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SUCCESS STORY

ILAW: SOCIAL DIALOGUE ON LAND AND GENDER HELPS CHANGE SOCIAL NORMS



Photo 1: A film screening with community perspectives on inheritance rights followed by discussion



Photo 2: An informal discussion with youth in the West on November 12 with a project field agent

When one thinks of social and behavioral change communication (SBCC), one usually thinks of targeted messages, communication campaigns and influencers.

But sometimes change happens just by talking.

The USAID Improving Land Access for Women (ILAW) project, implemented in Western and Northern regions of Côte d'Ivoire from 2021 to 2024, has organized over 200 social dialogue sessions in 30 communities on land, gender and inheritance.

The sessions are organized around five short films full of diverse and sometimes opposing perspectives from community members.

Participants often laugh at seeing people they know, and they appreciate that the films reflect their lived experience.

Above all, they appreciate the chance to discuss these issues, and the simple act of discussion catalyzes change.

Take the case of Madame KOULAÏ Emma Désirée, who recently returned from Liberia where she lived as a refugee for over ten years.

Returnees often lose access to land and because she is a woman, Ms. KOULAÏ's chances of getting land were next to nil. Due to land pressure, brothers often cite traditional rules that say that women cannot own land.

But in this case her brothers said that because of the social dialogue on inheritance, they discussed between themselves and decided to give her 2 hectares of the family's cacao plantation.

"Thanks to the films, they agreed," she said, even though the films did not explicitly talk about women's land rights.

Instead, they helped demystify unjust beliefs by juxtaposing them with people who suffer and examples of people who do not agree.

The dialogue after the films created spaces for new role models to emerge and for social norms to change by showcasing people who go against the conventional wisdom that women cannot own land.

In one session, a deputy village chief named GBEHI Gahé Achille told everyone proudly he decided “to add his daughter’s name on the document [for his rubber plantation] because people are mean – if you die your brothers can take everything so better give to your wives and children now.”

Another community member from the north named BAKAYOKO Siaka said that “change is already coming to our village – many men are already giving some land to women that they can put it to good use.”

While the sessions can also give space for negative role models, the multiple perspectives in the films ensured that no one point of view dominated, and facilitators encouraged open discussion and debate.

Communities felt respected and are now more open to new ideas and new practices. The village chief of Kapounon, for example, was featured in one of the films speaking negatively about women’s participation in land management, but during a recent event with the USAID country representative, said he had changed his mind and was adding at least one woman to the village land committee.

While the process of change is far from guaranteed, ILAW’s experience shows that social dialogue can create encouraging results.

For a playlist of the five videos with English subtitles, click [here](#):



Photo 3: Ms KOU LAÏ Emma Désirée in her cacao plantation which she says she obtained thanks to the reaction of her brothers to the social dialogue exercises organized by ILAW partners