



GENDER MESSAGING THROUGH TALKING BOOKS

THE FEATS PROJECT



In partnership with

Canada

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ACRONYMS

ATB	Amplio Talking Book
FEATS	Farmers' Economic Advancement Through Seedlings
GAC	Global Affairs Canada
GAPs	Good Agricultural Practices
GROW	Greater Rural Opportunities for Women
MEDA	Mennonite Economic Development Associates
SME	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises
VSLA	Village Savings & Loans Association

ABOUT THE FEATS LEARNING SERIES

The FEATS Learning Series is carrying on the Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA) tradition of sharing lessons learned during project implementation. This new series covers MEDA's learnings in the tree crop industry in Ghana during a seven-year period (2015 - 2022). Topics include:

1. Building Sustainable Small-scale Cashew Nurseries: Key Results and Lessons from the FEATS Project
2. Establishing the Model for SME Operations: Designing the Benchmarks for Growth
3. Scaling Up Farmers' Capacity Building: The Use of Technology on the FEATS project
4. Use of Groundwater in Tree Crop Irrigation: A Case of Cocoa in Ghana
5. Building the Capacity of Women Entrepreneurs: The FEATS Women-led SME Story
6. Gender Messaging through Talking Books: The FEATS Project
7. Supporting Women Farmers' Access to Finance: The FEATS Project

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Authors	Severa Soyiri, Lydia Dogee and Neha Sethi
Editing and Review	Robert Austin, Edouine François, Jennifer Denomy and Mira Chouinard
Photography	The FEATS team
Graphic Design	Wendy Helgerman

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1. ABSTRACT

The FEATS project worked with approximately 5,200 women farmers in the shea industry, most of whom were illiterate and in need of training on gender inclusion, leadership, Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs), and business management. Women farmers were faced with mobility and logistical constraints and had very little time for economic activities due to unpaid care responsibilities.

A digital messaging and communications tool known as the Amplio Talking Book (ATB) was used to provide the necessary training to the women. In total, 173 ATB devices were loaded with pre-recorded messages on topics such as gender inclusion, leadership, Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs), and business management and distributed to 10 shea women groups.

Women's use of the Talking Book devices at home led to very positive unintended benefits, as they intentionally listened to recordings while their husbands were present. This improved uptake of the messaging by husbands, leading to transformative outcomes such as greater cooperation at the household level and improved women's involvement in decision-making.



Figure 1: Women carrying milled shea nuts

2. BACKGROUND

The Farmers' Economic Advancement Through Seedlings (FEATS) project is a seven-year (2015-2022) initiative funded by Global Affairs Canada (GAC) that aimed to improve the economic wellbeing of men and women farmers in

export-linked tree crop industries in Ghana. The FEATS project was designed in collaboration with GAC to address key areas critical to improving the economic well-being of farmers, namely increased supply of quality tree crop seedlings, increased business and financial capacities of tree crop nursery operators and farmers, and improved business environment for farmers in the cashew, shea, rubber, and cocoa value chains.

Technology is necessary to scale up training, but some communities face challenges that may limit the use of technology, such as lack of electricity, low cell phone ownership, poor networks, and low literacy of community members. It is essential choose the right technology for the intended audience. The Amplio Talking Book (ATB) proved to be the most appropriate technological tool for the FEATS team to disseminate training to women in such infrastructure deficient communities.

3. THE PROJECT'S PROBLEM

In 2017, FEATS conducted a diagnostic study of women-led SMEs in the cashew and shea value chains and found gaps in the women's business and technical knowledge. Digital messaging on these topics was an important element of the FEATS capacity building support for women farmers. FEATS partnered with a Ghanaian ICT firm providing online agricultural marketing and messaging via mobile phones. The project's experiences with conducting training programs as well as a needs assessment conducted in 2019 revealed key challenges relating to broader gender and socio-cultural norms and issues that impact on training delivery and uptake:

3.1 High Illiteracy Rates Among Participant Farmers

Approximately 90% of participating farmers were not literate; alongside this, the multiple local languages made it more challenging to secure appropriate facilitators for different groups of farmers.

3.2 Mobility and Logistical Constraints

Logistical challenges, including difficulties with transportation and/or long commutes, made it harder for participants, especially women farmers, to attend trainings. The multiple constraints on women's time, in particular unpaid care

responsibilities, also compounded this challenge, often limiting their available time to attend training sessions, especially outside their communities.

3.3 Gendered Digital Divide

Mobile ownership among most participating women farmers – in particular, women in the shea value chain – was limited. Moreover, anecdotal insights from the project’s implementation (which are corroborated by wider research and insights in the sector) revealed that one possible reason for women’s limited mobile phone ownership was their husbands’ hesitancy: they did not want their wives to spend time talking on phones or potentially speak to men outside their own households.¹

3.4 Inflexible Training Times

Another challenge was the rigidity of the timing of mobile phone-based training, which interfered with women’s busy work schedules.

To address these challenges, the FEATS team deployed a pre-recorded audio device, the Amplio Talking Book (ATB) as an alternative to the mobile phone-based training approach.

4. AMPLIO TALKING BOOKS: SOLUTION TO THE PROJECT’S PROBLEMS

Talking Books are battery or electricity-powered devices that can be easily used by people with limited literacy because they are operated by buttons labeled with symbols, rather than words. Messages on a range of topics are recorded in the appropriate local dialect and uploaded onto the device. Users can play messages at their convenience.

In total, 173 ATB devices were loaded with pre-recorded messages on topics such as gender inclusion, leadership, Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs), and business management, and distributed to 10 shea women groups, covering 5,200 processors and shea pickers. They listen to information during their VSLA meetings; after meetings, one member takes the device home and listens at her convenience. Women’s feedback can also be recorded on the device. Talking Books were used to expand FEAT’s reach and share important information with low literacy women in rural, remote, off-grid communities.

¹ [Q&A: Addressing the Gender Digital Divide in Sustainable Development \(amplio.org\)](https://amplio.org)

All community-level FEATS trainings were well attended, especially those trainings carried out in the communities. Women stated that ATB trainings were their favourite because they could multi-task while listening to the recordings.

Qualitative analysis from the roll-out of the ATB under the FEATS project highlighted the following gender transformative insights:

4.1 Improved Uptake of Gender Equality Messaging Through the Strategic Use of Talking Books

Interviews conducted with participating women farmers revealed there was greater uptake of gender equality messaging through women's strategic use of ATB devices. Women farmers played the messages when their husbands were nearby and could also hear the material. Women reported that their messages had more weight because they were coming from a device, rather than a person. In addition, the content had an 'official' tone because it was part of an international project being implemented in collaboration with the Government of Canada. This resulted in better outcomes at a household level – husbands more readily adopted this messaging and some even began to get involved as gender equality champions or male allies. MEDA saw a similar kind of strategic use of Talking Books to support improved uptake of gender equality messaging at the household level on its GROW project in Ghana.²

4.2 Increased Involvement in Decision-Making

As women's business outcomes improved and their incomes increased, men began to value women's economic contribution in the household. Men continue to see themselves as heads of households, but some have now begun to consult their wives on key household decisions, as reported by Regina Tatia Awedam, the financial secretary of the Buru Union Cooperative. Women are increasingly engaged on decisions such as the quantity of the harvest that should be sold, and how money or how income should be utilized.

² Please see the [GROW Learning Series](#) for more information.



Figure 2: Regina Tatia Awedam leading a group discussion after listening to training from ATB device

4.3 Greater Cooperation at the Household Level

Through the project's gender equality messaging, there has been a positive shift in household relations. Project participants are now reporting greater cooperation and harmony in the household. Men are getting more involved in household chores, which were previously seen only as women's responsibility. This is particularly visible in the shea value chains, in terms of greater involvement of men in household work and childcare. As women farmers increasingly contribute to the household income and increased family savings through their shea businesses, husbands are more willing to take on childcare and domestic responsibilities when women have to spend time on their businesses.



Figure 3: Amplio Talking Books

Prior to the training, women were responsible for all the household work without their husbands' support and were primarily seen as the "property" of

their husbands. After the training, they are not only receiving greater support from their husbands, but husbands are also recognizing their contributions. Some participating women reported, for instance, that when they need to attend their business meetings, their husbands take on tasks such as cooking. In the community context, it is not considered acceptable for men and women (especially married women) to be seen in public spaces together, but after going through this training, husbands began to take their wives around town for her business meetings more freely, which points to larger transformative shifts within the community.



Figure 4: Cashew women grafting their seedlings



Figure 5: Women gathering shea nuts

Amplio Talking Books enabled FEATS to reach large numbers of women with high quality information in challenging conditions. In addition to positive learning outcomes, women were able to strategically use the devices to share gender equality messages with their husbands, resulting in increased household cooperation and greater recognition of women's contributions.



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