

Food, Finance and Social Cohesion in Eastern DRC: Lessons from MNHP and RENUGL Projects

REVIEW SUMMARY REPORT

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Executive Summary

ActionAid DRC, through the Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP, led a review of the ongoing Multisectoral Nutrition and Health Project (MNHP) and the Resilience and Nutrition in the Great Lakes Region (RENUGL) projects in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – Bakavu, South Kivu and Kalemie, Tanganyika – in November and December 2026. The review used participatory, feminist and conflict-sensitive qualitative methods, with a focus on women, indigenous Batwa communities, and internally displaced people.

The review confirmed strong household-level gains in food security, nutrition and resilience. Farmers have adopted agroecological practices, including crop diversification and bio-fertilisation, leading to significant yield increases and reduced hunger gaps. Biofortified crops and kitchen gardens have also improved dietary diversity, particularly for women and children, with linkages to health clinics enabling the project to reach those most vulnerable to malnutrition. Productivity gains are, however, largely contributing to household food security rather than generating additional income, limited by ongoing insecurity, infrastructure and absence of formal collection points.

Village savings and loans associations (VSLAs) emerged as an effective resilience mechanism, enabling households—especially women—to manage shocks, meet essential needs, and initiate small income-generating activities. Women's improved financial agency has significantly strengthened household decision-making, social status and dignity. Social cohesion has also proven critical, with Dimitra Clubs reducing inter-communal tensions, addressing farmer–herder conflicts, and enabling agricultural activities. Such evidence demonstrates the importance of peacebuilding as a prerequisite for technical interventions in fragile contexts. Local CSOs were shown to be the operational backbone of the project, remaining active even during security escalations.

Despite strong household-level impacts, the project has faced sustainability challenges stemming from insecurity, weak infrastructure, and fragmented funding arrangements. Abrupt funding changes, which undermined trust and exposed women to land-related risk, as well as limited investment in government extension, pose ongoing risks to long-term impact.

Recommendations

- **Reduce geographic spread:** Focus future projects on fewer villages.
- **Strengthen government capacity:** Equip and resource government extension officers.
- **Integrate project planning:** Harmonise MNHP and RENUGL planning, procurement, and disbursement to avoid fragmented, two-speed implementation.
- **Support local CSOs as the resilience floor:** Ring-fence flexible funding for local CSOs to ensure continuity during insecurity and international withdrawal.
- **Enhance participatory governance:** Increase CSO and community involvement in planning, budgeting, and monitoring, allowing adaptive, community-led decisions.
- **Avoid abrupt funding changes:** Use phased and transparent funding or contract transitions to protect community trust and prevent household debt.
- **Address unpaid care work:** Integrate household dialogue approaches to promote fairer distribution of domestic labour.
- **Reduce digital poverty:** Invest in basic community digital infrastructure to improve access to market information and financial services.
- **Support small-scale mechanisation:** Enable access to shared or VSLA-financed power tools to reduce labour burdens and support scaling.
- **Strengthen women's land access:** Integrate land-tenure advocacy or land-credit mechanisms alongside agricultural inputs.
- **Improve market organisation:** Support collection points or cooperatives to lower transport costs and increase farmers' bargaining power.

The Project Context

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is the second-largest country in Africa, with an estimated population of approximately 111 million people (2024). Despite possessing over 80 million hectares of arable land and vast freshwater resources, the country remains among the poorest in the world, with approximately 74.6% of people living in poverty and 22.5% experiencing acute food insecurity. Chronic malnutrition remains pervasive, with 47.9% of children under five affected by stunting. The structural link between low-productivity agriculture, limited dietary diversity, and poor nutritional outcomes is particularly acute in rural, conflict-affected provinces.

Agriculture employs between 70-75% of the population and constitutes the primary livelihood source in rural areas. The sector is dominated by small-scale, rain-fed subsistence production, characterised by low productivity, minimal mechanisation, weak extension systems, and limited access to certified inputs. Although national agricultural potential is significant, less than 10% of arable land is currently cultivated. Climate variability further compounds vulnerability. Increasing rainfall irregularity, localised flooding, soil degradation and seasonal unpredictability affect smallholder productivity. Given the near-total dependence on rain-fed agriculture, climate shocks directly translate into household food insecurity and income instability.

South Kivu Province is in eastern DRC and borders Rwanda, Burundi and Lake Tanganyika. Characterised by high population density in fertile highland zones, fragmented and small landholdings, predominantly manual farming methods and soil erosion in hilly terrains. In territories such as Walungu, one of the intervention zones, conflict, armed

group presence, and farmer-herder tensions significantly affect agricultural production and community stability. Insecurity restricts safe access to farmland, extension supervision and monitoring, market transport routes and humanitarian and development aid mobility. Soil degradation, limited input access and little mechanisation contribute to low productivity. Market access to urban centres such as Bukavu is further constrained by poor road infrastructure and insecurity.

Tanganyika Province, whose capital is Kalemie, is in southeastern DRC, borders Zambia and Tanzania and includes extensive rural and lakeshore communities. Tanganyika has experienced significant inter-communal tensions, particularly between Bantu and Twa (Batwa) communities. Although large-scale violence has reduced in recent years, the social fabric remains fragile in several territories. Land access remains a structural driver of vulnerability. The Batwa community, historically marginalised and frequently landless, faces systemic exclusion from productive assets. Tanganyika experiences rainfall variability and seasonal unpredictability affecting staple crop production. Agriculture in Tanganyika is predominantly subsistence-based, rain-fed and low-input. Weak infrastructure and limited extension services restrict productivity and market connectivity.

In both provinces, small-scale producers operate within intersecting layers of vulnerability, including chronic rural poverty, conflict-related displacement, land access insecurity, weak infrastructure and market isolation, high malnutrition rates, gendered economic inequality, climate variability and weak extension systems.

About the MNHP and RENUGL Projects

The Multisectoral Nutrition and Health Project (MNHP) and the Resilience and Nutrition in the Great Lakes Region (RENUGL) projects represent a triple nexus intervention in the DRC, bridging the gap between humanitarian relief, long-term development and local peacebuilding in the conflict-affected provinces of South Kivu and Tanganyika. The Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP) is contributing US\$15 million towards the overall initiative. This includes US\$9 million for the food security component of the broader, World Bank led, MNHP (which has a total budget of US\$ 542 million), and US\$6 million for FAO to provide complementary technical assistance through RENUGL.

Overall, GAFSP's support aims to improve food and nutrition security by strengthening social cohesion and community dialogue, promoting nutrition-sensitive and sustainable agricultural production, while also enhancing livelihoods, entrepreneurship and rural financial inclusion. In fragile contexts, such as eastern DRC, agricultural productivity gains alone are insufficient to sustainably improve nutrition outcomes. Social cohesion, women's empowerment, financial access and climate resilience are foundational to sustained food system transformation.

The RENUGL project builds upon FAO's Caisse de Résilience (CdR) approach, which integrates social, productive and financial capital development at community level. The key activities are:

- a. *Dimitra Clubs* - establishment of 400 Dimitra Clubs (DCs), complemented by community radio networks. Dimitra Clubs are community-based groups composed of 15-30 members (women, men, or youth, mixed or single-sex), designed to facilitate dialogue and conflict resolution, promote gender equality and women's empowerment, strengthen community voice and decision-making, while addressing harmful food taboos and promoting nutrition awareness.
- b. *Farmer Field Schools (FFS)* - establishment and support of 400 FFS. FFS serve as participatory extension platforms where farmers engage in experiential learning under farmer conditions to identify locally adapted agricultural technologies, promote diversified and nutrition-sensitive crop production, strengthen climate resilience practices and improve soil fertility and sustainable land management. The project works through 30 health centres in

Tanganyika, using them as hubs for both nutritional monitoring and agricultural distribution.

- c. *Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) and Small Enterprises* – establishment of 400 VSLAs and support for approximately 200 small-scale production and processing units. By increasing access to financial services at community level, these activities promote women's economic empowerment, support youth entrepreneurship, facilitate value addition and income diversification and build household-level resilience to economic shocks.

Participants are often enrolled in multiple layers of the initiative, across the two projects, creating a holistic support structure. For example, through the MNHP, households access health services, and those experiencing malnutrition are refereed for kitchen garden support. A smallholder producer would typically belong to an FFS for technical skills and a VSLA for capital, creating a holistic support structure, while simultaneously receiving biofortified seeds for agricultural production. Then, through RENUGL, a smallholder producer accesses an FFS for technical skills and participates in a VSLA for capital. Overall, the RENUGL project targets 30,000 households with 41% in South Kivu and 59% in Tanganyika.

Targeting is based on specific vulnerability markers, with some regions prioritising agricultural security and others nutrition. In Tanganyika, for instance, the initiative works through health centres to reach breastfeeding mothers and mothers of malnourished children for the nutrition intervention. In South Kivu, 15 health centres in Walungu are targeted.

RENUGL leverages FAO's existing operational presence in Kinshasa, South Kivu and Tanganyika, engaging selected CSOs based on their expertise and operational capacity. Using a decentralised governance model, the project works through local CSOs and community-based organisations as the primary technical and social anchors, who lead on the establishment and support of the project's key activities.

The project is collaborating with six local CSOs: Action des Volontaires Unis pour le Développement et la Santé (AVUDS), Commission Diocesaine Caritas Développement Kalemie Kirungu (CARITAS), Sauve la Femme et la Jeune Fille du Katanga (SAFEKA), Amis de Personnes Vulnérables (APV), Action Contre la Détérioration (ACD),

and Jeunesse pour la Solidarité et le Développement dans les Grands Lacs (JSD). It has also signed MOUs with two provincial government departments (agriculture and rural development).

The project implementation is led by the UG-PDSS (Unité de Gestion du Projet de Développement du Système de Santé), a government management unit under the DRC Ministry of Public Health based in Kinshasa, which holds the fiduciary mandate for the PMNS/MNHP. Technical coordination is led by FAO in Bukavu and Kalemie, focusing on the RENUGL-TA component. Field-level execution is carried out by local CSO partners, with technical oversight from the provincial government services, IPAPEL and

PRONANUT. Capacity development of relevant government services was embedded within each project component to facilitate long-term institutional ownership.

The initiative strategically aligns to national policy objectives, as contained in the DRC National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP), the Sector Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (SSADR), the National Agricultural Investment Plan (NAIP), the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy (NFNSP), the National Nutrition Programme (PRONANUT) including FAO's Country Programming Framework (CPF) and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.



Farmers working in the farmers' field school in Tabaa, Tanganyika.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID DRC

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The Project Review Methodology

ActionAid DRC, through the Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP,¹ led the review of the MNHP and RENUGL projects in Bakavu, South Kivu from 26 to 27 November 2026 and Kalemie, Tanganyika from 5 to 11 December 2026, with support from the FAO and World Bank teams. The field-based assessment employed feminist principles and a rights-based participatory qualitative approach, ensuring gender-sensitivity and a conflict-responsive process of mutual accountability. Purposive and stratified sampling strategies were used, targeting project participants in both South Kivu and Tanganyika. A total of 164 (115f;49m) participants were engaged, ensuring representation from small-scale producers (both project participants and non-participants for comparative insight), vulnerable groups (pregnant and lactating women, adolescent girls (15-35), and internally displaced persons) and marginalised communities, with specific focus on the indigenous Twa populations in Tanganyika.

Qualitative tools ensured the evaluation process had a multi-dimensional view of project impact. Segregated groups of men, women, youth, and indigenous people were engaged in thematic discussions using community scorecards and focus group discussions (2 in South Kivu; 4 in Tanganyika) to evaluate the project against specific indicators such as seed quality, VSLA functionality, and Dimitra Club effectiveness. Semi-structured key informant interviews (3 in South Kivu; 4 Tanganyika; 1 Kinshasa) were conducted with strategic and operational leads to triangulate community feedback with institutional perspectives. Informants included FAO provincial coordinators, government officials (IPAPEL), traditional chiefs, and technical leads from local CSOs (SAFEKA, APV, JSD). Stories of change were documented through videography and photography, capturing the qualitative transformation on households.

The review benefitted from a high degree of institutional coordination and security-responsive adaptability that observed AA DRC provincial offices' real-time security protocols. The mission in South Kivu was cut short by a sudden and severe deterioration of the security environment, after the area fell under the control of

the Wazalendo armed group, and the review team was evacuated on instructions from the FAO Security Officer. While the mission in Tanganyika began with more stability, the regional context shifted rapidly as M23 forces advanced and took control of Uvira, resulting in the review team accelerating the data collection process, prioritising the most critical questions.



When a Woman Stands, Back Up – a documentary on the MNHP and RENUGL projects in Bakavu, South Kivu and Kalemie, Tanganyika. [Watch it here](#). PHOTO: ACTIONAID DRC.



"I was really discouraged from farming: when I planted 3 kilos of beans, I only harvested 4. But after the training and support from the agronomist, I sowed the same 3 kilos... and I harvested 10. For me, it is an extraordinary exploit." Domitille Mitima, 45, from Chahunda, Walungu. [Hear more about her story in this short video](#). PHOTO: ACTIONAID DRC

Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP

The Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP (the Partnership) is a consortium of civil society organisations that has been contracted by GAFSP to assess a selection of their grant-funded projects. The consortium is led by *ActionAid International*, together with the *Eastern and Southern Africa Small-Scale Farmers Forum (ESAFF)*, *Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (AsiaDHRA)*, and *Coordination pour des Actions en Santé et en Développement d'Haïti (COSADH)*.

Project Impact

I. Farmers' Productivity and Livelihoods

The project has demonstrably improved livelihoods and food security at household level and introduced foundational agroecological practices. However, systemic barriers, market access, land tenure, climate conceptualisation and institutional logistics, limit full realisation of transformative impact. While the projects' intended pathway was to influence income through marketable surplus through technical training on improved planting techniques and use of organic inputs, the observed impact is that technical training increased yields, and ultimately household consumption, but with little evidence of marketable surplus.

The core design element of the project implemented by FAO was the distribution of biofortified maize, peanuts and beans. While some seeds, such as biofortified, iron-rich, beans, were difficult to source initially due to lack of regional availability, the introduction of biofortified maize has begun to change local production profiles. Seeds are procured by FAO through suppliers that serve as seed multipliers in DRC.

Five out of six focus groups in the review reported significant increases in yields. For example, in Walungu, women reported yield increases from 3 kg of seed producing 4 kg of beans pre-intervention to 10-13 kg post-training. The shift from random sowing to technical spacing and the use of locally produced organic inputs were widely cited as transformative, with a clear knowledge-to-yield pathway.

"At this stage, we do not yet have access to external markets. Our first objective is to ensure family consumption. We produce mainly to meet our direct needs. Therefore, it is a production for self-consumption, which considerably reduces the surplus available for a wider market."
CSC Women's Group, Mulonge.

The farmer field schools (FFS) served as practical laboratories, with farmers citing the mastery of certain technical skills (spacing, lining, sowing depth) as a clear

benefit. Evidence from Tanganyika indicates that local farmer groups were strengthened not through handouts, but through practical hands-on training. By managing demonstration fields, these groups transitioned from disorganised individuals into technical cooperatives capable of managing collective assets. Agricultural extension officers interviewed in Tanganyika and South Kivu confirmed that agricultural training focused on low-cost, local raw material fertilisation. By reducing the need for purchased inputs (seeds/fertilisers), the project increased the financial buffer of households. In focus groups in Walungu, men and women explicitly cited the abandonment of chemical products, and shift to self-produced biopesticides and organic manure, as a major change in their farming system, which has reduced production costs while increasing soil health.

Many producers operate in a subsistence-plus system, prioritising household food consumption over commercialisation. This reality explains an observed causal gap between increased yields and meaningful market integration, due to insecurity, transport constraints and lack of organised collection systems. While production volumes have increased, market access remains largely theoretical – the surplus is too small to justify the high transport costs to regional hubs like Kalemie or Bukavu. While this is a logical risk-mitigation strategy for smallholders, considering the insecurity context, it represents a hurdle for the project's income generation objectives. For example, in Tanganyika (Mulonge, Tabaa, and Lukwangulo), the focus groups strongly disagreed or were neutral regarding whether the project had improved market access, classifying it as "retressi" (shrunk/restricted).

Village savings and loans associations (VSLAs) were cited as the most immediate stabilising mechanism at household level. Participants reported using loans to cover school fees, medical emergencies, agricultural inputs and small-scale income-generating activities. The establishment of 184 VSLAs in Tanganyika alone has institutionalised community-based financial access for nearly 5,000 producers, combining technical agricultural training with financial management in the Kalemie/Nyemba area. VSLAs emerged to be a prominent feature for resilience with four of the seven focus groups reporting to have initiated additional income-generating activities outside of direct farming including small retail businesses, such as selling

beverages using VSLA loans, as they self-manage and demonstrate a high level of financial literacy. In 3 out of 7 focus groups, participants cited the ability to pay school fees as the primary indicator of their improved living standards.

Farmers also reported benefiting from the provision of farm implements, such as knapsack sprayers, water cans, rakes, trowels, hoes and wheel barrows. However, farmers and implementers emphasised that relying solely on physical human force has limited their ability to scale production beyond subsistence. Manual cultivation is physically exhaustive and slow, particularly for women who are already managing a double burden of domestic and project-related tasks. Mastery of technical skills (spacing and lining) has increased yields, but without power tools (e.g., motorised tillers or walking tractors), farmers are unable to expand the area cultivated without incurring unsustainable labour costs. To move from subsistence plus to commercial scale, there is a clear demand from the community for small-scale mechanisation.

While farmers are acutely aware of the insecurity and constrained nature of the regional hubs, they requested support for practical, local alternatives that allow them to transition from subsistence toward commercialisation. Farmers expressed a strong desire to formalise trade with neighbouring communities and districts. By focusing on these shorter supply chains, the project could assist producers capture value within their immediate surroundings, significantly reducing the transport costs

and security risks associated with long-distance travel to Kalemie or Bukavu. Additionally, farmers suggested the establishment of village-level collection centres or cooperatives, which would allow smallholders to aggregate their surpluses, and negotiate for shared transport or to attract buyers directly to the village, shifting the transport to market burden away from individual, vulnerable producers.

Key lessons

- Yields and household food security were increased, supported by technical training on agroecological techniques through FFSs.
- Reduced reliance on purchased inputs lowered production costs and improved household financial buffers.
- Improved productivity, however, did not generate additional income, as farmers rationally prioritise household consumption due to insecurity, high transport costs and weak market systems.
- Provision of small-scale mechanisation, establishment of village-level cooperatives or collection points, and more secure land access could facilitate commercialisation.

II. Climate Resilience, Adaptation and Agroecology

Although not explicitly framed as climate programming, practices adopted by farmers through the project align with agroecological principles such as organic fertilisation, crop diversification, soil moisture retention techniques, and reduced dependence on purchased inputs, among others. While climate resilience and agroecology were not the primary strategic pillars of the projects' design, the projects have nevertheless successfully introduced foundational agroecological techniques under the guise of "improved technical itineraries."

Farmers adopted diversified cropping systems and organic fertilisation techniques. All agricultural extension

officers interviewed confirmed a shift toward low-cost, locally sourced soil fertility management alternatives. Crop diversification increased from 1 to 2 crops pre-intervention to 3 to 5 varieties in several sites. In South Kivu, the government rural development officer reported that participants are now cultivating at least 4 to 5 different crop varieties including maize, beans, amaranth and sweet potatoes compared to a previous mono-crop or dual-crop focus. The same report was also received in Tanganyika, where farmers now have increased household resilience after being introduced to home gardens with amaranth, vegetables and biofortified maize and are moving away from mono-cropping. A diverse field acts as a natural hedge against climate shocks, if one crop fails due to pests or erratic rain, others may survive.

"In the past, we used chemical products sold in the markets. Currently, we have been taught to produce them ourselves with raw materials that are easy to find in the community... this helps the soil stay strong."

Xavier Iragi Tabaro, Men's CSC, Chiriri.

"We were taught to produce [fertiliser] ourselves with raw materials that are easy to find in the community. Before, we used chemicals sold in markets that we couldn't always afford."

Men's focus group, Chiriri.

The most significant agroecological achievement was the transition from commercial chemical fertilisers and pesticides to organic alternatives locally produced by farmers. The abandonment of chemical fertilisers in favour of organic alternatives is a direct contribution to agroecological adaptation. Producers in Walungu and Kalemie noted that their soils are "cooler" and "stronger" against heavy rains when organic matter is used. Producers in South Kivu also reported learning how to manufacture biopesticides using local raw materials. This shift was driven as much by economic necessity (high cost of chemicals) as by environmental adaptation.

Participants in the farmer field schools (FFS) reported that new sowing techniques (spacing and lining) and the use of organic manure helped the soil retain moisture longer. In a context of irregular rainfall, this served as a practical, although undocumented, climate adaptation strategy. Only 1 out of 8 KIs explicitly linked these agricultural techniques to climate change adaptation, suggesting that while the practices are resilient, the concept of climate adaptation was not a central part of the project's communication to stakeholders.

Key lessons

- Foundational agroecological practices were successfully adopted – although the project lacks an explicit climate framing.
- Economic incentives (cost savings) strongly drive adoption of climate-positive practices.
- Crop diversification and organic soil management improves resilience to erratic rainfall and climatic shocks.
- Limited climate literacy among participants constrains consolidation and scaling of adaptation outcomes.

III. Gender Responsiveness and Women's Empowerment

Women play a central role in food production and household nutrition in South Kivu but often lack secure land tenure and control over income from agricultural sales. While women have emerged as the primary adopters of biofortified kitchen gardens, controlling the production of food for the home, men still largely control the market interaction for any cash-crop surplus.

Financial inclusion mechanisms, such as VSLAs, have been particularly transformative as they have enhanced women's economic agency and strengthened household shock absorption capacity and stability. In contexts with limited formal banking infrastructure, VSLAs serve as

critical community-managed safety nets and investment platforms. Participants reported using loans not only for agricultural inputs but as a critical buffer for social shocks, specifically school fees, medical emergencies and wedding costs. The VSLAs have fundamentally altered household power dynamics. By providing women with a mechanism to save and borrow, the project has granted them economic agency that translates into a voice in household decision-making. The project acted as a catalyst for shifting the social role of women from passive household managers to active economic agents (dependents to co-providers) and community leaders. In South Kivu, men reported changed perceptions of their wives with their enhanced ability to contribute financially during family crises such as paying dowry costs or medical bills. This has reduced domestic tension and elevated women's voices in household planning.



"Being in the VSLA allowed me to save and better plan my expenses. With the money I received from the payout in November 2025, I was able to rent a field slightly larger than my family's... I am sure that at harvest, I will be able to sell and obtain a good income." Mapendo Naweza, Woman Participant, Walungu. PHOTO: ACTIONAID DRC

"In my family, my younger brother was supposed to get married, but we lacked money for the goat to give to the in-laws. My wife quickly brought a solution by taking a debt loan of 150,000 Congolese francs from her VSLA. Now, she has a special place in my family because she saved us from shame."

Xavier Iragi Tabaro (male focus group participant), Walungu.

A powerful psychological theme emerged regarding living standards. Men in Walungu specifically reported that the project has helped them "avoid shame" by allowing their wives to access funds for family obligations that the men could not meet alone. This indicates a profound shift in community cohesion and household dignity.

Women hold leadership positions in over 60% of the newly formed community committees. Financial agency has increased women's decision-making power within households. Women reported enhanced social standing and household influence. The project intentionally placed women in leadership roles within Dimitra Clubs and FFSs.

For the first time in many communities, women are not just members but committee presidents and reporters. For example, in Tanganyika, a mother of a malnourished child was further hired into a professional role within the CSO (APV) based on her leadership skills demonstrated during the project meetings.

While the project succeeded in uplifting women in economic and social spheres, there is evidence of a gap in addressing unpaid care work. Women are now farming, managing savings, and attending club meetings in addition to their traditional domestic duties. Some focus groups mentioned, however, that while they are empowered, their workload has doubled, indicating a need for future interventions to address the redistribution of domestic labour.

Additionally, even with biofortified seeds and technical training, many women remain landless, forcing them into precarious land-rental agreements, exposing them to debt risk. For example, when funding to VSLAs ceased, some women became legally and financially liable to pay rent for land they could no longer cultivate due to lack of funds. This demonstrates a need to support women with land tenure, in addition to provision of seeds.

The causal pathway of empowerment is clear, financial access (VSLA) coupled with technical knowledge (FFS) is leading to increased production and, in some cases, income, both which have enhanced women's social status. The project successfully reached the most vulnerable women, including indigenous Batwa women and internally displaced persons (IDPs).



"Today, my husband and I work together in the fields. It helps us a lot. When we are united, we do more for our family... Today, even though life remains difficult, we have regained hope. We have learned to get back up and rely on ourselves." Yohali Moustapha, Kalemie, Tanganyika. [Hear more about her story in this short video.](#)
PHOTO: ACTIONAID DRC

Key lessons

- Financial inclusion through VSLAs, combined with agricultural training, significantly increases women's economic agency and decision-making power.
- Intentionally placing women in leadership roles enhances their social status, while contributing to household stability and community cohesion.
- Empowerment gains are undermined by persistent landlessness and insecure access to productive resources.
- Increased responsibilities without redistribution of unpaid care work risk overburdening women.

IV. Nutrition

In South Kivu, both focus groups strongly agreed that food variety had increased. The introduction of biofortified maize, beans, peanuts and kitchen garden crops (e.g. amaranth, Black Beauty and Nyanya eggplants, onions, tomatoes and Chinese cabbage) has contributed to measurable improvements in dietary diversity. Beneficiaries repeatedly emphasised that hunger gaps had reduced. Even where specialised biofortified seeds were hard for the project to source, the focus remained on crops that increase the nutritional density of the family meal. In Walungu (South Kivu), all focus group participants strongly agreed that the variety of food on their plates had increased. Conversely, in the APV Health Centre site (Tanganyika), while progress was noted, participants stated that "malnutrition is not yet finished" despite the project's efforts. They also described how the established Dimitra Clubs are addressing both social cohesion and increasing nutritional education within farming households.

The project specifically targets women as the "gatekeepers of nutrition," reaching 3,000 women in Tanganyika alone with biofortified seed kits. In the words of the Project

Manager, "We target women because they are the ones who manage the pot. If the woman is trained on biofortification, the child's health changes immediately".

Linking agricultural interventions, particularly biofortified seeds and kitchen gardens to health centre-based nutrition programming provided a strategic pathway to address both food availability and dietary quality. Health centres are functioning as convergence points for identification of malnourished children, nutrition education and access points for biofortified seeds. This way, there is a referral pathway where malnourished children identified at health centres are linked to households receiving biofortified seeds, creating a direct link between clinical health outcomes and agricultural production.

The MNHP project is working with HarvestPlus (the technical assistance partner for biofortification) to increase the range and scope of nutrition interventions aimed at two nutritionally vulnerable populations: children aged 0-23 months and pregnant and lactating women. While the project has distributed Vitamin A maize and iron beans in South Kivu, there is scope through the partnership to expand crop varieties to include vitamin A cassava and orange sweet potato (OSP).

"The problem of malnutrition is decreasing... we can see the variety of crops in the fields. The small-scale farmers and breeders are becoming increasingly confident in their field work." — KII with the government rural development officer

The causal link here is biofortified seeds + kitchen garden training = increased micronutrient intake. The project manager noted that while the project targeted 30,000 households, the real impact is measured by the number of children no longer appearing in the "acute malnutrition" statistics at health centres.

Key lessons

- Provision of biofortified crops and kitchen gardens measurably improve dietary diversity and reduce hunger gaps.
- Targeting women as nutrition gatekeepers accelerates household-level nutrition outcomes.
- Linking agriculture with health-centre nutrition services strengthens reach to the most vulnerable groups.
- Persistent malnutrition indicates the need for expanded crop varieties and sustained nutrition programming.

V. Community Participation & Cohesion

The project has a nexus approach, integrating technical agricultural support with social cohesion and financial inclusion.

The project's most significant contribution to community cohesion was the creation of neutral spaces, via the Dimitra Clubs, for dialogue and economic cooperation, which directly addressed deep-seated communal tensions. These local groups act as governance platforms after being trained on conflict resolution and self-reliance. The clubs have acted to resolve complex land-use disputes between herders and farmers without external mediation, marking a significant leap in local institutional maturity. In South Kivu (Walungu), a primary source of fragility was the destruction of crops by wandering livestock. The Dimitra Clubs were a mediation platform where the community established local codes of conduct. Farmers agreed to fence their plots, while herders committed to stable livestock management. This local resource management strategy reduced cycles of revenge and improved community safety.

"What amazed me was the creation of spontaneous Dimitra Clubs. We only provided the methodology, but they took their own initiatives. Some even started community fields without waiting for us."
Paulin Kakule Bukundika, FAO Bukavu

The social cohesion component of the project recognises that in fragile areas affected by conflict and displacement, productive interventions require a foundation of trust, dialogue and collective action. In several areas, the review found that social reconciliation was a prerequisite for effective agricultural engagement, highlighting the necessity of sequencing peacebuilding before technical interventions in fragile zones. In Tanganyika, in the Kasabondo area, the project faced a historical ethnic fragility – before the project, Bantu and indigenous Batwa communities had ceased all communication. By integrating both groups into shared community gardens and Dimitra Clubs, the project facilitated reconciliation through labour, reducing tensions and facilitating communication. The shared interest in protecting a common crop acted as a catalyst for renewed dialogue. The demonstration fields served as models for collective resource management, showing farmers that shared water and soil resources could be managed more efficiently through the FFS approach than through individual competition. Such reconciliation between Bantu and Batwa communities was a prerequisite for agricultural engagement. Agricultural programming only became viable after Dimitra Clubs restored inter-community trust. All focus groups strongly agreed that social cohesion had improved.

As economic fragility often drives community conflict, the VSLAs also served as stabilisation mechanisms by providing members with a way to resolve financial crises without resorting to desperate measures or exploitative loans. The collective nature of building savings through

weekly meetings built a web of trust that transcended individual household interests. Integration of FFS, VSLA and Dimitra Clubs created a synergistic impact. Participants were often enrolled in multiple structures, reinforcing social, productive and financial capital simultaneously.



Meeting of the VSLA in Kawama, Tanganyika. PHOTO: ACTIONAID DRC

The project ensured the intentional inclusion of marginalised groups, with Indigenous Batwa and IDPs holding leadership roles. Evidence from Kalemie shows that targeting criteria was need-based, ensuring that those traditionally excluded from land ownership were integrated into communal garden activities. In certain, predominantly Pygmy villages, indigenous people occupy positions of responsibility and work alongside Bantus. In the Lukwangulo focus group, 12 out of 22 participants were IDPs. Their full integration into the project's agricultural and financial structures indicates a high level of social inclusion by the project. Batwa members now hold presidency or secretarial roles in community committees, a shift in traditional power hierarchies. By ensuring that Batwa and women held non-contested leadership roles, the project challenged the structural causes of fragility through empowering marginalised groups.

Participants unanimously agreed that the project encouraged community involvement in implementation; however, they noted gaps in their involvement in planning and budgeting. While community groups are the engines of implementation, their role in strategic planning and budgeting has been marginal. Participants expressed

that they often felt the project's objectives were pre-determined. The Project Manager confirmed that while CSOs were contractual partners, the high-level design was heavily influenced by supervising entities' (World Bank, FAO) frameworks, leaving little room for community-led budgetary shifts.

CSOs are the primary facilitators for community-level activities and the resilience floor for the project. The project works through a three-tier structure, involving CSOs (implementing partners), community structures (Dimitra Clubs, FFS, VSLA), and the small-scale producers. Such layering allows for high-frequency engagement and stable intervention that otherwise would not be possible. During the M23-related security deterioration, for example, the review team noted that local CSOs maintained operational presence when international actors were required to evacuate. This confirms the importance of local CSOs to the project and their reliability in conflict zones. While World Bank oversight is bound by strict security protocols requiring withdrawal during rebel advances (as seen in the South Kivu precedent), local CSOs remain the anchors of continuity. Their staff are recruited from the project zones and remain as permanent community fixtures during surges in conflict.

All the interviewed CSOs reported that the project has helped them grow their reputational and technical capacity. SAFEKA, for example, noted they are now recognised by the community as a reference institution for financial inclusion.



Members of the Dimitra Club in Kawama, Tanganyika. PHOTO: ACTIONAID DRC

Key lessons

- Community structures (FFS, VSLA, Dimitra Clubs) are essential enablers of productive agriculture in conflict-affected settings, with Dimitra Clubs effectively facilitating dialogue, conflict resolution and collective resource management.
- Shared community gardens and Dimitra Clubs facilitated reconciliation through labour, with interest in protecting a common crop acting as a catalyst, reducing tensions and facilitating communication.
- Local CSOs are critical delivery and resilience anchors, maintaining trust, continuity, and access in insecure contexts, even when international actors withdraw.
- Communities are highly engaged in implementation but remain marginal in strategic planning and budgeting.

"We do not know how they do [the planning] or if we are truly involved. We see the staff, we ask our questions, but we don't know about the budget." — CSC Women's Group, APV Health Centre.

Challenges

In addition to gaps illustrated in the sections above, the review also noted the following challenges related to project design, institutional sustainability, financial and contract management.

- While impact at household level is clear, the sustainability of the project presents a mixed picture. Technical knowledge has been embedded within communities through FFS and Dimitra Clubs; however, provincial government officers lack logistical means (motorcycles/fuel) to monitor ongoing activities and ensure continued oversight beyond project cycles. This is also reflected in a noted tension regarding the balance of power between local CSOs and government, with government officials arguing that more resources should have been funnelled directly through state structures to ensure sustained technical support.
- Abrupt funding withdrawals or contract changes undermine long-term trust. The abrupt cessation of the US\$1,000 VSLA acceleration fund, which was to be provided by FAO to the top performing 60% of VSLAs, created reputational and financial risk. While UG-PDSS plans to still provide these funds, following evaluation of the VSLAs' performance, the transfer of this responsibility from FAO to UG-PDSS created lengthy delays. Some women rented land or incurred debts in anticipation of this support, but when the project funding ceased, some women became legally and financially liable for land they could no longer cultivate. Likewise, concern was raised on World Bank's cancellation of a contract with FAO, due to internal delays at FAO, and engagement of HarvestPlus.
- The geographic spread of the project across 100 villages has meant that some implementation areas face challenges of accessibility, impact and security.
- As the initiative is funded through two projects, some interviewees noted that their different disbursement cycles have led to fragmented implementation. Interestingly, however, at the community level, participants rarely distinguished between the projects, suggesting a high level of operational coherence at the point of delivery, despite the noted administrative silos.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The intervention is multi-layered, with MNHP providing broader multisectoral nutrition and health programming and RENUGL providing capacity development and resilience-building technical assistance, reflecting GAFSP's objective of strengthening food and nutrition security through coordinated investments in agricultural productivity, resilience and institutional capacity. The review findings show achievement of the project objectives at the household impact level, particularly in agricultural knowledge, food security and financial inclusion, and identifies several scalable practices. The project's integrated architecture, which links support for social cohesion, technical agriculture, and financial inclusion is particularly appropriate to the fragile, conflict-affected context in the DRC; however, structural sustainability risks remain at institutional and market-system levels.

Importantly, the findings of this review should be interpreted within a context where: yield increases do not automatically translate into market access due to insecurity and transport constraints; women's economic empowerment intersects with land tenure; peacebuilding structures are prerequisites for technical agricultural success; local CSOs provide the operational resilience floor when international actors withdraw; and climate-resilient practices are economically driven but environmentally consequential.

Given the ambition of the project to improve the general well-being of people in South Kivu and Tanganyika through peace building, agricultural productivity and accessible micro-finance, the review makes the following recommendations:

- *Review the project's geographic spread.* Spreading the project across 100 villages in South Kivu creates logistical and security risks. For future initiatives, GAFSP and supervising entities (World Bank and FAO) should consider including fewer villages, but with higher concentrations of participants in each, to ensure better monitoring and security.
- *Support government structures for sustainability.* The project should strengthen the role of government extensionists by assigning them additional responsibilities and providing further budget to purchase motorcycles and fuel, to enable them to conduct monitoring visits, contributing to the sustainability of the FFS demonstration fields.
- *Develop an integrated project activity plan.* The activities of the MNHP and RENUGL funds should be better integrated to avoid fragmented activity implementation. Disbursement of funds and administrative protocols should be harmonised to ensure synchronisation. This would prevent two-speed implementation, where technical training is ready, but input procurement (as in the case of biofortified seeds) is delayed.
- *Recognise and support local CSOs as the project's resilience floor.* Local CSOs are the anchors of continuity because their staff are recruited locally and remain in project zones, even during conflict surges. GAFSP and supervising entities (World Bank and FAO) should allocate or ring-fence a portion of funds specifically to support local CSOs to act as the project's contingency management units, allowing them to continue project activities, even when international entities must evacuate due to security protocols.
- *Support participatory planning and budgeting.* While community groups are the project's engines of implementation, their role in strategic planning and budgeting has been marginal. Supervising entities (World Bank and FAO) should ensure CSO and community involvement in planning, budgeting and monitoring, and allow room for community-led budgetary shifts.
- *Avoid sudden project funding changes.* Supervising entities (World Bank and FAO) should avoid sudden project funding withdrawals (such as the \$1,000 VSLA acceleration fund) or contract changes. Instead, where such changes are unavoidable, a more phased process should be used to prevent saddling vulnerable farmers with land-rental debts and damaging community trust.
- *Address the impact of unpaid care work.* While the project succeeded in uplifting women in economic and social spheres, their workload has doubled due to managing savings and attending meetings alongside traditional care work, indicating a need to address the redistribution of domestic labour. The project should

integrate household dialogue modules in trainings to encourage the redistribution of domestic labour.

- *Invest in community infrastructure to address digital poverty.* The project should explore supporting digital infrastructure in communities, including solar charging and group mobile, to enable women to access market information and financial services critical for scaling their income generating activities.
- *Invest in small-scale mechanisation.* There is a clear demand from communities for small-scale mechanisation, to allow them to move from subsistence plus to commercial scale. Future interventions should consider providing farmers with access to small-scale power tools (such as walking tractors, motorised threshers or solar pumps). Strategies could include matching grants or working

through the VSLA model, where members can rent equipment using their collective savings for use on their farms.

- *Advocate for land tenure for women.* While they have benefited from the project's technical training and provision of seeds, many women remain landless, forcing them into precarious land-rental agreements. Supervising entities should work with local CSOs and government to integrate land-tenure advocacy or land-credit modules into project design.
- *Invest in organised collection points or cooperatives.* Farmers and local government should be supported to establish organised collection points or cooperatives. This would bridge the causal gap between increased yields and marketable surplus by overcoming high transport costs and lack of bargaining power.

With support from



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COVER PHOTO: Yohali Moustapha, a farmer from Kalemie, Tanganyika, harvesting amaranth from her field. CREDIT: ACTIONAID DRC

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A decorative horizontal border consisting of a repeating pattern of small triangles in yellow, orange, and grey, some with internal geometric patterns.

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