



Photo by CRS Ethiopia staff

Fostering more equitable decision making

SYNOPSIS

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and Ethiopia Development Food Assistance Program (DFAP)¹ explored the opportunity to promote community and couples communications by piloting The Family House (TFH) approach in six *kebeles*² in Kersa and Meta *woredas*³ from December 2015 through March 2016. Using TFH approach, the pilot aimed to strengthen couples' relationships by addressing communication through messages. CRS Ethiopia/DFAP found that TFH approach can help families make better decisions regarding agricultural livelihoods by deliberately crafting dialogue around equitable decisions and family income spending, especially when coupled with a related intervention such as CRS' savings and internal lending communities (SILC).⁴ The pilot also demonstrated that an effective network of community-

based TFH couples could dramatically increase the percentage of new couples exposed to this approach.

Even after the pilot ended, TFH-trained couples continued to disseminate TFH approach and messages to community members through social events. The six-*kebele* pilot study results informed the Government of Ethiopia (GoE) district offices about the benefits of a more broad-based policy to increase community-based TFH awareness, training, and utilization. By scaling up TFH approach—for example, by linking it to Resilience through Enhanced Adaptation, Action-learning, and Partnership (REAAP) communities in East and West Hararghe⁵—CRS Ethiopia/DFAP can potentially strengthen communities against outside shocks and stresses at different layers of society, including the household level.

1 This was a five-year United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Title II-funded program.

2 A *kebele* is the smallest administrative unit contained within a *woreda* in Ethiopia.

3 A *woreda* is an administrative division managed by a local government in Ethiopia.

4 Community-based groups such as savings and internal lending communities (SILC) have proven successful in building the social and financial capital of recover farmer segment households.

5 REAAP is being implemented in the vulnerable communities of East and West Hararghe zones, including Meta, which is one of two pilot *woredas*. REAAP helps nearly half a million people adapt new practices and technologies to mitigate drought, erratic rainfall, and land degradation, and better withstand climate change.

Vulnerability varies across social groups. Within social systems, the relationships, networks, behaviors, and cultural norms between people, households, communities, and groups can impact resilience. To more clearly understand the drivers of vulnerability, CRS Ethiopia/DFAP has attempted to clearly understand the social drivers of vulnerability, including the inequitable distribution of rights, resources, and power that make certain individuals, households, communities, or groups more sensitive to the impacts of shocks and stresses. Women are disproportionately at risk to shocks (e.g., they often have to travel much further from the home to fetch water for the household during periods of drought). In addition, unequal power in decision making and livelihood resource management contributes to their vulnerability. Cultural roles that restrict women from acquiring skills and knowledge further increase their vulnerability in certain contexts. CRS Ethiopia/DFAP have leveraged data generated from The Family House pilot study to inform partners on how to increase resilience, especially in vulnerable households, through changes in project design, linkages, and long-term benefits within target communities.

Building social capital and human assets increases resilience of vulnerable households. Community-based groups such as producer groups and SILC

CONTEXT-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

The Faithful House (TFH) is a couples-strengthening curriculum focused on improving the quality of the couple relationship. In 2015, TFH was adapted for use with Muslim couples in a modified curriculum entitled Islamic Family House (IFH). For the pilot in Ethiopia, the curriculum name was modified to The Family House—a name that was more appropriate to the local context and avoided mentioning any specific religion or faith. This name emphasizes that the house belongs to the family and focuses on the togetherness of its members.

OVERVIEW OF THE FAMILY HOUSE PILOT

Twenty trained TFH couples provided 4–5 messages (e.g., recognition of gender equality and gender roles, and shared decision making on resource utilization) to SILC, producer, and community conversations groups in six *kebeles* in Kersa and Meta *woredas* during the pilot period (December 2015–March 2016).

Two hundred and twelve couples have been transmitting messages to their children and other community members during community conversations meetings; at SILC and Fuel Efficient Stove (FES) producer group meetings; and at government mass labor mobilizations representing post-pilot, self-replicating, scaling up efforts.

groups have helped build the social and financial capital of vulnerable households in Ethiopia. For example, CRS' SILC model strengthens social capital and household absorptive capacity by allowing participants to draw on savings in times of shock. During the 2015–2016 El Niño drought, SILC group members had access to regular savings, loan, and social or emergency funds to help them better cope. The SILC group rules require members—primarily women in Ethiopia—to save whatever little they have (typically, 1–2 birr per month⁶). Their savings have proved very useful for capitalizing petty-trade activity or purchasing seeds and food.

Through the SILC groups, households have learned to come together to pool financial resources, solve problems, create forums for discussion, and learn new skills, all of which strengthen the social bonding so critical to vulnerable households. The SILC and producer groups also provide a foundation for building further skills (e.g., agronomic, financial, and business skills). Strengthening household assets fosters confidence and empowers households to undertake riskier but more productive and diversified livelihoods. The groups also provide an entry point for awareness building and behavior change with respect to improved nutrition, coping strategies, and women's empowerment during periods of shock or stress. Community groups that develop relationships to other communities, organizations, and service providers can further

6 As of September 2016, 1 U.S. dollar equaled 22 Ethiopian birr.

build resilience by broadening social networks as well as business or marketing ties. For example, using skills learned in SILC, group members can also form seed multiplication producer groups outside the SILC to improve their links to markets.

Using SILC and producer groups as well as community conversations (CC)⁷ meetings as an entry point, CRS Ethiopia/DFAP piloted TFH approach to determine how participation could help couples re-imagine their relationships and identify areas where they were most interested in increasing joint decision-making skills. During the implementation, CRS Ethiopia/DFAP found that women predominately participated in SILC groups and were the members of the household who saved. One of the study's findings suggests that TFH approach has the potential to motivate men to participate in group activities, especially SILC activities.

PILOT KEY TASKS

- CRS selected 20 role-model couples.
- CRS conducted workshop on TFH approach for the 20 selected couples.
- Twenty trained couples conveyed TFH messages to 212 community members in two Meta and Kersa *woredas* over a three-month period.
- SILC and other groups received messages 4-5 times during the pilot period.
- CRS supervised, followed up on, and documented changes in couples' perceptions over the three-month pilot period.
- Pilot participants were able to recite main points from TFH approach that they received from the trained couples, including recognition of gender equality and gender roles, and shared decision making on resource utilization.

Partnering with GoE on the development and rollout of the pilot. To increase community co-investment and planning in the pilot, CRS Ethiopia/DFAP held meetings with implementing partners, religious leaders, and government representatives from Women's Affairs and "Yehaimanot Mechachal"⁸ offices of both *woredas* to orient them in TFH approach. Subsequently, CRS Ethiopia/DFAP selected, in collaboration with government stakeholders, *kebeles* for the pilot study. They selected a total of 20 couples (40 people) that were members of the CRS Ethiopia/DFAP beneficiary community, based on their positive couple relations and community acceptance.⁹ The couples shared similar socioeconomic backgrounds, including religion and language, with other DFAP project beneficiaries. After receiving training, the 20 couples started transmitting messages to other community members at CC groups as well as SILC and producer group meetings, and other social events such as Edir.¹⁰

Overall, the results demonstrate the areas where community or program planners need to link TFH to technical interventions that promote specific desired outcomes, such as increasing saving and credit activities. The post-pilot test indicated that women's involvement in decision making increased, which could contribute to improved well-being outcomes for women and girls in the future.

Government stakeholders, including the *woreda* Women's Affairs Office head, facilitated message transmission to community members, provided technical support to trained couples, and followed up on their activities. This practice attracted the attention of neighboring communities, and they began asking for membership in TFH approach groups. When participants in the training observed the benefits of the communication-skills education, they initiated discussions about expanding the reach of TFH approach with the *kebele* administration. In some cases, participants decided to teach what they learned to the community at large.

7 It is critical to address gender-based violence and child marriage, since both contribute to the vulnerability for young women in Ethiopia and limit their opportunities, including productive livelihood opportunities. Within DFAP communities, the CC method encourages positive changes in the reduction and prevention of gender-based violence, early marriage, and other harmful traditional practices. It also creates awareness and facilitates open discussions about these issues among family members, improves the decision-making role of women in the household, and promotes women's empowerment.

8 Amharic phrase that refers to religious tolerance.

9 For couple selection, the pilot used standard criteria implemented by other CRS countries.

10 In Ethiopia, an edir is a traditional burial society to which members make monthly contributions and in return receive a payment to help cover funeral expenses.

While government officials were involved in the pilot from its inception, and even helped select couples, they did not have adequate knowledge about TFH approach, nor did they have access to the training materials and other guiding documents appropriate to the local context. To some extent, this lack of guidance has affected stakeholders' capacity to provide technical support to trained couples and other community members who received the messages. Sharing the findings and issues raised in this TFH pilot study can encourage a more widespread discussion within and across communities, and with *kebele*, *woreda*, and national policymakers.

Sustainability of engaging couples in TFH messaging activities. Sustainability for the new communication skills appears promising, as couples expressed plans to continue improving their relationships as well as sharing their knowledge of TFH approach with others. Trained couples also served as positive role models for other couples. After the introduction of TFH, men made statements such as: "Before I sell agricultural products, I talk to my wife about it and do not make decisions just by myself."¹¹ In addition, men realized that household management required the participation of both women and men. This realization prompted action—for example, husbands began to share household responsibilities and sit down with their spouses at night to plan for the future.¹² Women also demonstrated some instances of greater autonomy after the pilot.¹³

Overall, these are promising changes that can provide the foundation for the greater household resilience that is needed during periods of shock. The pilot findings also indicate that integrating TFH approach led to encouraging results in other social, economic, and political areas.

COMMUNITIES LEADING THE WAY TO CHANGE BEHAVIOR

Women's restricted access to income and limited decision-making in regard to household assets critically affects the well-being of families. TFH work seeks to change behavior at the household and community level, leading to the adoption of improved practices and more equitable decision making. When coupled with a specific technical area, TFH method can bring greater equality into household decision making through direct family counseling.

- **Prevention and reduction of gender-based violence, early marriage, and other harmful traditional practices.** Most harmful traditional practices are rooted in religious beliefs. Conveying TFH messages to community members can potentially correct harmful beliefs and practices affecting community members—mainly women and girls—and eventually eradicate them.
- **Improving the decision-making role of women in households.** TFH approach promotes constant communication as well as joint decision making by couples, which contributes positively to the development of knowledge, self-esteem, self-confidence, decision-making skills, and status of women. For example, REAAP monitoring data revealed an improvement in female representation in community-level institutions due to SILC and other disaster risk reduction (DRR) activities.
- **Promoting empowerment of women.** TFH approach helps change men's attitudes and behaviors toward women. Men support their wives and partners in achieving socioeconomic empowerment. For example, it is now common practice for women to purchase goats for rearing or fattening by using their savings from SILC group activity.

Improving men's active participation in SILC groups. DFAP monitoring data show that women

11 Getenesh Alayou and Dejene Mideksa, "Catholic Relief Services/Ethiopia Development Food Assistance Program: The Family House Pilot Project Evaluation Report," March 2016, p. 41. A post-test survey that included comments from a male participant from Tola *kebele*, Kersa *woreda*, indicating a change in communications with his wife.

12 Getenesh Alayou and Dejene Mideksa, "Catholic Relief Services/Ethiopia Development Food Assistance Program: The Family House Pilot Project Evaluation Report," March 2016, p. 41. A focus group discussion that included comments from a male participant from Hakebas *kebele*, Meta *woreda*, indicating a change in communications with his wife.

13 Pre- and post-test comparison indicates improvement around decisions to participate in DFAP saving and credit activities after the pilot. At pre-test, out of 22 respondents, only 1 wife decided by herself, 5 let partner, make the decision, and 3 decided jointly. Husbands, however, replied as follows: 5 decided by themselves, 6 let partner make the decision, and 2 decided jointly. Post-test results showed that, out of 23 respondents, 47.8% made decisions by themselves and 52.2% made decisions with their partners. Out of these respondents, 8 wives replied they decided by themselves and 3 let partner make the decision. On the other hand, 3 husbands decided by themselves and 9 let partner make the decision, showing that wives developed strong decision-making power in DFAP saving and credit activities after the pilot.

make up the majority of participants in SILC groups. However, both women and men are encouraged to actively participate in SILC group activities. TFH approach can potentially motivate more men to participate in group activities and improve their culture of saving.

Learning to-date: Before the pilot introduction of TFH approach, couples, especially women, reported minimum joint decision-making communications. After the training, couples were assigned to work on improving their relationships and to share TFH messages with 212 other couples, mainly through group settings such as SILC. Accordingly, CRS Ethiopia/DFAP observed two major changes: (1) positive attitude change among couples toward their spouses, and (2) improved joint decision making, cohesion, and couples communications,

as well as reduced gender-based violence. Pilot participants' households started to observe positive changes in their lives after couple communications altered. This alteration led to the adoption of similar communications by non-pilot friends and neighbors.

The introduction of TFH approach has demonstrated the capacity of people, especially men, to develop better communication and joint decision-making skills when they have the training and tools to do so. CRS Ethiopia/DFAP sees excellent opportunities for scaling up with local community groups. For example, by linking TFH approach to REAAP communities in East and West Hararghe, CRS Ethiopia/DFAP has the potential to strengthen communities against outside shocks and stresses at different layers of society, including the household level.

HOW THE FAMILY HOUSEHOLD APPROACH CONTRIBUTES TO RESILIENCE-BUILDING CAPACITY

Absorptive capacity at the household level: During a shock, absorptive capacity can be irreversible (e.g., selling of livestock) or reversible (borrowing money). Participation in savings and loan groups, such as SILC, can minimize households' sensitivity to shocks and stresses while contributing to social and financial capital.

Adaptive capacity at the household level: The ability to proactively modify conditions through new skill development and decision-making practices (e.g., TFH approach) in anticipation of, or as a reaction to, shocks and stresses.

Transformative capacity at the household level: The TFH approach, coupled with SILC, has the potential to strengthen communities against outside shocks and stresses at different layers of society, including the household level. When a family participates in collective sharing, learning, and innovation, the power balance shifts, allowing women greater access to health care, education, livelihoods, and rights, and leading to permanent changes in the role of children.

