and encourage rural economic development and an increase in food production.

SWOFON’s path to results

IBP helped SWOFON advance their budget agenda through different tactics to reach those who could impact decision-making on the agricultural budget. These included mobilizing their members en masse during general elections; leveraging their nationwide presence to participate in formal and informal channels to influence budget decisions at the national, state, and local level; and working with the legislature and the media to raise attention to their issues (and the political costs of ignoring them).

Joining of technical and political power

It was important from the start of the program, as well as the subsequent annual planning phases, to focus on building IBP and partners’ understanding of the ecosystem of actors, roles, institutions and contexts that influence budget decisions

¹ Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) has provided budget technical assistance to the SPARK program since 2019, supporting SWOFON with strategic training and technical accompaniment. IBP and SWOFON also entered into a partnership with the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR) to mobilize and coordinate journalists to document and publish human angle stories of SWOFON’s women farmers.

² Anambra, Jigawa, Nasarawa, Niger, and Oyo states.

in the agricultural sector. By understanding the political economy, SWOFON was able to design a purposeful and focused series of campaigns.

For instance, like all federal states, Nigeria's agriculture budgeting and spending decisions and powers are spread across the federal, state and local level. This can be problematic as decision-making is often decentralized, which results in uneven reform. However, SWOFON's nationwide membership structure provides a distinct organizing advantage, as well as the necessary political weight required to tackle this challenge: they have a deep and wide enough membership base to mobilize members, engage officials and influence decisions that are being made at all three levels.

IBP and SWOFON also benefitted from strong connections with key government agencies and institutions when the program started. This political power, combined with IBP's fiscal governance expertise, is the foundation of SWOFON's success, since it has allowed them to navigate the political aspects of this program with great skill.

Building budget and political advocacy skills

Budget processes in Nigeria, as in most countries, are hidden, opaque and dominated by men. IBP and technical partners assisted SWOFON in improving their budget and political advocacy skills so that they knew what they were looking for, whom to address, what to expect and what to ask for. Armed with these new skills to examine and navigate the budget and the actors who influence it, SWOFON's state and national networks led mass actions, including marches across 3 focus states. They also organized mass applications from over 379,000 women for access to fertilizer, seed and equipment. This strategy exerted electoral pressure on state actors during general elections, since SWOFON represents more than 500,000 women farmers with the power to influence election outcomes through their votes.



Smallholder women farmers marching for access to agricultural inputs in Lafia, Nasarawa State

"I had always thought that Jigawa State had little or no women farmers – the reason being that most of the agricultural projects implemented by the State Government [are] male-dominated, but with the engagements, meetings and advocacy visits from SWOFON, I am happy to recognize SWOFON as an organized structure of small-scale women farmers. Therefore, I want to support and ensure that SWOFON farmers are officially part of the Agriculture Initiative currently being implemented in the state."

Barrister Ibrahim Hadejia, Former Deputy Governor Jigawa State, while granting audience to SWOFON during the campaign march in the state.

Generating and leveraging data to make demands



SWOFON member speaking to the press

Nigeria's government generally lacks robust data about how its policies impact underserved communities. IBP seized on this opportunity to help SWOFON fundamentally shift its advocacy strategy to be more data driven. This shift proved critical to landing key wins and gaining buy-in from officials who began to recognize SWOFON as a credible, knowledgeable partner. Since 2018, IBP has helped SWOFON draft community charters of demands

and organize its members to submit mass applications for seed, fertilizer and equipment that were informed by women's priorities and accurate estimates of the volume of supplies they needed. IBP also helped them conduct ongoing research on the agriculture sector budget and related spending and allocations to supplies and equipment. In 2020, SWOFON participated in the Budget Office of the Federation's public budget forum and found out that the agriculture budget would likely be cut. IBP and technical partners quickly drafted an assessment on the probable effects of the proposed cuts on women farmers in particular and national food security more broadly. SWOFON successfully leveraged this research to advocate against the cuts.

In the words of a **SWOFON member**:

*"We now understand that to have a voice, **we need to be part of the process that puts together the budget.** We need to know and engage about how much is being allocated to the agricultural sector – and how much of that goes to women farmers."*

Formal and informal engagement and participation

IBP and other technical partners supported SWOFON to identify and seize informal and formal opportunities to engage government and participate in the budget planning processes at all levels. Offices and institutions that they engaged with included local government chairpersons, state governors' offices, state Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development permanent secretaries, Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development at state and national level, the Budget Office of the Federation, and National Assembly legislators from the focus states. For instance, SWOFON members submitted the community charters of demands to local officials to inform local government budget planning processes. They also submitted position papers to national agriculture and women affairs' ministries and legislators.

After one such engagement, the **Commissioner for Agriculture**, Oyo State said:

“Women are the driving force of food production and agriculture in our State. My doors are open to hear their voices and demands. We will do our best to increase investment and allocation to the Agriculture budget as a state during my tenure in office.”

Working with oversight institutions

A particularly powerful moment came in 2020 after SWOFON gave a technical presentation to the National Assembly during the national 2020 budget revision process, which highlighted the effects of proposed COVID-induced cuts for agriculture on smallholder farmers and on national food security. By building relationships with parliamentarians from the focus states and providing the often data-poor National Assembly with robust evidence at the right time during budget appropriation sessions, SWOFON was able to ensure parliamentarians made evidence-informed decisions as part of their oversight role in the budget process. This strategy paid off.

Amplifying SWOFON’s voice

To exert public pressure on government, SWOFON and IBP also allied themselves with broader public and civil society agricultural campaigns in respective states and used them to put forward their women members and their issues. This was vital in helping identify and build relationships with influential decision-makers and legislators.



Prime time news coverage of SWOFON’s campaign on Nigerian television

To build public support for these behind-the-scenes government engagements, the campaign also involved the media. Radio, national and state television, and social media increasingly broadcast compelling stories about the situation faced by individual women smallholders or about the sector as a whole. Newspapers and magazines published similar information

in articles and interviews. This brought the everyday plight of women small-scale farmers to the fore. The public became more aware of their needs, the impact of COVID, and the consequences of proposed budget cuts on food security – as previously these issues had been hidden or ignored.

SWOFON's main successes to date

The strategic shifts SWOFON were able to make with support from IBP and other technical partners have helped Nigeria's smallholder women farmers reclaim their voice and power. Now they can be heard and are able to contribute constructively to consequential government decisions over resources that impact their livelihoods and the nation's food security.

Not only did SWOFON get much needed fertilizer, seed, equipment and COVID relief into the hands of more than 111,000 women farmers in the five focus states, but they also played a part in the federal government's decision to increase spending for the agricultural sector by 18.5% over the amount earlier proposed by the Executive Arm of Government in its revised 2020 budget, bringing Nigeria closer to meeting its commitments under the 2011 Maputo Declaration.



SWOFON members receive fertilizer.

The Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development also followed through with the 35% affirmative action provision for women farmers stipulated in the Gender in Agriculture Policy. It made new budgetary allocations worth just over 800 million naira (approximately \$2 million USD) for seeds, fertilizer and light and modern equipment across the program's five focus states in the 2020 revised federal budget.

Moving Forward

Laying the foundation for longer term influence and sustainable change, SWOFON has also gained legitimacy as a valuable partner for government officials by demonstrating their knowledge of budgets and using that knowledge to help officials make more informed decisions.

This legitimacy has led to them becoming a key player when it comes to national decision-making. As a result, SWOFON can positively influence service delivery for its members and other women. Examples of these inroads include the fact that the Federal Ministry of Finance, Budget and National Planning invited SWOFON to become a member of the Technical Working Group on Agriculture and Related Sectors. In addition, the SWOFON State-level Coordinators in both Jigawa and Kaduna states have been included on the state committee responsible for fertilizer distribution.



Inauguration of the high-level Technical Working Group on Agriculture and Related Sectors with SWOFON members

*“For Nigerian women farmers to come out to the federal capital and make known to government what their demands are is a very commendable thing. I have to assure you that your comments have been noted and I assure you on behalf of the Ministry [of Agriculture] that we are going to take actions going forward. **Now we are going to work with women on a larger scale.**”*

*The Ministry has also taken note of your demands, especially in the area of agricultural inputs as regards seeds and equipment. **The narrative now has changed in the Ministry,** that whatever interventions we are doing, whatever support we are going to give to farmers it should be demand-driven. We are going to procure what the farmers say they want, and we are going to start from the smallholder women farmers.”*

Mrs. Karima Babandiga. Director, Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, during a press briefing with SWOFON in February 2020.

Conclusion

Change is a gradual process. It is not easy to alter entrenched norms that influence who has a seat at the decision-making table. Through continuous engagement with government, communities and traditional leaders, women are shifting their role in agriculture at all levels. SWOFON have been energized by this process and have increased their membership across the country. They are finding their voices and are being heard.