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## From Challenge to Opportunity

### A Story of Transformation



by **Andrew Gwaivangmin**  
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The Bendukoro community in the Diang Chiefdom of Koinadugu District is witnessing the results of Christian Extension Services (CES) and its partner World Renew in mutually reinforcing initiatives in community projects, gender mainstreaming, food security, and Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA).

With the support of World Renew through CES, the members of the Munafa VSLA group in Bendukoro have been able to transform continuing challenges into opportunities. Since the setup of the project, most of the households in Munafa group have been able to purchase husk rice, groundnuts, and assorted items to be sold for profit with loans from the VSLA. Madam Hawa Sawaneh, a widow with children, was among them. She secured a VSLA loan to hire labor and pay for oil palm seedlings for a plantation garden she has established. According to Hawa, she is also now able to support the needs of her four children, buy farm inputs, and have access to plots of Inland Valley Swamp in the community for the Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security (SAFS) project. She could not do any of these things prior to the CES intervention in Bendukoro. "My standard of living has positively improved through the products of the VSLA savings, loans, and social fund introduced by CES," says Hawa.



The 44 members of the Munafa VSLA group in Bendukoro will be completed their first cycle share-out on May 13, 2016.

Mr. Edward Koroma, the head teacher in the community, serves as the secretary of the Munafa



group and has volunteered to educate the public on the need for everyone to belong to a VSLA group. He said that the VSLA benefited him more than any other member of the group. He added, "I have been able to pay the fees of my younger sister in a nursing training college in Makeni and for my daughter in senior high school at Kabala. I might not have been able to pay these fees if not for the financial support from the group, and I later paid back the money to the group." Another member of the group, Mrs. Kadiatu Daramy, described how helpful the group has been to her small business. She bought various kinds of assorted items to sell in the community. She added that she sometimes runs a loss on her business, and when that happens she can now come to the group and secure a small loan, settle with the group, and still continue her business. She concluded that her financial status has improved significantly.

At the end of the April meeting, the group reflected on the lessons they have learned from their membership in the VLSA: "Saving a little amount of money of about 2,000 Leones weekly can improve one's financial status and the unity of the community."

The CES field agent assigned to Bendukoro, Lansana Jawara, added, "VSLA regulates one's out-of-control expenditures and acts as a stage for sharing ideas on other issues like sanitation, climate change, agriculture, and conflict resolution." He said, "Disadvantaged women like Hawa Sawaneh got these and other benefits from the VSLA, and other complementary activities in the Bendukoro community."

# Looking Back and Planning Ahead

## CES Partner Evaluation Highlights

*"Our community was dead, but you have brought life to it. I was once leader over a community that was abandoned, but now we are a community that others look to emulate. Thank you, CES and your partners, for showing such love and for reviving our community. We are now the best community in the chiefdom."*

Pa. Sewuru Kargbo  
town chief of Yirafilaia Badala

### Project Impact

The major observations and findings on project impact include the following:

- **Community engagement.** CES has had a huge impact in the communities they are working in. In each of the 13 communities there has been an outpouring of appreciation, kindness, and trust for the CES field agent. CES helped communities to meet and plan projects, discuss conflicts, and make decisions for the benefit of the entire community.
- **Town halls.** In most of the villages, meetings are held in halls that were constructed by the community with building materials supplied by CES. In every case the building was filled to capacity with interested village members.
- **Partnership with government.** Officials at the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Food Security had very positive comments regarding the work of CES. They told us that the values and strategies of the Ministry and CES align very well.
- **Inter-religious partnership.** CES has a high level of respect among Muslims in the communities they work in. Muslims and Christians are equal participants in the programs. All community meetings are respectful and start with Christian and Muslim prayers.
- **Partnership with the local CRC.** CES board members and the CRC-SL pastors noted that community transformation is more effective when both CRC-SL and CES work together. While CES mobilizes the communities toward meeting their physical needs, the church works to meet spiritual needs. The presence of a CRC-SL pastor in a community contributes to the sustainability of transformation.
- **Organizational capacity.** CES has strong organizational capacity for training communities in the development of Village Development Committees (VDCs). In many respects the local VDC is the main form of government that exists in the community. These committees are instrumental in mobilizing community action, resolving local conflicts, and empowering women in the community.
- **Disaster response.** CES responds well to disasters, including the Ebola crisis, collaborating with government health officials and 20 other collaborating NGOs in keeping Ebola out of Koinadugu District.
- **Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA).** The VSL program has been a success in all the communities in which it operates. Participants report that they now have mon-

ey to send their kids to school, buy their uniforms, and feed them because of the VSL program. Some women participants proudly told us that the program has empowered them to the point that they no longer need the approval of men in making financial decisions for the family.

- **Project ownership.** In all of the communities it was evident that the communities have taken control and ownership for the programs they undertake.

- **Community infrastructure projects.** In several communities people talked about the transformation that has taken place. Grain storehouses complement the SAFS and VSL projects, enabling farmers to store their surplus grains and enabling the community to keep rice seed received in payment. In addition, road work has been done at Gbokoroma and Firawa.

- **Gravity-fed water systems.** The gravity-fed water projects observed in two communities have transformed these communities; water is now made available without the need of a machine to pump it.

- **Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security (SAFS) Program.** With this program, rice yield has increased fourfold in some cases, and farmers are able to store their grain safely away from pests and fires. The program has helped them increase their family incomes, improve their homes, feed their families, pay for farm laborers, and send their children to school.

- **Hunger alleviation.** In Kolkoya the SAFS members said, "There is no hunger in this village; we no longer need to hunt for rice seeds from village to village each year."

- **Technical training.** The SAFS program has provided technical training to community members in the form of proper planting times, improved seed varieties, inter-cropping, and successfully storing seeds for the coming year.

- **Rice mills.** Added to the grain storage building in communities with SAFS programs, this provides for adequate service integration, and in some cases, neighboring communities come and pay for the services of the rice mill.

- **Graduated communities.** In the graduated community of Yiraia the SAFS group continues to meet even though CES stopped coming there a few years earlier. They proudly showed us a documented list of 169 names of community people who are still active in the program.

*CES is grateful for the presence of the World Renew consultant living in Sierra Leone on a semipermanent basis and having a regular schedule of trying to visit all CES communities on a quarterly basis. This schedule was curtailed during 2014-2015 because of restricted travel during the Ebola crisis.*

To read the full report, please get in touch with office staff.



## Praise and Petition

- Thank God for the successful partner evaluation of CES that took place in February 2016. The results and impact were very encouraging. Pray that these results will be sustained with more support and cooperation from staff, communities, and donors.

- Thank God for the ongoing Ebola Orphan Relief project undertaken by CES in Nieni Chiefdom. Thank God for the successful relief delivery of food items, clothing, and bedding and for the training of mentors and volunteers who will support the orphans in their communities.

- The CRC-SL made an evangelistic outreach to Yirafilaia Badala, one of the communities CES has been working with. The community requested a church earlier on because of the love shown to them by CES. Thank God that this need has now been met. Pray for the new evangelist, Bilalie Mansaray, as he volunteers to visit the new church every weekend.

- Pray for the Kabala Church as the senior pastor, Rev. M.B. Jalloh, is retiring from active service as a pastor because of ill health and age. Pray that God will provide a new pastor for the congregation.

- Pray for the CES staff and volunteers as they implement the Ebola Orphans project, that they will commit themselves to helping these children as they invest in their future. Pray especially that the volunteers will train and mentor the children to be responsible and to feel loved.

- Praise God for the support CES receives from donors in North America. This has met the needs of many communities over the years. Pray that such support will not dwindle but rather be on the increase as the communities' needs are becoming more challenging.

- Pray for my wife, Christie, that she may find fulfilment in her work at the Nigeria Bible Translation Trust (NBTT), Jos. She is discouraged and distressed with the lack of a Christ-centered attitude among most of the administrative staff she leads.