

FARMING AND ACCESS TO FINANCE AS A MEANS TO SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

The plight of vulnerable widows and single mothers in Sierra Leone worsened as the COVID-19 pandemic caused community and national lockdowns which brought to an abrupt halt any form of livelihood and income generating activities these women were engaged in.

In Dodo Kortuma, a village in the Kailahun district of Sierra Leone, over 50 vulnerable women who are widows and single mothers with no support from their extended family to cater for their children were trained on the Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA) concept by SEND Sierra Leone, a local partner organisation implementing the More Than A Woman project funded by Irish Aid. After several VSLA and capacity- building training sessions, the women formed two VSLAs namely Gboyama 1 and 2.

The prospect of self-reliance was however short-lived as the women who had only formed their VSLA months before the initial lockdown in March 2020 had to come to terms with government imposed restrictions on movement which severely affected their ability to trade to earn incomes. Determined through their training and capacity building, the women chose not to beg for money for upkeep but decided to appeal to the More Than A Woman project for agricultural support. In this, the Gboyama VSLAs were supplied with farming tools, implements and rice seeds, allowing them to engage in swamp rice production.



Fig 1. MEMBERS OF GBONYAMA 1 GATHER ROUND THEIR RICE HARVEST IN THE PRESENCE OF THE TOWN CHIEF

Our VSLA's name, Gbonyama which means "Help Us" could not have been more true when the COVID-19 caused us to lose all our livelihoods and threatened our ability to feed our families as widows and single mothers"; Wuyah Morie Jusu narrated.

The supply of farming tools and rice seeds by Irish Aid through SEND Sierra Leone proved to be the necessary investment and support the Gboyama VSLAs needed as they cultivated over 10 acres of swamp for rice production. As the year went on, the women were able to harvest over 50 bushels of rice which represents over 1,375 kilograms of harvested rice. To ensure sustainability, the VSLAs sold half of their harvest and saved the earnings from this sale into their VSLA box. All members of the Gboyama VSLAs also received equal portions of the harvest for their household consumption or individual sale. For the first time in many years, these vulnerable women now had sufficient food for their families and could boast of savings which could be invested into any business venture.

Collectively, the VSLAs have invested their savings into the leasing of additional acres of land for the cultivation of swamp rice, the purchase of more rice seeds and farming tools in the next planting season. Some members have also acquired personal to cater for household expenses such as school fees of their wards and business loans to invest into trading businesses to promote diversification of business activities in the village.

“We stand on our own two feet now and say we are able to engage in large scale swamp rice farming only because of the support SEND Sierra Leone and Irish Aid provided us in our time of need. The training on the VSLA, the VSLA boxes and the leadership training meetings have put us on the right path towards self-reliance through our savings”, Wuyah Morie Jusu expressed with a smile on her face.



Fig 2. Members of Gbonyama 1 harvesting their swamp rice farm