



UNIVERSITÄT HOHENHEIM

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# Women agricultural cooperatives in the Western Cape, South Africa: a strategy to achieve food security and promote women's empowerment

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## Summary

Women who live and/or work on farms are regarded as one of the most vulnerable groups among the South African population. Their access to housing and jobs is tied to men's employment and accommodation, and they are increasingly being employed as seasonal workers, limiting their income options to less than six months per year. This study, which is situated within the frame of the larger research project "Food security and right to adequate food in the context of land and agrarian reform in South Africa", aimed to assess the empowerment process of women who live and/or work on farms in the Western Cape Province through participation in agricultural cooperatives facilitated by the NGO Women on Farms Project (WFP). The aim was to further evaluate the cooperatives as a future livelihood strategy and the impact on food security status of cooperative members and their households. A qualitative research approach was used, applying participatory action research, observation and interviews, and also integrating quantitative data. The units of analyses were two agricultural cooperatives that focused their activities on mushrooms and organic vegetable production. Results demonstrate that participation in the cooperatives was enhancing the empowerment process of members by providing them with access to resources, e.g. land, training, funds, education, and by enabling them to hold agency over the cooperative development process. Among the positive livelihood outcomes were a sense of ownership and a certain degree of control over land, increased confidence and self-esteem, acquiring new skills and increased rights awareness. On the other hand, various power relations hamper women's empowerment process, such as high dependency on farm owners, power struggles within households, communities and cooperatives, and reliance on the support of the NGO. At the time of this research, both cooperatives were not yet generating an income and it remains to be seen whether the cooperatives will constitute a sustainable livelihood strategy for these women. Nevertheless, cooperative members experienced a considerable enhancement of certain livelihood assets, thus positively affecting their vulnerability context. As this study demonstrates, a major challenge for the sustainable development of cooperatives is the promotion of an enabling environment through transforming structures and processes. This refers to institutional structures at national and provincial level in the form of laws, policies and services, but also to perpetuating paternalistic structures on farms, as well as to gender-based dynamics at the level of households and communities.