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# Theory of change for gender transformative programming for food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture

Technical note

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Gender  
Transformative  
Approaches

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# Abbreviations

FALS	Financial Action Learning System
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GALS	Gender Action Learning System
GTAs	gender transformative approaches
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
JP GTA	Joint Programme on Gender Transformative Approaches for Food Security, Improved Nutrition and Sustainable Agriculture
RBA	United Nations Rome-based Agencies
VSLA	Village Savings and Loans Association
WFP	World Food Programme





# Introduction

This technical note presents the theory of change for gender transformative programming for food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture. It aims to provide the rationale for development actors and practitioners to adopt the theory of change for gender transformative change in interventions contributing to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 2 – Zero Hunger.

The theory of change was produced by the JP GTA and offers a conceptual framework to assist the RBAs – FAO, IFAD and WFP – and their partners in designing and implementing gender equality work with a transformational and sustainable impact.

This technical note comprises two main sections. Section one provides background information on the logic and key assumptions of the theory of change, and general considerations for its use. Section two provides examples of how the theory of change was used in two pilot projects supported by the JP GTA in Ecuador and Malawi. These examples display some of the potential ways in which the theory of change can be used to strengthen the design and implementation of food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture interventions.

This technical note complements [other JP GTA publications](#) available on the JP GTA website.

# A theory of change to integrate gender transformative approaches in food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture programmes

A theory of change is a comprehensive explanation and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to occur in a particular context by defining a systemic and coherent pathway. It identifies long-term goals, and then works backwards to identify the root causes of an issue and the conditions that need to be in place for change (the achievement of outcomes and outputs) to occur. It also maps out how these elements are causally related to each other.

## The logic of the theory of change

Gender transformative approaches (GTAs) are participatory processes that seek to uncover and address pervasive unequal power relations and discriminatory social institutions (and their associated negative effects) that limit the potential of interventions geared towards food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture.

The theory of change for gender transformative programming identifies gender inequalities, in particular the unequal power relations and discriminatory social institutions<sup>1</sup> that govern daily life, as underlying causes of food insecurity, malnutrition and unsustainable agriculture. The theory of change sets out pathways, beginning with addressing the underlying causes of gender inequality and harmful practices, through various interventions that result in gender transformative outcomes and impacts (see Figure 1).

Social and gender norms shape behaviours, practices, policies and laws that often result in pervasive discrimination against women and limit the achievement of food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture. These factors affect the individual and collective agency of women by reducing their capacity to define their own goals, act upon them and thereby build better livelihoods and well-being.

<sup>1</sup> Social institutions comprise both formal (policies, laws, rights, and legislation) and informal (social and gender norms) rules and norms (FAO *et al.*, 2023).

The analysis of discriminatory social institutions and unequal power relations reveals pressing issues requiring attention and informs the review of existing interventions. Such analysis also enables the identification of appropriate GTAs that can systematically empower local players to bring about the necessary changes.

Through various entry points in different spheres of influence (individual, household, community, organizational and macro-environmental), GTAs empower local players to understand the negative impact of gender inequalities. The use of GTAs triggers positive changes in perspective and attitudes, which can in turn lead to practices and policies that support gender equality.

Addressing women's practical needs and strategic gender interests can improve women's skills, knowledge and access to assets. Immediate impacts include improvements in women's workloads and enhanced voice<sup>2</sup> and agency, as well as more gender-supportive policies and laws. Together, these outcomes lead to greater levels of gender equality. This, in turn, translates into further positive outcomes such as:

- more equitable access to and control over resources, food, services and opportunities;
- increase in women's representation and leadership; and
- a reduction in gender-based violence.

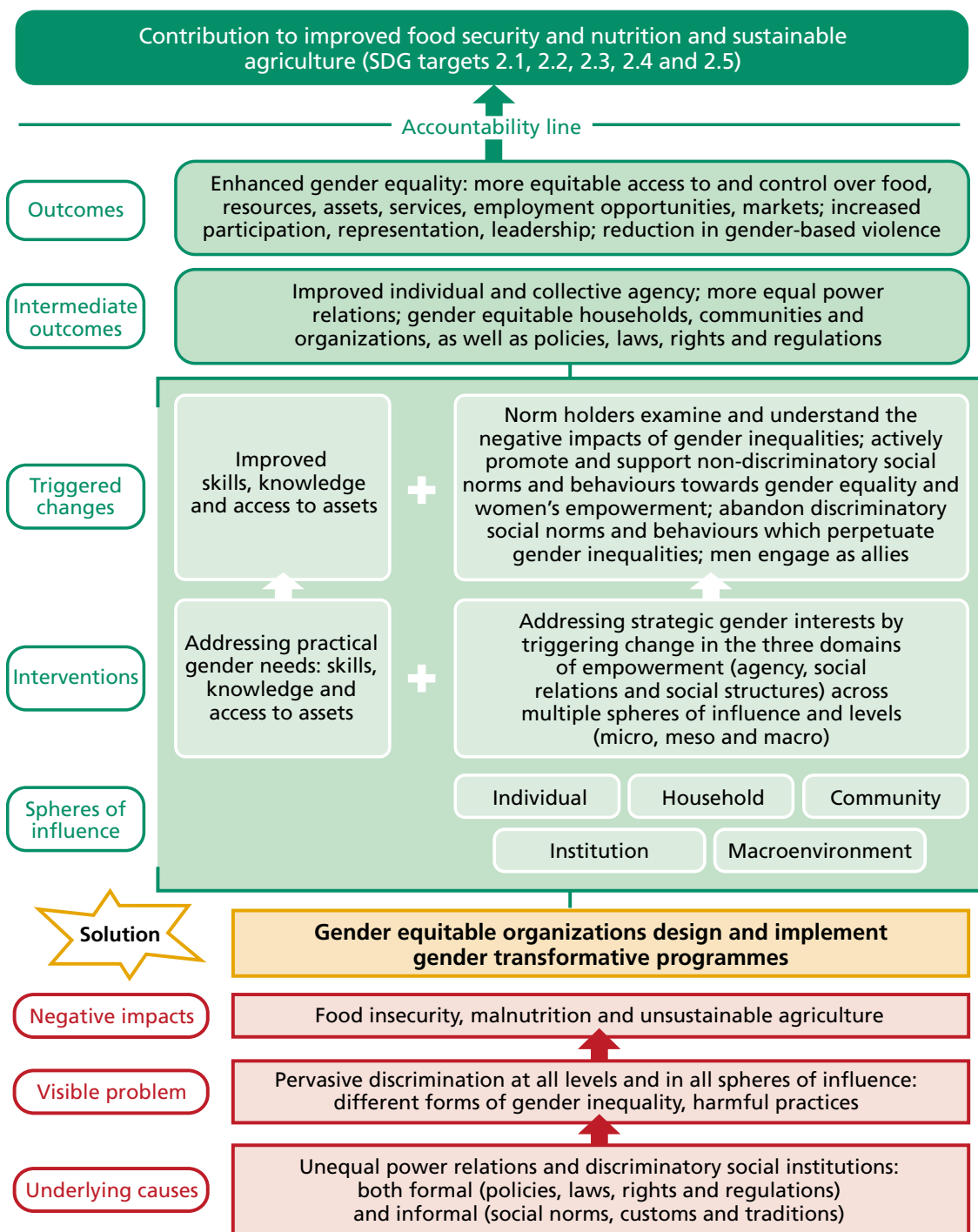
By increasing opportunities for women and improving their motivation and productivity, these outputs lead to greater levels of food security and nutrition and more sustainable agriculture.

When organizations embrace gender transformative change in their vision, mission, values and internal policies, they equip themselves to achieve long lasting results through programme implementation.

In order to deliver on gender equality and women's empowerment in each of their interventions, organizations must allocate adequate resources and develop the necessary skills among management, staff and collaborators. They also need to reflect critically on their own norms and behaviours towards gender equality and address any negative behaviours.

<sup>2</sup> Women's equal voice and leadership in public life means that everyone has the opportunity and ability to participate meaningfully in public decisions that affect their lives. (CARE, n.d.)

**FIGURE 1.** The JP GTA’s theory of change for gender transformative programming for food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture



## Key assumptions for successful use

The success of the theory of change for gender transformative programming relies on the following key assumptions:

- **Gender norms and gender inequalities are context-specific.** Gender inequalities manifest themselves in different ways across nine core areas<sup>3</sup>, depending on the context. It is important to identify the most influential social and gender norms leading to the greatest levels of inequality in a specific location and time. Context-specific norms and inequalities inform and demand context-specific responses.
- **The scope of a gender transformative intervention determines the magnitude of its impact.** The use of the theory of change generates positive impacts in the sphere of influence in which it is used (individual, household, community, organizational or macroenvironmental), though positive effects often spill over into other spheres. Nonetheless, using multiple spheres as entry points and, especially, using a systemic approach to target those spheres, increases the potential for impact, scale-up and sustainability.
- **GTAs empower women and men, albeit in different ways.** Transformative change relies on engaging and empowering both women and men. The use of GTAs can promote women's economic empowerment, voice and agency and result in more balanced workloads. Yet GTAs also empower men, by, for example, promoting positive masculinities.<sup>4</sup> GTAs can also help demonstrate that women's empowerment does not mean disempowering men, and in fact increases collaboration and cooperation. The impacts of women exercising their rights are felt at all levels (micro, meso and macro): in their own development and wellbeing and that of their families, in the socio-economic progression of their households, community groups and society, and in the broader economy.
- **Intersectionalities result in specific forms of discrimination.** Women and men are not homogenous groups. Therefore, the theory of change is flexible and offers the possibility of considering any other social norm (beyond gender norms) or unequal power relation that shapes gender inequalities for specific groups of women and men. This includes factors such as age, marital status, race, class, religion, ability and socio-economic status. The theory of change should identify pathways towards gender equality for each group.
- **The use of the theory of change can be cost-effective.** Adopting the theory of change requires a commitment to addressing the root causes of gender inequalities, which can trigger positive effects on the achievement of core food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture outcomes. By investing in gender transformative approaches, it is feasible to obtain long-lasting and effective results.

<sup>3</sup> The nine core areas of gender inequality in the context of food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture are: (i) knowledge, skills and access to information; (ii) productive autonomy; (iii) economic autonomy; (iv) agency; (v) division of labour; (vi) power, influence and decision making; (vii) participation, representation and leadership; (viii) reproductive freedom; and (ix) freedom from violence and coercion. (FAO, IFAD & WFP, 2022)

<sup>4</sup> Gender-equitable (positive) masculinities are supportive of women's empowerment and gender equality. They contest patriarchal structures and unequal gender power dynamics. (OECD, 2021)

## Considerations for implementation

The theory of change can be integrated at any stage during the project cycle but is most effective when used during the design and early implementation phases. The proposed theory of change aims to facilitate the empowerment of local players and target audiences. It is process-oriented and based on the premise that change requires time. The considerations below outline a pathway for the transformation of discriminatory social and gender norms and other social institutions (such as policies and laws) to increase food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture.

### 1. Build awareness and internal capacity to integrate GTAs.

Prior to integrating GTAs in new or existing programmes it is necessary to create awareness of how GTAs can benefit women and men, as well as their potential impact on food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture. Awareness generates the necessary buy-in upon which capacity is then built for programme managers and implementers to design the best ways to integrate GTAs in the specific context. Buy-in and capacity constitute essential pillars for ownership, leadership, the successful management and implementation of GTAs, and the generation of impactful results. The best way to prepare a theory of change is through participatory processes with engagement at different levels of an organization.

### 2. Identify the main gender gaps associated with food insecurity, malnutrition and unsustainable agriculture.

Integrating GTAs in a programme must start with identifying the prevailing gender gaps associated with food insecurity, malnutrition and unsustainable agriculture. These gaps can be identified through rapid gender assessments, i.e. investigating the situation of men and women in the target area as it relates to food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture. Once identified, these can be prioritized by order of importance.

### 3. Explore the driving discriminatory social institutions and unequal power relations.

The most important and prevailing gender gaps identified are then investigated using specific methodologies.<sup>5</sup> These methodologies can reveal the context-specific unequal power relations, discriminatory formal institutions and social and gender norms that create, sustain or reinforce the main gender gaps. Once discriminatory social institutions and unequal power relations are identified, it is possible to envision where and what gender transformative change is needed to sustainably address the identified gender gaps. Addressing prevailing discriminatory social institutions and unequal power relations becomes the focus of the GTAs chosen for a programme.

### 4. Design how to best integrate GTAs.

Once the gender gaps have been identified, the team designs the intervention in collaboration with partners, including communities, groups or households when possible, and determines the spheres in which it seeks to generate change. GTAs can be introduced in different spheres: individual, household, community, organizational and macro-environmental. The nature of the project and the available resources (time, funds and human resources) are some of the key features dictating the entry point(s) that best suit each context.

<sup>5</sup> For example: the Social Norms Analysis Plot (SNAP) framework, the Social Norms Exploration Tool (SNET), the Social Norms Diagnostic Guidance for Financial Inclusion and the Social Norms Diagnostic Tool. (IFAD & Procasur, 2023)

The design of gender transformative interventions also includes the identification of participants, implementing partners and other stakeholders, as well as indicators of change.<sup>6</sup>

### **5. Implement carefully, with curiosity, openness and flexibility.**

The use of GTAs provides implementers and participants alike with opportunities for personal reflection and growth. Implementing GTAs intentionally, paying due attention to the quality of the processes, interventions delivered, and results obtained is crucial for success – just like any other participatory methodology or behaviour change intervention. Implementation needs to be flexible so that operational strategies and processes can be fine-tuned as needed. Equally important is to embed safeguards to protect participants from any unintended consequences associated with the implementation of activities.

The effects of GTAs can be much broader than initially foreseen and lead to programmatic possibilities not considered. For example, the use of a GTA at the individual level or in the household sphere can lead those targeted to seek the same type of positive changes in the organizations they belong to, which could in turn generate positive impacts on how the organizations operate. The use of GTAs can have a positive ripple effect among stakeholders and the landscape in which they operate.

### **6. Measure, share and discuss results.**

Monitoring and evaluation systems or other mechanisms such as rapid qualitative enquiry are common tools to measure the changes brought about by the integration of GTAs. It is important to measure changes in agency, key social and gender norms, policies, laws, power relations, the status of prevailing gender gaps, and effects on the relevant area of focus of the programme (food security, nutrition or sustainable agriculture). Evaluators should measure changes in the sphere of influence in which GTAs were introduced and also pay attention to possible effects in other spheres. The results are not only an indicator of progress and success but are also key to assessing if operational strategies need to be adjusted.

Sharing documented experience and results offers the opportunity to raise awareness, contribute to the expanded use of GTAs and generate impact in other spheres and locations.

<sup>6</sup> For further information on how to develop GTA indicators, please refer to FAO, IFAD & WFP, 2022.

# The theory of change in practice: Examples from Ecuador and Malawi

The JP GTA implemented two pilot projects from 2021 to 2023, one in Ecuador and another in Malawi. The pilots were carried out under the umbrella of RBA-specific operations and capitalized on opportunities conferred by each context. The two pilots differed in focus but were both equally valuable in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment. Both pilots used GTAs to influence social norms that negatively affected food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture.

## Ecuador: Using GTAs to spearhead systemic change in food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture

The JP GTA pilot project in Ecuador was launched in December 2021. The results from the pilot were transformative for women and the spaces they participate in, namely, their households, farmer organizations, communities and the larger farming landscape. The pilot made it possible to witness, first hand, the benefits of implementing GTAs, and understand how gender norms condition social and economic progress. Visible results led to policy changes at multiple levels, beyond what was initially expected.

The JP GTA's interventions in Ecuador were designed to contribute to government and RBA efforts at national and provincial levels. The JP GTA pilot capitalized on the existence of Ecuador's National Agricultural Strategy for Rural Women of 2019 and the Rural Women's Roundtable (Mesa Mujer Rural) – the main space for dialogue and action for gender equality and women's empowerment in agriculture. The RBAs also leaned on IFAD's understanding of common context-specific gender gaps and rapid rural diagnostic exercises; FAO's rooted work with Ecuador's Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock and gender sensitive value chain approach; and WFP's knowledge of rural communities.

Inspired by the JP GTA's draft theory of change for gender transformative programming, the RBAs in Ecuador set out to achieve transformative results at the institutional and policy levels; in farmer organizations; in rural communities and households; and within the RBA Country Offices themselves.



Interventions were identified and informed by two social norms diagnostic studies that deepened the understanding of prevailing social norms shaping gender inequalities in agricultural production and marketing, as well as in decision-making. Each agency used GTAs they were familiar with and introduced learnings from the social norms studies to strengthen them and render them profoundly relevant to the context in which they were applied. All opportunities were explored to generate systemic change, even if at a small scale.

Smaller localized studies made it possible to provide targeted support to address specific gender gaps among organized producer groups. For example, a study on women vegetable producers' access to markets resulted in identifying measures that increased their voice, enhancing their participation in these markets. The study also allowed them to establish partnerships to increase their income and contribution to nutrition. A gender-sensitive value chain development study led to the identification of interventions to address gender gaps in two cocoa farmer organizations and enabled another group of women to engage in honey production – a domain largely dominated by men.

Based on the analysis of social norms and building on the better understanding of the roots of gender inequalities, the JP GTA implemented gender transformative methodologies in its programming interventions, including Cerrando Brecha, Dimitra Clubs and Comunidades de Aprendizaje.

Cerrando Brecha, a facilitative and reflective methodology, laid the groundwork for other farmer groups to decide on the changes sought and how to achieve them. Women who participated experienced positive outcomes including:

- transitioning from feeling afraid to speak in public to now engaging in public spaces and online;
- participating in their groups' affirmative action planning;
- displaying greater participation in leadership positions than before; and
- negotiating prices with their cocoa providers.

The Cerrando Brecha process also provided opportunities for youth, who until then were largely absent from leadership positions in these farmer organizations. The same methodology was used to train the management team of a second project and to guide the design of a third project expected to start operations in 2024, which is expected to generate equally transformative results.

A social behaviour change communications campaign was also implemented in an additional cohort of rural communities with the goal of encouraging local inhabitants to consider gender roles and gender norms in ways that promote greater equality and wellbeing for all community members.

As part of this pilot project, the JP GTA also introduced the Dimitra Clubs, another gender transformative methodology, marking the first time this approach had been used in Latin America. Dimitra Clubs are informal groups of women and men of all ages with a common interest that discuss solutions to collective needs and challenges. The Dimitra Clubs in Ecuador provided access to information and facilitated communication and dialogue on topics such as gender equality, infrastructure, education, nutrition and food security. Through the Clubs women and men were able to participate in discussions, identify solutions to pressing concerns and develop leadership skills.

The impact of the JP GTA pilot at the policy and institutional level has been vast and multi-dimensional. Concerted efforts were made to:

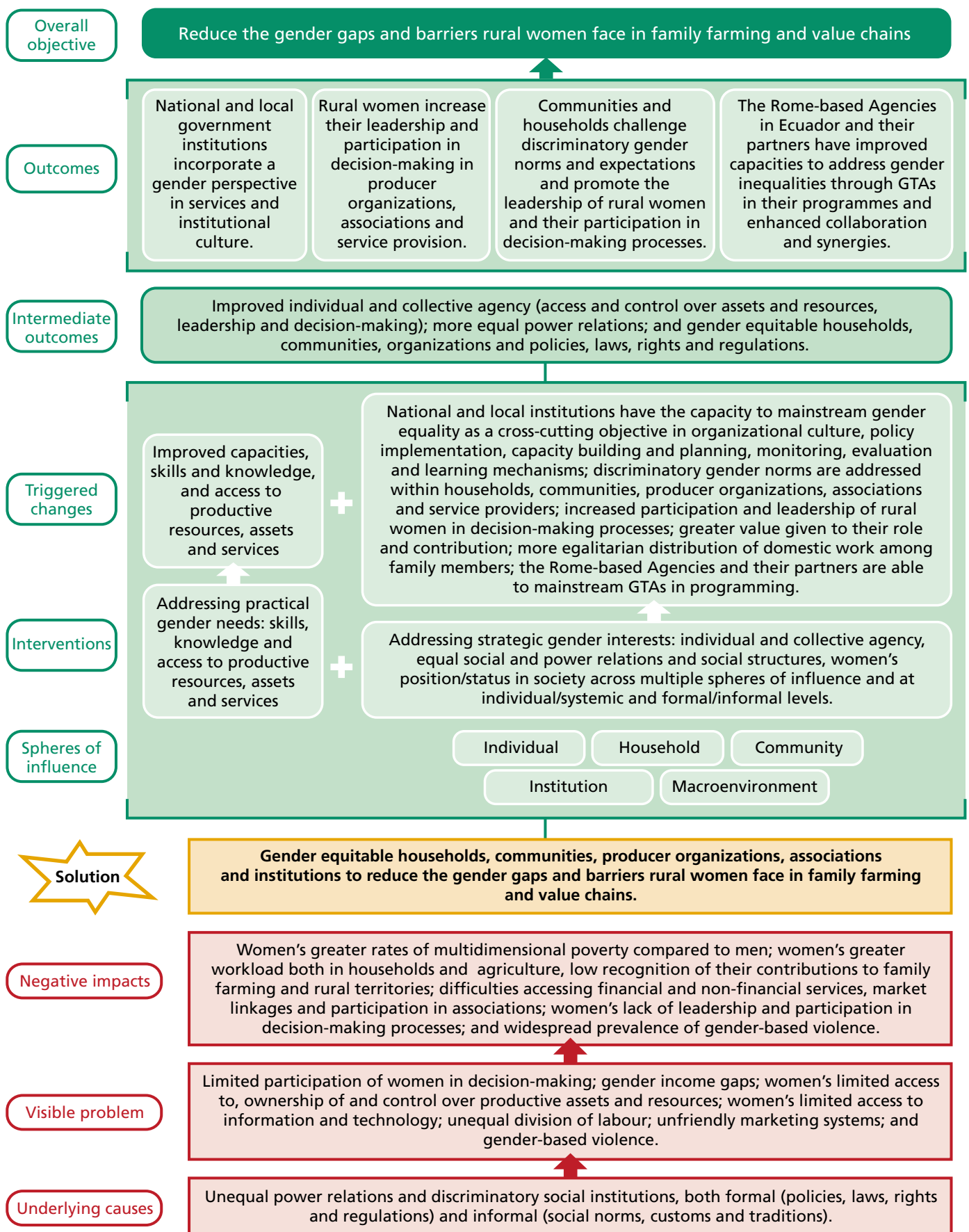
- upgrade the agricultural extension package used in Ecuador (Comunidades de Aprendizaje) to integrate gender perspectives and support further training among farmer groups;
- adopt gender-sensitive indicators within the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock's Agriculture Public Information System, as well as a methodology and system to continue building new gender-sensitive indicators;
- develop an e-learning training, which contributed substantially to increasing the capacity of local government and sector players; and
- support the development of the Rural Women's National Intersectoral Agricultural Strategy for 2024-2034 by Executive Decree (ongoing).

Capacity-building and participation of local government and sector institutions were promoted at all times. This made it possible to obtain buy-in, facilitated implementation and enabled all of those engaged to witness and appreciate the results obtained, and therefore aspire to sustain and replicate them. The Rural Women's Roundtable raised women's voice and participation and enabled women to be part of policy discussions on access to credit. Witnessing the positive results, the Autonomous Decentralized Government of Chone decided to adopt the Dimitra Clubs as policy for another four years in communities under its jurisdiction.

Finally, the insights offered by the study on the use of women's time in the cocoa value chain led to the same gender perspectives being integrated into routine assessments for another eight value chains, the data from which feeds into the Agricultural Public Information System of the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock.

The use of GTAs in Ecuador generated transformative results for women, but also for those who interact with them in different spaces. The RBAs and their local implementing partners witnessed how the use of GTAs had positive effects both at the chosen entry points, as well as in other spheres of influence. Anecdotal results have also been reported in relation to food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture. However, the full effects of the integration of GTAs in these realms can only be measured with more time than was available to this pilot.

**FIGURE 2.** Example from Ecuador: The JP GTA's theory of change for gender transformative programming for food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture



## Malawi: Using GTAs in financial inclusion programmes for women and youth

Previous RBA initiatives in Malawi had revealed the importance of promoting women's access to financial services as a cornerstone of gender equality and women's empowerment and the achievement of food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture. However, it was also apparent that the existing mechanisms used to promote financial inclusion – primarily Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) – were having limited impact on women's lives. The JP GTA pilot in Malawi took on the challenge of addressing this gap by introducing GTAs into existing VSLA operations.

By identifying the social and gender norms holding women back, and incorporating these into a gender transformative logical framework, the JP GTA pilot was able to improve women's and youth's access to microfinance, enhance gender equality and women's empowerment, and pave the way for greater levels of food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture.

The JP GTA pilot project in Malawi was designed to contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment by improving women's and youth's access to financial services, thereby supporting their economic autonomy. To achieve this, the pilot sought to accomplish the following:

- generate changes in government institutions and regulatory bodies;
- strengthen women's and youth's participation in VSLAs and enable their sustainable access to financial institutions; and
- confront and challenge discriminatory gender norms and support women's leadership within communities and households.

Unequal gender norms in Malawi result in women's low self-determination, dignity and freedom, which in turn influence poor access to financial services. A gender and age norms diagnostic study identified the following key social norms limiting women's and youth's financial inclusion:

1. married women should seek approval from their spouses on all financial decisions;
2. married women should not have financial privacy from their spouses;
3. women should not have assets in their name;
4. women should use their money for household expenses and not savings; and
5. youth should not have assets in their name.

This study provided recommendations to change these norms to enhance women's and youth's financial inclusion.

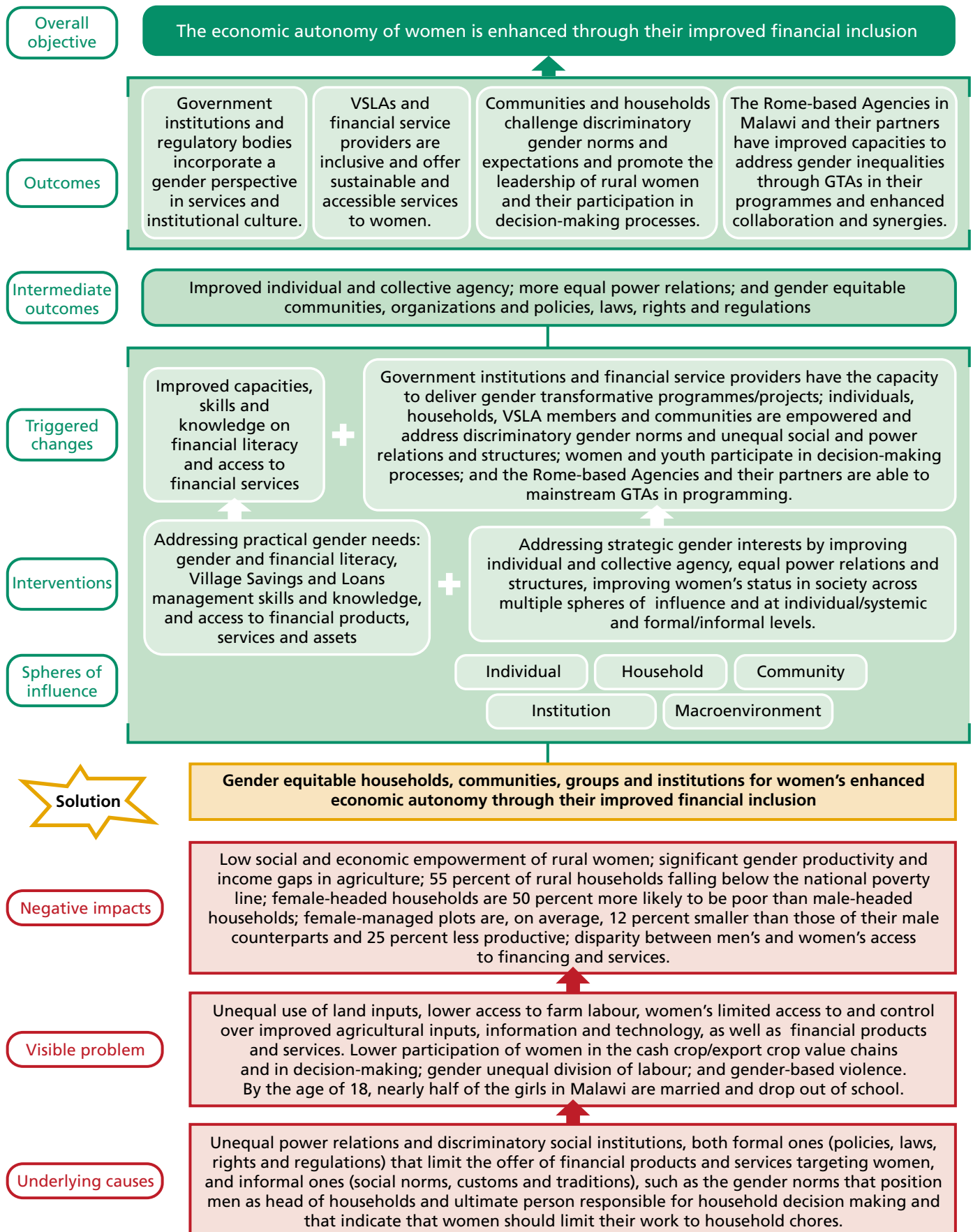
Building on each agency's comparative advantage and ongoing projects, the RBAs in Malawi designed and implemented interventions to enhance women's and youth's access to financial services using VSLAs as entry points.

For example, WFP added matching grants for women to start income-generating activities through a revolving fund. FAO, on the other hand, piloted the Dimitra Clubs approach in two districts to challenge discriminatory gender norms and promote the leadership and greater participation of rural women in decision-making processes. The Dimitra Clubs approach contributed to the transformation of gender relations and roles at the household and community spheres of influence.

IFAD took advantage of the pilot to expand the Gender Action Learning System (GALS) methodology, embed the Social Analysis and Action approach within the GALS methodology to generate change at the community level, and introduce the Financial Action Learning System (FALS), a new methodology inspired by the GALS.

The pilot improved women's access to financial services and enhanced their leadership within their households and communities. It also allowed youth to gain confidence and access financial products by working with their parents. Finally, the results of this pilot inspired a related IFAD project and its implementing partner to adopt the FALS methodology in their work to advance women's and youth's financial inclusion.

**FIGURE 3. Example from Malawi: The JP GTA’s theory of change for gender transformative programming for food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture**



## Conclusion

The theory of change for gender transformative programming for food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture offers a framework to increase the effectiveness of projects like those described above and their ability to positively impact gender equality and women's empowerment.

The theory of change is responsive to local needs. It follows a simple cause-and-effect logic illustrating how discriminatory social institutions and unequal power relations cause gender inequalities that negatively impact food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture. It also offers pathways to enhance individual and collective agency, addressing women's practical gender needs and strategic gender interests in different spheres (individual, household, community, organizational and macroenvironmental).

The theory of change illustrates different entry points through which change can be effected. At the same time, it points to the potential of systemic approaches (such as in the case of Ecuador), while also offering the flexibility to focus on a specific level or issue (as was the case in Malawi). GTAs constitute participatory processes whereby local players identify the changes they wish to make to address persistent gender inequalities, and the theory of change illustrates the path to the achievement of this change.

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