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# Working with Women's Groups in Jordan – Building Networks and Social Capital

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Report

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## Abbreviations

Al-Khudair	Al-Khudair Women's Cooperative for Social Development
CBO	Community Based Organization
EAS	Extension and Advisory Services
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GDP	Gross domestic product
Jordan	Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan
Mawakeb	Mawakeb Al-Noor Women's Cooperative for Charitable Causes
MEAS	Modernizing Extension and Advisory Services
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MEPI	Middle East Partnership Initiative
NCARE	National Center for Agricultural Research and Extension
Ngera	Ngera Cooperative for Social and Charitable Causes
SNA	Social Network Analysis
UF	University of Florida

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## Introduction

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, agriculture is important to national economies and women play important roles in crop and livestock production. Several studies in Arab countries show that up to 70% of all agricultural labor is provided by women, often as unpaid family labor (Abdelali-Martini, 2011; Augustin, Assad, & Jaziri, 2012;). In Jordan, a 2003 field survey revealed that women were heavily involved in crop and livestock production. Women grew food for household consumption, provided labor for plowing, planting, fertilizing, irrigation, weeding and harvesting, and reared household animals in tasks including feeding, watering, milking and shearing. Women also supplied half the labor to processing and packaging agricultural and livestock produce, and marketing (Al-Naber & Shatanawi, 2004; Al-Rousan, 2005; Augustin et al. 2012). Women's roles in agriculture and food security are critical, yet women lack access to productive inputs, credit, and extension and advisory services (AES), which often fail to reach them due to the challenges faced by women in the region, including social norms that prohibit women from accessing public spaces and interacting with outsiders, as well as extension agents' own biases. While it can be difficult to overcome the barriers that affect women's ability to partake in meaningful extension exchanges, promising opportunities exist in working through culturally acceptable women's groups where members can overcome obstacles through collective action and the capital they develop within their social networks.

The project's, working title "*Extension and Advisory Service Delivery for Women's Groups in Jordan: Assessing Competencies and Building Social Capital*", began in October of 2012 in partnership with Jordan's National Center for Agricultural Research and Extension (NCARE). The goal of the project was to study the development of social capital and social networks of rural women from three cooperatives as they underwent a year-long capacity building program that utilized participatory learning methods. The ultimate purpose of the project was to identify methods of successfully building and developing social capital, agency capacity, and social networks to determine if doing so enables Middle Eastern women to improve their access to agricultural information and ability to engage in the market. NCARE, using funds from the *Middle East Partnership Initiative* (MEPI), facilitated the training program utilizing a peer-to-peer mentoring model. With this model, a well-established, successful women's cooperative was paired with two newer women's cooperatives in the Al-Mowagar District of Jordan as they underwent training based on five skills that were identified as being critical for successful engagement of smallholder farmers in the market. The end result was a demonstrated ability to achieve synergies by combining efforts on these two projects, one for training and one for research on AES, i.e., researching the training and social capital building for AES.

The funding for our research was provided by Modernizing Extension and Advisory Services (MEAS) project, USAID-funded, which is focused on improving the provision of agricultural information to farmers and those involved in agricultural value chains. The research program was built on previous research on gender analysis work in MENA countries for the USAID-funded Water and Livelihoods Initiative (WLI) project<sup>1</sup>, which collaborated with MEAS. Both WLI and MEAS are interested in understanding the role of

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<sup>1</sup>This project is being implemented by the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA).

women in agricultural production and in identifying effective approaches for contacting and reaching these women with extension information in culturally appropriate ways.

## Background Problem

Jordan is a relatively small country comprised of 91,880 square kilometers that borders Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, Palestine and Israel. The agricultural sector contributes 3.1% to the GDP and employs 6.3 % of the economically active population – 62.2% of whom are women (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2011; United Nations Development Program, 2011). However, with only 10% of the land being arable, the country is unable to produce more than 8-10% of its cereal needs. Unemployment is high especially among youth ages 15-24 (29.3% total of which 48.8% are females) and 14.2% of the population lives below the poverty line (The World Factbook, 2013). The food security situation in Jordan is increasingly exacerbated by population pressures due to an influx of refugees, primarily from conflict affected neighbors, who share in the scarce resources available. In a cross-sectional study of five hundred women in Northern Jordan it was discovered that 32.4% of the women were from food insecure households (Bawadi, Tayyem, Dwairy, & Al-Akour, 2012). At household level women contribute to farm labor as well as grow crops in home gardens for family's consumption. Despite these contributions to the financial and physical wellbeing of their families, women are frequently excluded from receiving extension and advisory services that could improve the outcome of their efforts. Research carried out by FAO (2011) revealed that globally, women farmers are 20-30% less productive than their male counterparts, due in large part, to their exclusion from accessing the same production resources, including extension services.

A number of factors contribute to this exclusion including cultural expectations regarding women's appropriate behavior, the limited capacity for women to financially invest in agricultural technologies and improvements, and the willingness and ability of extension agents to deliver appropriate materials to women whose time is often highly structured. Due to space-based patriarchy in the Middle East many women are unable to travel freely and enter spaces where they may interact with men they are not related to. This has an enormous impact on their ability to attend mixed-sex trainings or various points in the value chain where they might have to interact with men in order to be successful. Female extension agents could help mitigate the problem but there is a shortage of them in Jordan; out of fifty-eight agents employed by NCARE, only seventeen are women (Augustin et al., 2012).

In Jordan women have the legal right to inherit land, however in practice it is not an equitable distribution and they are often pressured by male relatives to sign over title to them (UNICEF, 2011). As a result, women comprise only 10% of land and property owners in Jordan (Gender Equality and Social Institutions: Jordan, 2012). Without collateral to offer formal financial institutions, they typically lack the ability to obtain credit for agricultural technologies and inputs. Women are also typically not recognized as the "head of household" which extension agents tend to use as the defining characteristic of a farmer. This helps to ensure that women's roles in agriculture and food production remain invisible leaving them relegated to the role of "household laborer". Extension agents often believe that information that is given to men is freely shared within the household, which is, in fact, rarely the case. Moreover, crops that women produce in home gardens are regarded as less worthy of extension efforts than are cash crops – despite the fact that home gardens often contribute greatly to the household's food security and the nutritional well-being of the family (Manfre, et al., 2012). Another obstacle that makes reaching rural women difficult is the highly structured nature of their time. Women's responsibilities in the home and to family are often time-based, such as meal preparation and child care duties, so trainings that involve them require advance planning and a measure of flexibility. In addition, women may not have the same literacy and math skills as men due to less schooling, especially in rural areas. This may mean that extension agents have to tailor their training materials to be effective for the women.

## Study Cases

NCARE, our field partner, selected three cooperatives located in the Al-Mowagar District of Jordan: Ngera Cooperative for Social and Charitable Causes (Ngera), Mawakeb Al-Noor Women's Cooperative for Charitable Causes (Mawakeb), and Al-Khudair Women's Cooperative for Social Development (Al-Khudair).<sup>2</sup> The cooperatives vary in size, yet they are demographically similar and located in the same agro-ecosystem of the Badia, which is arid rangeland. Each of the cooperatives is situated approximately an hour's commute from the capital, Amman, in areas with complete infrastructure and agriculture on the fringes.

Each cooperative's by-laws reveal a commitment to women's empowerment, increasing women's earning potential, and a desire to provide support to the community at-large, namely the economically disadvantaged and children. While similar in their goals, they vary in age - Ngera is the oldest cooperative, established in 1994, whereas Mawakeb and Al-Khudair were established in 2012 and 2009, respectively. Since its founding, Ngera has successfully established relationships with local foundations (administered by the Royal Family) to obtain funding over the years. These funds went into the creation of a kindergarten, a dairy-processing unit, a computer lab, and the periodic facilitation of public health awareness events to serve the needs of the community.

Members of the cooperative are directly served through various training sessions on vocational skills such as math, English, computer and information technologies, food processing and handicrafts as well as awareness events to educate them about their legal rights. Similar to Ngera, Mawakeb and Al-Khudair have hosted a number of trainings on food processing, handicrafts, and mushroom production. Mawakeb also utilized support from the foundations to open a beauty salon and a photography studio and to purchase sewing machines to offer tailoring service to local women. Al-Khudair provides employment to some members who are employed at its kindergarten. Unlike the other cooperatives, Al-Khudair has a revolving fund that provides small loans to women.

While previously conducting research in the area (2012) we held focus group discussions with female cooperative members about their experiences related to agriculture, water scarcity, and time use. A chief complaint they articulated was a need for more information and training on topics that would be useful in their daily lives, and help them achieve their personal goals, as well as cooperative's mission (such as fundraising, financial skills, marketing, value-added processing, greywater treatment, and cultivation of medicinal/herbal plants). Cultural barriers, time and entrenched discrimination were some of the contributing factors impairing women's equal access to and full participation in EAS. Reaching women through well established, legitimate cooperatives presented a culturally acceptable way to deliver such trainings. It also created an opportunity to strengthen women-to-women relationships, which ultimately enhances women's capacity and agency to take more prominent leadership role in the community.

## Training Program

NCARE is facilitating a year-long training program designed to deliver information from five skill sets that have been identified as essential for cooperatives to successfully engage with markets (see Ashby et al., 2011). These skill sets are: group management; natural resource management; financial management; operations and marketing; and technology and innovation. Training in these areas has historically contributed to a cooperative's success and efforts to empower its members. The main pillar of the training program is a peer-to-peer mentoring model that puts members of Ngera, the longstanding and well

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<sup>2</sup> Mawakeb and Al-Khudair were not originally selected; instead, they replaced two cooperatives that were initially selected but that dropped out of the MEPI program due to lack of familial support and commitment.



established cooperative, in direct contact with members of the two newer cooperatives. The cooperative boards each selected a number of its members to take part in the training program (“participants”). Conditions for inclusion in the program were that the women selected made the time commitment to complete the entire training program, and that they had completed secondary education in order to benefit from the materials used.

The majority of women who participated in the training program were married (61%) and 39% were single. The average age of the woman-participants was between 25-46 years old (52%). Several women were young in their early 20ies (26%). These young women were from the two new cooperatives participating in the training program (Mawakeb and Al-Khudair). The educational level of the women was evenly distributed among the three cooperatives. 65% of women had completed secondary education, whereas four women had diplomas and three women held university degrees. 65% of the women came from households that had regular income from salaried job sources and 30% reported having irregular income mostly generated from private business. 57% of the women reported that they did not have their own financial resources nor assets stowed away as savings (70%). 43% of the women reported having their own money and assets (30%), which were designated for family emergencies (57%), a special family event (71%), and only one reported that she could invest her savings in her own business enterprise.

## Research

The study endeavored to discover why working with women's cooperatives is beneficial to women's social capital and how to further enhance the agency of the women's groups. Questions included: 1) whether social capital<sup>3</sup> and social networks could be intentionally enhanced in the context of the Middle East; 2) whether participatory training methodologies<sup>4</sup> within women's cooperatives could build on women's confidence and social capital, while strengthening their network connections; and 3) whether strong cooperative agency empowers women to be change agents.

## Methods & Data

The data was collected through surveys, focus groups, direct observations, and social network analysis (SNA). Two groups were used to gather data; the first was a group made up of members of the three cooperatives who were participating in the trainings (“participants”), and the second was a composed of women from the same cooperatives who were not participating in the training program (“nonparticipants”). At the outset of the program, the participants were administered a baseline survey to get a sense of their knowledge in the five skill sets, as well as their participation in the cooperative, communication skills, and interaction levels both with the community and the cooperative. A second survey was administered six months after the baseline to collect information from latecomers to the program and to evaluate what, if anything might be gleaned from the program at its halfway point.<sup>5</sup> Focus group discussions were conducted with the participants and non-participants in May and September 2013, and May 2014. The initial discussions allowed the research team to inquire about the cooperatives' operations and capacity, women's communication skills, livelihood strategies, and other valuable socio-

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<sup>3</sup>Social capital is the multi-dimensional social space a person occupies including the physical and intangible resources that can be articulated because of social relations or those that accrue within a group. Social capital is key to creating strong and high-functioning groups that are propelled into action (Lions & Snoxell, 2005).

<sup>4</sup>Participatory learning methods have been identified as an ideal way to build social capital within small to medium-sized groups. It is a learner-centered approach, involving strategies that promote the full engagement of participants through collaboration, inclusivity, and interaction wherein the learning process is as important as the subject matter (Woocock & Narayan, 2000; ARC Resource Pack, 2009).

<sup>5</sup>Six participants left the program during the first six months, four of whom were replaced.

cultural information from the women's perspectives as well as information directly related to the participants' experiences within the program. The May 2014 focus groups discussions were structured in a way to solicit women's perspectives and feedback on how to enhance: 1) women's social capital and social networks in the Middle East, 2) women's confidence and leadership potential, and 3) cooperative's agency for female empowerment. Direct observations were taken of the participants during training activities by members of the both the UF research team and NCARE staff.

The SNA survey was designed and administered (to both participants and a non-participant group) as part of the baseline and at the end of the MEPI training program to detect and assess changes within the participants' social capital and networks. The SNA was designed to capture the level of trust and capital that existed among the participant group, as related to other participants from their respective cooperatives. The non-participant group received the same survey that asked about their feelings of trust and the perceived capital of the participant group members. The SNA survey was supplemented with focus group discussion questions in May 2014. The discussion probed to reveal whether or not the participant group developed stronger bonds and capital with each other and the extent of women's leadership roles and prominence within their respective cooperatives and communities at large.

## Constraints

As footnoted above, losing two of the three initial cooperatives created strain on the program soon after it commenced. After locating replacement cooperatives with the time, willingness to participate, and requisite literacy skills to engage with the training material, it was necessary for NCARE to secure formal approval from their donor (MEPI). This caused the NCARE-led training program to be delayed (and therefore extended) for six months,<sup>6</sup> which impacted the intended schedule for evaluation of participant and non-participant groups. Compounding that problem was the loss of eight participants, which limited the SNA sample for full analysis. To address this problem the researchers supplemented SNA with final focus group discussions, which probed women on the role of MEPI training and peer-to-peer mentorship on social capital development and expansion of their networks within and outside their cooperatives.

## Findings & Discussion

Data collected from both the participant and non-participant groups revealed that women in both groups perceived strong benefits from being members of a cooperative. The non-participants, especially, identified gains associated with increased knowledge and skills from various training events and lectures offered through their respective cooperatives. Women from both the participant and non-participant groups recognized the role the cooperatives can play in developing and/or facilitating income-generating activities for its members, such as providing specialized training, business advice, marketing and microcredit resources. They also noted considerable gains associated with personal development and confidence building, social connections, public/civic purpose, and collective action. Women from the Al-Khudair described the personal enrichment they obtained from their connections within the cooperative, specifically noting the ability to provide support and care to each other and receive it in-kind. Women specifically highlighted their personal commitments to help vulnerable women in the community by providing financial and moral support to women in need. Given that Al-Khudair women described this altruism towards others as a personal benefit, and for some, a motivation for their involvement in a cooperative, it appeared that women gain a greater sense of purpose from building valuable relationships and giving back to the community. The sense of purpose they seem to obtain from belonging to something larger than themselves was illustrated in a statement by a training participant who explained that before

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<sup>6</sup>This also impacted the entire MEPI project that was running parallel to our research and led by NCARE.



she joined the cooperative she never left her home, but has since come to feel more involved and more a part of the community.

The training program provided an opportune environment for intensive capital and network building given both the frequency of the workshops, and the participatory learning methods that facilitators employed. During focus group discussions with participants from each of the cooperatives, women discussed how the training program and participatory methods used therein helped them to realize their own potential and capabilities. The teaching format relied heavily on group discussion, working in small groups, and problem solving. It also required that the participants discuss their ideas and present their team projects to the entire group. Women praised the learning-by-doing approach and specifically noted how helpful it was to engage with each other, present their work, and practice speaking in public and sharing their opinions openly with others. Direct observations by researchers from NCARE and UF confirmed that the women were highly involved and motivated, not just in conceptualizing new ideas for their cooperatives, but in exchanging their opinions and suggestions in the spirit of collaboration. It should be noted that this participatory learning style is not a common practice in Jordan, especially in rural areas where extension training is driven by, and centered on the trainer, without meaningful input from trainees during the learning process.

The participatory approach regards learners as educators in their own right and the women involved in the training program recognized each other as such. The initial focus group discussions revealed that participants felt a sharp difference in knowledge and skills between Ngera women and the women from the two newer cooperatives. However, the collaborative learning environment enabled them to capitalize on the differences and allowed learning from each other. Direct observations revealed that Ngera women were choosing to work with participants from other cooperatives, which indicated their intention to balance the difference in experience and/or knowledge. On the flip side, the women with more knowledge or experience re-assessed their own knowledge and leadership potential. As one participant explained, *“After my college graduation I felt like I was nothing, but with the cooperative training I became more confident and I found out that I have many skills.”* Another participant described feeling more powerful and looking forward to applying her new skills on project design, which was one of the topics in the fundraising training. This sentiment was mirrored by women from the two other cooperatives who agreed that they now felt they possess the skills to lead projects within their cooperatives.

The triangulation of data from the baseline survey, focus group discussions and observations revealed evidence that participants had developed confidence in their skills and gained experience in communicating their thoughts to others, and as result, have become more outspoken. Women from each of the cooperatives offered examples of how they become more open and willing to share their opinions, even in front of large groups, whereas before the training program they would have stayed quiet and uninvolved. One woman noted that she went from being very shy and hesitant to speak in the cooperative's general body meetings, but that she has since become highly engaged in the discourse. Another woman noted that she went from being too intimidated to speak up, to feeling that she can now interject her opinion in conversations about the cooperative's budget after she gained knowledge on the topic through the trainings. Women also reported feeling more confident in their ability to make decisions on their own – an experience that many women in the region frequently lack. A woman from the Ngera cooperative said that she had become more influential in her household due to her newly acquired confidence to make decisions. A participant from the same cooperative went even further saying that she now felt her *“word has strength.”* Several women acknowledged that the trainings provided them with better management skills, including those affecting their ability to make decisions within the household.

Regardless of participants' previous skills, knowledge or standing, the data revealed that because of the high level of engagement and collaboration, they viewed each other as equals and were able to actively

build their social networks and provide mutual mentoring support. The final focus group discussions validated earlier findings from the mid-term evaluation that women built trust and deepened ties with their fellow women. Particularly, they highlighted the role of collaboration and partnership building. Women saw the need to nurture and promote volunteer groups within the cooperatives that could eventually benefit the community and enhance the cooperative's social capital. One MEPI participant from Al-Khudair participated in the charity initiative with women outside her cooperative to help educationally challenged students in primary and secondary schools. Partnerships with neighboring cooperatives were highly regarded as a way to increase knowledge, and promote the exchange of ideas and information. Women noted that collaborative projects between two cooperatives could also allow bringing limited resources together and expand benefits beyond one's own community. The participants also acknowledged that they had developed what they viewed as strong personal relationships within and among cooperative members. After the completion of the MEPI training program women, have been maintaining regular contacts with each other. For example, they visited each other and even shopped together. Women from Ngera and Al-Khudair started using the beauty salon located in Mawakeb.

These personal gains and attributes extend beyond the individual level to provide practical gains to the cooperatives and communities to which the women belong. One way this occurs was through the new social network connections and social capital that were being developed within the program. For example, participants expressed their willingness and ability to articulate what they learned in the training program with non-participants. A few women pointed out that they already shared information they learned (on greywater management and mushroom production) with non-participant cooperative members as well as friends and family members. In at least two instances, participants reached out to women from other cooperatives to seek their advice on particular endeavors with which they had experience. This demonstrated that the women become better at locating and accessing information and resources through the social networks they were actively developing. Participants also recognized that the trainers had connections to service providers and funding agencies they could capitalize on for the benefit of their cooperatives.

During discussions the proactive spirit was seen again when some of the participants affirmed their willingness to take on leadership roles within their respective cooperatives. This was followed by a discussion of the pride felt from being self-sufficient, influential, and knowing that others depended on them. Two women in particular expressed having developed ambitions to take on the role of cooperative president. When asked if the trainings had an impact on the way they envisioned their futures within their cooperatives, the women answered in the affirmative with one stating, "*There is nothing wrong with being ambitious*" and another woman articulating her desire to attempt to use what she's learned to tackle problems being faced by her cooperative.

In summary, MEPI trainings had positively impacted women. They felt they were becoming more outspoken and engaged in meetings due to developing confidence in their abilities, gaining experience expressing their ideas and opinions, and believing in their true potential to make change. Many now have the desire to take on additional leadership roles and be proactive within their cooperatives – either in seeking or sharing information, pursuing new community development projects or simply in solving problems. After receiving training on skills that develop and strengthen cooperatives, participant women were capable of improving the function and service level in their respective cooperatives. In turn this benefited the cooperatives because these women could serve as role models to other members and inspire a new level of leadership, engagement and commitment to the cooperative. Furthermore, the participants' expanded social networks can translate into new resources that could be leveraged for the benefit of the entire cooperative and community at large. As final focus group discussions showed,

women related their ability to access different institutions as a direct output of the training program. A participant noted that: *“We now know how to knock on the doors of organizations.”*

## Role of Women's Groups in AES Delivery – Lessons Learned

From an analysis of the baseline survey, it appeared that members from the more established and higher functioning cooperative benefited more than their counterparts in the newer cooperatives. Participants from Ngera had more contact with agricultural extension staff in the six months prior to the training program than did their counterparts from the newer cooperatives. According to the baseline survey, 75% of participants from Ngera had contact, whereas only 26.7% from Mawakeb and Al-Khudair did. The same was characteristic of the women's exposure to training programs. One-third of the women from the newer cooperatives had never received any type of training whereas 100% of the participants from Ngera had. The women of Ngera also seemed more comfortable than their counterparts to speak up at the cooperative's meetings as evidenced by the baseline survey that revealed that 100% of the women from Ngera reported being comfortable as compared to 73.3% of their counterparts. These benefits are no doubt influenced by a number of personal factors such as the individual's level of commitment, family support, capabilities and engagement, however many of these factors can be enhanced by actively developing support for the cooperative within the community.

The importance of the cooperative serving as a culturally acceptable and safe space was highlighted in focus group discussions with non-participants, especially from newer cooperatives. Women explained that before their cooperatives were established, they were unable to attend trainings due to fear of the potential repercussions they or their families might face. However, with the trainings offered through, or held on the cooperatives' premises, women felt as though there was less of a stigma and began to attend the learning sessions. Providing a safe space not only mitigates the restrictions that may be imposed on women's mobility, but it can also help dampen the hesitations of male family members who may be concerned with the women's interactions with males and outsiders due to the cooperative being local and comprised of other women from the community. One might assume that because a cooperative is located in a small village that the members are tightly knit with strong connections, but this may not be the case. If women do not have a reason to come together, i.e., meetings, activities etc., then, despite their similarities they may not be actively engaged with each other. Women also suggested using mosques and community halls, which are considered culturally acceptable and safe spaces for public discourse and information exchange.

Participants and non-participants expressed the importance of having the support of the community and male family members. When asked about possible weaknesses of the cooperative, a participant from Mawakeb offered that the biggest weakness was the lack of trust and involvement of the locals. Ngera members explained that support grew when the cooperative was providing families with needed assistance. They went on to say that they are satisfied with the level of support they received from men though it should be noted that the level of support given may vary by family and the length and level of involvement in the cooperative. Since family members will likely only support women's involvement when the community is accepting of the cooperative, deliberate efforts should be taken to strengthen relationships with the cooperative. Women also indicated that a revolving loan program created in the cooperatives could lead to community and household improvement projects, which would generate genuine buy-in from community and household members.

The women considered the cooperative as a way to be involved with community affairs. Women reported that their participation in the community decision-making process was indirect. Moreover, the cooperative and/or its chairwoman were considered as conduits to their indirect representation. In this capacity, cooperatives were viewed as a collective voice represented on a communal level. In fact, in

many patriarchal societies women have limited access to conventional avenues of decision making. The lack of effective networks and political clout make it harder for women to raise capital for political campaigns. Women often seek public sphere participation through alternative routes such as charities or women's organizations.

Because cooperatives can be the key to reaching rural women, it was clear that developing their potential, and building community support for them is worthwhile. One way to do this is by delivering trainings that are relevant to women, which will not only improve the likelihood of success and a higher level of engagement, but will also positively impact the women's families. This in turn can increase the trust of community members who see the usefulness of the cooperative and additionally help boost the status of its activities. Cooperative members reported that some family members did not support women's involvement because they don't see a real benefit to participation and would prefer they instead focus on the home and children. However, they went on to explain that they would be supportive if their involvement produced benefits for the household. To determine what may have a higher utility to the group, training topics could be developed during general meetings in order to receive everyone's input and find out the best times to hold training sessions. Because of the structured nature of women's time, it is critical that trainings are arranged around times that they can be present without having to choose over their other responsibilities. Similarly, training sessions must not extend past the time scheduled; otherwise women's families may become less supportive of their involvement. One added benefit of using general meetings as a forum to develop a training agenda is that it is a good opportunity to assess the cooperative's strengths and long-term vision so that training sessions can focus on improving the overall agency of the cooperative to provide desired services to its members.

Training rural women can be vastly different than training male farmers due to cultural expectations regarding their behavior and the fact that they may have different levels of literacy and knowledge. For these reasons it is necessary that trainers, especially male trainers, be cognizant of women's comfort levels and the appropriateness of particular exercises and training topics so as to not offend them or their male family members. This will also help preserve the reputation of the cooperative that trainers are working through. When planning a training session, extension agents should take available resources into consideration. This means not delivering training on a topic that requires access to resources that women are unlikely to procure, such as fertilizer or large amounts of clean water in the context of Jordan. Women also noted the importance of trainers providing enough materials so they can each take part and continue to implement what they've learned afterward. For example, participants appreciated the provision of spores that they received in the training about mushroom cultivation and were able to use them to grow their own oyster mushrooms, and distribute them to their fellow women in the cooperative.

Participatory learning methods yielded a number of benefits for trainers, participants, and their respective cooperatives. These methods included: facilitating learning through practice; group discussion; problem-solving; and small group projects. The practice improved learning and allowed trainees to get to know, trust and respect each other. Another way of reaching these targets was by following the peer-to-peer model that was utilized during this project. Pairing well-established cooperatives with newer ones enabled extension agents to reach rural women from multiple communities without the added time burden of replicating training delivery. It had the added benefit of building capacity among each cooperative that was involved - members from newer cooperatives gained from the knowledge and experiences of participants from more established cooperatives who, in turn, could gain from the leadership role. Extension agents can also improve the impact of the training materials they develop by adapting them for distribution over the internet to make them available to a wider audience. The women in focus groups expressed comfort and familiarity using the internet and social media though some were hesitant to use Facebook openly lest it upset family members. For this reason, copies of the training

materials should be distributed to the cooperative for in-house use and distribution on their website as well as the site of the extension agent's institution. In addition, women noted that information boards in the cooperative's offices could help facilitate information exchange especially to those who reside at a distance and visit cooperatives irregularly.

Regardless of material content, trainings are only effective if women can do something with what they've learned. They can benefit greatly from trainings on water conservation, greywater use, computer skills, etc., but training that is focused on improving livelihoods must consider how the women will transform their new skills and abilities into income-generating activities. The cooperatives involved in the project were receiving a number of trainings in the past, from a variety of providers, on how to process food or produce goods like soap and handicrafts, but the links to the market were non-existent. The women weren't able to put these new skills into practice in a way that would improve their household's income or generate revenue for the fledgling cooperatives because they had no access to the market. Given space-based restrictions, it may not be feasible for women to enter the market directly, but there are options that don't require this or the use of middlemen. NCARE developed an interesting model of hosting an annual exposition to showcase the products of Jordan's cooperatives. One woman who learned dairy-processing through her cooperative was able to establish a home business by bringing her products to the exposition and collecting a list of customers and their phone numbers. Each month she called each customer and asks if they would like to place an order. Those that did make arrangements to meet with her and the products and money were exchanged in random roadside locations. Women from one of the newer cooperatives relayed the story of a woman that used her home as a site to sell goods she made to women she knew in the community. When someone wanted to go 'shopping' they called her and arranged a time to browse through the items she's produced. Cooperatives can also serve as the transaction site, as was the case for Mawakeb, which hosted a beauty salon and photography studio or Ngera that sold products from the dairy processing unit. While these alternatives to the formal market are beneficial, trainers can play a role in actively developing the links between cooperatives and third-parties that may be able to provide resources or facilitate the sale of goods and services produced. Cooperatives, especially those in their formative years, are in need of this kind of deliberate relationship building. As stated by one participant from Mawakeb, *"You all have been talking about the weaknesses of the community related to the lack of services and infrastructure. Nobody has paid attention to the fact that we live together in the same community, but we are still unable to communicate...it is hard for members of our community to reach out and network on a larger scale."*

## Training Modules

As part of this project five training modules have been created based on the five skill sets taught in the training program. Each module is comprised of a guide for use by the training facilitator and a set of PowerPoint lessons related to topics covered in the skill category. The guides provide direction to training facilitators on methods of working with women's groups using participatory learning strategies. As some of the topics may be unfamiliar to trainers, the guides also provide additional detail on the topics covered in the PowerPoint lessons. These materials were developed with capabilities and constraints of women's groups in the Middle East and North Africa in mind and are freely available through the MEAS website at [www.meas-extension.org/meas-offers/training/mena](http://www.meas-extension.org/meas-offers/training/mena).

- 1) Cooperative Management: Leadership and Group Management
  - Developing Leadership Skills
  - Leadership and Teambuilding
  - Communication Skills for Managers
  - Leading Successful Meetings

- 2) Savings and Financials: Fundraising and Proposal Writing
  - Introduction to Community Development Projects
  - Community-Based Organizations
  - Assessing Community Capabilities
  - Project Design
  - Project Planning and Preparation
  - Funding Opportunities and Proposal Writing
  - Project Management
  - Financial Management
- 3) Business and Marketing: Marketing, Value Added, and Value Chains
  - Introduction to the Concept of Marketing
  - Marketing Mix and Consumers
  - Agricultural Marketing Channels
  - Value Added
  - Promoting Gender Equitable Opportunities in Agricultural Value Chain
- 4) Natural Resource Management
  - Water in the Household
  - Greywater Use
  - Litter's Effects on Livestock and Water Irrigation
- 5) Technology and Innovation
  - Do-it-Yourself Projects
  - Online Resources for Education and Skills Development
  - Using Social Media to Promote your Group

## Conclusions & Further Research

The project examined the deliberate development of social capital and networks of members of women's cooperatives through participatory learning in a peer-to-peer-model training program in Jordan. Overall, the participants of the MEPI training reported positive experiences and self-growth, which was evident from their knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions. The women also acknowledged the expansion of their social capital and were treating it as a resource to further strengthen their relationships and build networks beyond their cooperatives. Personal motivation along with knowledge acquisition were highly valued by the women emphasizing its critical role in collective action. The experiences and opinions the women shared emphasized the important role women's cooperatives play in uplifting the socio-economic conditions of women and ultimately their local communities. The evidence from our discussions and observations showed that all three cooperatives were regarded as locally owned, people-centered enterprises. Women perceived cooperatives as avenues to exercise their collective action, and increase social organization and cohesion. With the members concern for their fellow-members and communities, the women represented a model of social enterprise that placed a high regard and utility on social capital.

Further research should be conducted to determine how women, who are traditionally underserved by extension services, could utilize their social capital and their networks to overcome common obstacles such as lack of financial resources and market access. Because women face space-based patriarchy, methods for reaching them and moving them into public spaces are an outstanding area of needed research. Jordan is experiencing a feminization of agriculture where more women take over men's traditional responsibilities in agriculture and livestock production. This merits research on understanding how this phenomena impacts women and what types of support they will need to increase their earning



potential. Another interesting area for follow up research is in the examination of how the level of success a cooperative has in gaining community support impacts the benefits that its members are able to accrue. For example, whether the high level of collective action within a cooperative translates into support for women's involvement and increased independence from male family members. Finally, research is needed to understand how EAS can be reformed in Jordan, or MENA, to better serve rural women.

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