

Strengthening Smallholder Resilience in Burundi: **Lessons and Recommendations from the PARE-COVID Project**

REVIEW SUMMARY REPORT

JUNE 2026



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Executive Summary

The Eastern and Southern Africa Small Scale Farmers Forum (ESAFF), through the Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP, led a participatory review of the *Supporting Small-scale Family Farmers who are Members of CAPAD Cooperatives to be Resilient to the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (PARE-COVID) project, using a participatory, qualitative and rights-based methodology, between 17 and 23 November 2025.

The review findings indicate that the PARE-COVID project -- implemented by producer organisation Confédération des Associations des Producteurs Agricoles pour le Développement (CAPAD) and co-financed by GAFSP -- has delivered strong post-pandemic recovery outcomes for over 4,800 smallholder farming families, across nine cooperatives in eastern Burundi. By improving access to high-quality banana and bean seed, strengthening cooperative structures, rehabilitating the banana value chain and promoting agroecological techniques, the project has boosted productivity, incomes and climate resilience. Farmers reported substantial yield increases, driven by disease-free seedlings, enhanced soil fertility and

farmer-to-farmer learning structures. Improved collective marketing and stronger links with Société Coopérative de Transformation et Commercialisation des Produits Agricoles (SOCOPA) enabled more stable farm-gate prices, while mutuelle de solidarité (MUSO) savings groups increased financial inclusion and reduced reliance on informal lenders.

The project demonstrated that cooperative-led approaches are effective for organising farmers, ensuring equitable benefits and facilitating market access. Agroecology proved to be a powerful strategy for managing climate shocks, with practices such as mulching, composting, intercropping and use of organic inputs significantly improving soil moisture retention and crop resilience during erratic rainfall.

Despite strong results, implementation delays—particularly in seed delivery, processing equipment installation and fund flows—have hindered efficiency. Gender participation also remains uneven due to limited gender-targeted activities. Opportunities to strengthen nutrition education are also underutilised.

Recommendations

- Increase cooperative grant sizes and expand support to additional crops and livestock.
- Extend the project beyond the current nine cooperatives to include more CAPAD members.
- Invest in clean energy solutions (e.g., micro-solar grids) for cooperatives and SOCOPA.
- Improve irrigation infrastructure to stabilise production under climate variability.
- Strengthen gender mainstreaming through leadership training and targeted women's enterprise support.
- Develop a structured nutrition plan including cooking demonstrations and food-use training.
- Ensure timely fund disbursement and expedite installation of processing equipment.
- Establish a clear agroecology strategy and benchmarks for consistent adoption across cooperatives.
- Continue supporting farmers organisations by strengthening cooperative governance, financial management and peer-learning systems.

The Project Context

Agriculture is the backbone of Burundi's economy, contributing approximately 28% of GDP and employing over 90% of the active population, the majority of whom are smallholder farming families cultivating plots often under 0.5 hectares. The sector supplies more than 95% of national food needs and is central to rural incomes, poverty reduction and employment. However, agricultural productivity remains low due to limited access to quality seeds, soil degradation, land fragmentation and high dependence on rain-fed systems. These structural constraints make smallholder livelihoods highly vulnerable to shocks.

Banana is one of Burundi's most strategic crops, accounting for an estimated 30-40% of household intake and up to 50% of farm income in major banana-growing areas. The

banana value chain supports millions of rural livelihoods through production, local brewing, processing and trade and contributes significantly to local economies. Likewise, beans play a vital economic and nutritional role in the agriculture sector of Burundi where bean consumption is among the highest in the world and 90% of farmers grow beans for food and income with national production falling short of demand.

Burundi's agricultural economy was severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Agricultural household incomes fell significantly during the pandemic period, increasing food insecurity and limiting farmers' ability to reinvest in production. Women farmers were disproportionately affected due to increased unpaid care work and reduced participation in informal markets.

About the PARE COVID Project

The project *Supporting Small-scale Family Farmers who are Members of CAPAD Cooperatives to be Resilient to the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (PARE-COVID), is led by the Confédération des Associations des Producteurs Agricoles pour le Développement (CAPAD), a federation of agricultural producer organisations and cooperatives in Burundi. The project is supported by the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP) with a grant of US\$2.8 million, through its producer-organisation (PO) funding tract. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) is the supervising entity for the project.

The project, being implemented between 2023 and 2026, aims to restore agricultural production, protect rural livelihoods and improve household resilience, food and nutrition security. The project is serving at least 4,800 small-scale farming families and benefiting more than 20,000 individuals across six communes who depend primarily on agriculture for household income and food security. Working through a cooperative-based approach, the project builds on CAPAD's institutional presence and grassroots network, targeting nine farmer cooperative members of CAPAD that operate in the Moso area across selected regions of Mishiha, Cendajuru, Kinyinya, Ruyigi, Gisagara and Gisuru in eastern Burundi.

PARE-COVID supports both the quantitative and qualitative increase of multipurpose bananas and their marketing, focusing on revitalising unproductive, ageing banana stands with vitamin-A rich varieties that are valued for taste, juice content and appearance. The initiative also strengthens subsistence crops, introducing biofortified beans, to better meet household food, nutrition and income needs.

The project is working on doubling the productive capacity of the Ruyigi banana processing plant through supporting a new bottling line and laboratory equipment, improving product quality, competitiveness and market integration. Furthermore, the project is strengthening cooperatives in collective and contractual marketing thereby enhancing their economic services, such as improving members' access to inputs and markets, thus boosting incomes. This entails brokering dialogue with private actors such as the Société Coopérative de Transformation, Conditionnement et Commercialisation des Produits Agricoles (SOCOPA) processing plant, ensuring compliance with market standards. Direct grant support is also provided to households severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.



CSOs4GAFSP review team in a group photo with the SOCOPA management team.
PHOTO: ESAFF

The Project Review Methodology

The Eastern and Southern Africa Small Scale Farmers Forum (ESAFF), through the Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP,¹ led a review of the PARE-COVID project, using a participatory, qualitative and rights-based methodology, between 17 and 23 November 2025. The review process included desk research that entailed a review of project appraisal documents and progress reports. The sampling approach was purposive, aimed at ensuring a balanced representation of the perspectives of both grassroots and institutional stakeholders involved in the project, with a focus on the communes of Buhumuza, Chankuzo, Cendajuru, Gisuru, Ruyigi, Kinyinya.

Sixteen key informant interviews were held with CAPAD project staff, cooperative leaders, national and district government officials and community facilitators who provided insight into project implementation, coordination

and policy support. Four participatory and inclusive focus group discussions were held with 71 (44 men; 27 women) participants in Mishiha, Cendajuru, Kinyinya and Gisuru communes, including young farmers, to gather personal insights on the significance and impact of the project. The review captured diverse experiences, practices and challenges among farmers, triangulating the findings with the realities on the ground.

The review upheld feminist and participatory methods, ensuring a people-centred evidence gathering process that encouraged women, young, and vulnerable people to critically but safely reflect on the nature of gender power relations and social realities within their communities and the project. To achieve this, the review ensured informed consent and put in place measures that upheld safeguarding principles.

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 (AsiaDHRRA)*, and *Coordination pour des Actions en Santé et en Développement d'Haïti (COSADH)*.



A documentary about the PARE COVID project, produced by ESAFF, through the Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP. [Watch it here.](#)

Project Impact

I. Improved Livelihoods through Increased Productivity

The project strengthened agricultural production among small-scale producers, evidenced by improvements in banana productivity and quality, as directly observed and reported by farmers in the intervention areas.

In **Cendajuru**, farmers described how the adaptation of the project-supported agroecology production practices have enabled them to increase banana production. For example, farmer Elie Nsamisazi reported an increase from five banana bunches per harvest to about 20. Similarly, several other interviewed farmers, who previously harvested mostly three bunches on 0.5 acres, are now harvesting an average of 22 bunches on the same plot size, with some farmers achieving even higher outputs.

Beyond increased production volumes, banana quality has significantly improved. Farmers report healthier plants, stronger stands and reduction in disease incidence. This improvement is largely attributed to the use of quality disease-free seedlings, which establish faster, mature earlier and are more resistance to pest and disease attacks.

In **Gisuru**, farmers highlighted that productivity has more than doubled, noting that as few as five seedlings can now produce up to 20 bunches, a result that was previously unattainable. These gains have been driven by

the adoption of agroecological production techniques, including the use of disease-free banana planting materials, adopting soil fertility management practices using organic manure and compost, mulching to conserve moisture and improve soil health, crop diversification and intercropping with legumes such as beans and field sanitation including proper spacing.

For example, a farmer in Gisuru reported he is now getting a yield of 50 kg of bean per 0.5 acres, an increase from 8 kg, improving his household income, allowing his family to better meet essential needs, including payment of their children's school fees.

The project is building the capacity of cooperative members to establish and manage banana nurseries, enhancing their autonomy by enabling them to locally produce and multiply seedlings. Farmers attested to having enhanced their technical knowledge on crop management, post-harvest handling and production planning, leading to improved yields thanks to project support in improving access to lab tested quality seeds and inputs including tools, cooperative-based extension services (facilitators) and hands-on training tailored to local agroecological conditions. CAPAD facilitators work with farmers in demonstration plots; encouraging peer to peer farmer learning and sustainability in community areas. Farmers attend demonstration plots for learning at least twice a month with an opportunity to integrate indigenous knowledge with technical skills.



Seedling nursery demonstration under a shaded structure at the SOCPA area.
PHOTO: ESAFF

The project also contributed to institutional capacity strengthening by familiarising government extension officers and CAPAD facilitators, enhancing their ability to provide informed technical guidance, support farmer adoption of sustainable practices and promote wider replication beyond the direct beneficiary communities, supporting longer-term sustainability and scale-up of project results.



Smallholder farmers from Cendajuru Commune showcasing harvested bananas at a demonstration farm. PHOTO: ESAFF

In **Kinyinya**, substantial increase in bean yields were reported. Before the project, farmers harvested about 30 kg of beans per acre, with farmers now attesting to harvesting up to 200 kg per acre. In addition to higher production volumes, bean quality has significantly improved, enabling farmers to access better markets. Resultantly, the selling price for beans increased from US\$ 0.8 to 3 / kg, translating to higher household incomes and improved economic resilience.

Farmers reported more stable market linkages and improved farm-gate prices as a result of selling collectively. The project is improving market access by reinforcing collective transportation at product aggregation centres. A mobile banana collection vehicle collects bananas from farmers' collective aggregation centres, which provide temporary storage of bananas for the farmers' cooperatives, and transports them to SOCOPA processing factory, enabling producers to overcome individual constraints linked to small volumes and weak bargaining

power. Collective marketing has reduced dependence on intermediaries, improved price negotiation and facilitated access to local and nearby regional markets. Farmers also take part in agriculture fairs where they showcase their products and expand their markets. Additionally, farmers highlighted that such cooperative-based sales now provide them with consistent income across seasons.

The SOCOPA banana processing factory at Ruyigi has also provided a market for farmers where they not only sell bananas to the factory but also adhere to the established standards, enabling farmers to improve the quality of bananas. SOCOPA is a cooperative-owned processing facility that adds value to various agricultural products for resale.

Under the PARE-COVID project, SOCOPA received a grant to acquire new juice bottling and cleaning equipment, aiming to improve operational efficiency and increasing the factory's capacity to offtake bananas for juice production.

Farmers have produced more bananas since the market was guaranteed and have signed a supply contract that offers them double the market price. While bulk sales through aggregation and delivery transport support have helped to reduce operational costs, some farmers were of the view that the farmgate price for bananas remains generally depressed and they enjoy only minor profits, albeit better than what they can obtain on the open market.

Additionally, the project has improved financial inclusion and reduced reliance on informal moneylenders. The project has supported farmers to establish community-based savings and lending groups ((*mutuelles de solidarité* (MUSOs)) through which members regularly save money and access small loans which also enable farmers to manage seasonal cash-flow needs more effectively.

In **Cendajuru** commune, one farmer, Ms. Yvette Irankunda, shared that income from banana and bean production has enabled her to construct a house for her parents and invest in goat rearing, with her livestock already reproducing. She is also an active member of MUSO, through which members at own initiatives contribute savings, access credit and receive annual dividends based on their level of contribution, enhancing financial inclusion and resilience.



Ms. Yvette Irankunda, a young smallholder farmer holding a safe box that she uses to keep money for their savings village group. [Watch her video testimony here](#). PHOTO: ESAFF

Key lessons

- Productivity is driven by use of disease-free banana plants and agroecological production techniques.
- Farmer-to-farmer learning and demonstration plots accelerate adoption of agroecological practices and improve sustainability.
- Collective marketing through cooperatives reduces transaction costs, strengthens bargaining power and stabilises incomes across seasons.
- Guaranteed offtake arrangements incentivise farmers to increase production and improve quality.
- Value-chain bottlenecks (energy, equipment installation, transport) can significantly constrain benefits if not addressed early.

II. Building Climate Resilience through Adaptation and Agroecology¹

In Burundi, erratic rainfall and prolonged dry spells have affected early establishment of banana plantlets, with soil erosion in hilly areas threatening the survival of young plantations. Additionally, although Burundi ordinarily enjoys two annual growing seasons, in recent years there has only been one.

The PARE-COVID project has supported farmers and their communities to adapt to climate change by promoting agroecological practices that enhance resilience, reduce dependency on external inputs, encourage synergies, promote sustainable land and water use, and improve ecosystem health. Through the project, farmers have been trained and supported to adopt techniques such as crop diversification, intercropping, mulching, contour farming, composting and soil and water conservation. Farmers are widely combining crops and small livestock management, organic inputs and agroforestry to generate co-benefits such as yield, nutrition and resilience. This is complemented by farmers' involvement in participatory land-use planning sessions. The use of such practices was mentioned across project sites.



Staff member of SOCOPA banana juice processing factory holding a basin with black soldier flies. PHOTO: ESAFF

1. The review defines agroecology in terms of the 13 principles developed by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security.

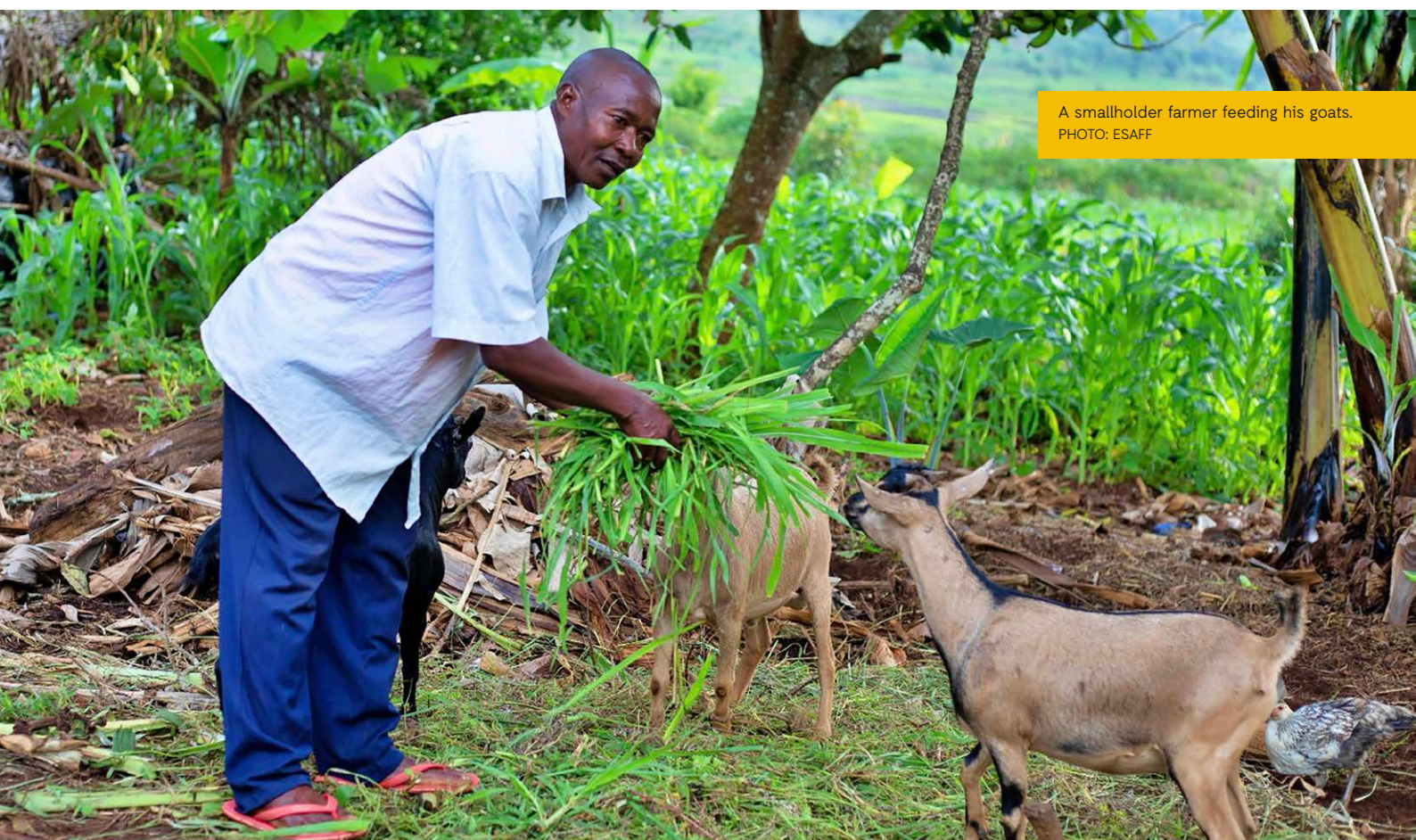
The use of locally available organic inputs, including Tithonia (*Tithonia diversifolia*) as a biopesticide, fertiliser and farmyard manure, has been encouraged to improve soil fertility, control pests and diseases and moisture retention while lowering production costs. Farmers were trained by CAPAD facilitators (extension officers), who established dedicated side sections within demonstration plots to practically guide farmers on the preparation and application of these organic inputs. These practices strengthened soil structure and reduced vulnerability to erratic rainfall and prolonged dry spells. In Mishiha, for example, farmers have grown and multiplied Tithonia plants bordering their farms to biologically control pests. Cooperative-level composting hubs have also been established in Cendajuru and Kinyinya to scale recycling of organic waste and crop residues.

Farmers in Mishiha and Cendajuru commune reported that plots treated with Tithonia and farmyard manure retained moisture for longer periods. For example, during delayed and uneven rainfall seasons, crops on the improved plots remained healthy while neighbouring fields experienced wilting and reduced yields. Some farmers indicated that they were able to harvest despite shortened rainy seasons, whereas previously they would face partial or total crop failure. This reduced their exposure to food shortages and the need to purchase food during lean periods, thereby strengthening household resilience.

At community level, agroecology is promoted by using drought resistant seeds, farmer-to-farmer learning, demonstration plots and cooperative-led training sessions. Notably, the food crops promoted are those that are generally grown and consumed by the farmers. Farmers reported improved yields and more stable production, despite climate variability, particularly during seasons of irregular rainfall. The use of organic fertilisers, such as Tithonia, was highlighted as both affordable and effective. Farmers from the Shirukubute cooperative narrated how the project is promoting the intercropping of bananas and beans and agroforestry through planting of trees that co-exist with crops such as umuhumure, Calliandra and grevillea, supporting greater farm biodiversity.

While the project is not supporting the rearing of animals, farmers are diversifying their crops with small livestock such as goats, pigs and chickens. They attest that including small livestock not only enhances nutrition and income but complements the ecosystem and improves availability of manure.

At the SOCOPA factory, the project funds the procurement of bottles which the company recycles by offering an incentive for returning the bottles. The new bottling machinery offers an opportunity for the factory to modernise from a bottling process that required the use of bottles to sustain the intense heat during pasteurisation and can now consider using locally available packaging such as paper-made bottles.



A smallholder farmer feeding his goats.
PHOTO: ESAFF

“Agroecological training received through the project allowed me to be more autonomous. I had always depended on my husband to prepare the compost manure for our fields. The project provided hands-on training on methods that were not labour-intensive. This has helped me to prepare everything on my own, without waiting for my husband.”
A woman farmer from Cendajuru.

The project has also built farmers’ resilience by encouraging them to diversify crops and small livestock to reduce risk and increase income sources. MUSO savings and lending groups have further enabled financial resilience. Smallholder farmers also engage in other non-farm economic activities, such as, value addition of bananas to make porridge and pancakes to increase incomes.

Overall, farmers reported that the project’s integration of agroecological principles has assisted them in

increasing production, improving soil health, and encouraging nutritious and diversified diets. Nevertheless, the application of such agroecology practices across cooperatives shows wide variations and the project would benefit from a project level strategy on agroecology that sets these principles as a benchmark for progressive adoption and monitoring.

Key lessons

- Agroecological practices are effective, low-cost and locally appropriate for building resilience to erratic rainfall and soil degradation.
- Using locally available organic inputs increases farmer autonomy and reduces dependency on external markets.
- Without a shared agroecology framework, adoption remains uneven—highlighting the need for clear benchmarks and monitoring.

III. Gender Responsiveness and Women’s Empowerment

At the project level, the nine participating cooperatives are composed of 40% women. These cooperatives represent 510 groups (with women making up 20% of members). The project employs 33 staff in total, including two (6%) women, as well as an accountant in each in the nine supported cooperatives, including three (33%) women. Future gender-aware recruitment should be encouraged to ensure more balanced project staffing.

While the project proposal integrated gender considerations, by prioritising women’s participation in CAPAD cooperatives, training activities and income-generating interventions, there are notable implementation gaps. There was no specific criteria or benchmark for women participation or female headed households, rather their participation was consequent to their membership in the selected cooperatives. As a result, the participation of men and women is uneven; for example, women comprised only 38% of the participants for the review.

“Women are working but the men are the decision-makers at the market and control the revenues”

Eliezel - PARE-COVID Project Manager

Despite these gaps, some women farmers shared stories demonstrating empowerment. For example, women noted the project has assisted them in participating in all stages of the value chain. They acknowledged, however, that men continue to make the marketing decisions and have more control of the farming proceeds.

Economically, women farmers improved their agricultural production and incomes through access to quality seed and inputs, technical training, collective marketing and participation in savings and lending groups. Increased control over income has enabled participating women to better meet household needs, reinvest in farming activities and reduce dependence on men. Several women reported that earning and managing income through cooperative

activities strengthened their financial autonomy and resilience. Women are also leading in diversifying income generating activities such as cooking porridge and pancakes and selling at markets. At the SOCOPA banana juice processing factory, women are leading in some areas, particularly in marketing and quality assurance (cleaning of bottles before filling).

Socially, the project has contributed to increased leadership and visibility of women within cooperatives and community structures. Women are assuming roles such as cooperative committee members, treasurers of savings and lending groups and lead farmers facilitating peer learning. Participation in leadership positions has enhanced women's confidence, public speaking skills and recognition as capable farmers and community leaders. In Cendajuru village, the leader and secretary of the MUSO cooperative saving and lending group are all women. In other cooperatives, women lead the organisation of collective marketing (such as at the SOCOPA processing factory) and savings activities, demonstrating effective management and accountability.

Women also attested to how their participation in the project has elevated their social status. Maria, from the Shirukubute Cooperative explained that they now have increased incomes to enable them to pay school fees, improve their diets by retaining surplus production for home consumption and purchasing other condiments such as oil, spices and meat to enrich their meals. Interestingly, women shared how they now actively participate in political activities, such as voting during elections, whereas previously their husbands would have discouraged them.

At the household level, increased economic contribution and leadership roles have translated into improved respect, reduced gender power imbalances and greater participation of women in household decision making. Women reported being more involved in decisions related to crop choices, use of income, children's

education and household investments. Recognition of women's unpaid care work has improved as household members increasingly acknowledge their dual roles in production and family care. Some households reported more shared responsibilities, particularly during peak agricultural seasons.

Women noted their appreciation of the agroecological techniques taught by the project, such as composting, saying they are labour-friendly as they did not involve digging. A focus group discussion in Mishiha revealed how women are working as community change agents on nutrition. In particular, they have sensitised staff and pupils at Mishiha School about the project's vitamin A bananas and biofortified beans.

"Women in Burundi are usually not considered. With the project, there are many things that changed including women participation and sitting in meetings. Today a man by himself cannot sell the land without the consent of the wife."

Maria – member of the Shirukubute Cooperative, speaking of the importance of the cooperative meetings.

Key lessons

- Women's economic participation increases when they gain access to inputs, technical training, collective marketing and savings mechanisms.
- Intentional gender design (targets, leadership pathways, tailored training) is necessary to shift leadership and decision-making power in farmers' organisations, not just participation.

IV. Improving Household Nutrition and Food Security

At the household and community levels, improved production has directly enhanced food availability and dietary diversity. Families reported consuming most of their own produce while selling surplus for income. These

increased earnings have allowed households to meet essential needs, such as buying other types of food, paying for healthcare and education, and reinvesting in productive assets, contributing to improved standards of living. With increased agriculture productivity and increased incomes, farmers reported that they can now afford to prepare three meals a day, an increase from only a single meal per day (with only children receiving a second meal).

Similarly, in Mishiha, farmers reported that the project strengthened their skills in poultry keeping and home gardening, allowing them to improve household diets and generate additional income. These gains have enabled families to purchase essential household items and meet other basic needs.

The project has mostly a commercial focus, targeting to distribute 284,000 bananas, 60% being varieties for processing and 40% for direct consumption and desserts, which also includes biofortified Vitamin A banana varieties. The project has distributed 33MT of different varieties of biofortified (iron) beans.² The beans are distributed to the farmers through a chain of solidarity and a pass-on scheme for up to three seasons. In Burundi, in addition to Vitamin A banana and iron beans already promoted by the project, the l'Institut des sciences agronomiques du Burundi (ISABU) has also released Vitamin A sweet potato varieties.



A smallholder farmer from Mishiha Commune, showcasing one the banana plant at a demonstration plot. PHOTO: ESAFF

The project promotes access to healthy and diversified diets, increasing the variety of foods families consume. The project has not fully tapped into the opportunity to increase the agency of women and young people in promoting good health and nutrition behaviours. Women are actively involved in food production and could benefit from improved ways to prepare and consume food through putting forward women representatives of cooperatives for value addition trainings. For example, when the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), an implementing partner of the project, conducted a value addition training on the use of banana for other culinary products, such as bread, doughnuts and porridge, only three of the nine trained cooperative leaders were women. The subsequent training of cooperative members by the trained leaders was reported to have faced challenges. The project could consider developing and implementing a nutrition plan that includes cooking demonstrations and nutrition awareness for the cooperative members to maximise the optimum use of available food to enhance household nutrition.

The SOCOPA market project is promoting community self-sufficiency through better food distribution to reduce food loss and waste, as farmers now have a ready market of good quality bananas. The development of product standards by the Burundian Bureau of Standards (BBS) through the project has helped to improve food safety to safeguard public health not only for the project but for Burundi and its neighbouring Eastern African Community market where the banana products-juice and wine are sold.

Key lessons

- Increased production improves incomes and food availability, but nutrition outcomes require complementary knowledge and behaviour change.
- Biofortified crops can contribute to more nutritious diets, but only when combined with training in food preparation and the promotion of dietary diversity.
- Women are critical agents of community and household nutrition change and should be systematically supported through training.

2. The inclusion of biofortified crops is a strategy to increase micronutrient density in staple crops, thereby helping to combat micronutrient deficiencies. Micronutrient-enriched, climate-smart varieties of common staples are bred to provide essential iron, zinc, and vitamin A to rural households to improve nutritional status, health, and livelihoods.

V. Advancing Community Participation & Cohesion

The project actively engaged smallholder food producers through their primary membership in CAPAD cooperatives, using these farmer-led structures as the main entry point for implementation. This cooperative model has ensured cost-effective delivery of services while strengthening social cohesion and local governance structures.

Farmers and civil society organisations have been involved across the full project cycle. During the planning phase, cooperatives participated in needs assessments and beneficiary selection as well as choice of the agriculture high value crops (banana and beans), and the areas to place the farmer field schools (demonstration plots), ensuring inclusivity and local relevance. During implementation, they have coordinated activity delivery, mobilisation of members and community level progress monitoring. Civil society organisations supported capacity needs assessment and training, seed testing and production, ensuring production standards and advocacy, while also contributing to monitoring and learning processes. Regular consultations, cooperative meetings and feedback sessions have ensured that farmers' priorities and local knowledge inform the design and implementation of project activities. This approach has strengthened trust, participation and the relevance of interventions to smallholder realities.

MUSO savings and lending groups, established and strengthened within cooperatives to improve financial inclusion for smallholder farmers, have also enhanced community participation and cohesion. These groups operate on a member-based model where farmers make regular savings, access small loans at agreed interest rates (mostly 9%; below market rates of 12%) and repay within defined cycles. At the end of each cycle, profits generated through interest charged on loans are then shared among members as dividends according to individual contributions. Through MUSO, farmers collectively procure agricultural inputs, small livestock and household needs, manage seasonal cash gaps and reduce reliance on informal moneylenders, thereby strengthening their economic resilience and investment capacity.

The project strengthened local farmers' groups by strengthening cooperative governance, organisational

management and leadership capacities. CAPAD cooperatives received support in the form of working equipment, such as computers, solar kits for power supply, cabinets for storing books and files to improve internal coordination, transparency and collective action, particularly in production planning, input management, marketing and savings and lending initiatives. As part of improving financial oversight, all nine cooperatives were provided initial support to hire project accountants. By the time of the review, the cooperatives had successfully covered the costs of both their finance manager and community mobilisers for three consecutive months, demonstrating growing financial autonomy. Through CAPAD's targeted capacity-building interventions, seven out of the nine cooperatives had reached the highest level of formalisation, reflecting strong governance, organisational maturity and operational efficiency, while the remaining two were progressing toward the same.

The cooperatives that formalised have been strategically linked to other projects supported separately by World Bank and IFAD, enabling them to access microfinance services, diversify income through income-generating activities. These efforts enhanced the functional capacity of cooperatives to deliver services to members and to represent farmers' interests more effectively at local level thus buttressing internal cohesion.

CAPAD itself attested to having benefitted from a positive working relationship with their supervising entity (IFAD), which helped enhance professionalism through joint annual field visits where CAPAD received actionable recommendations.

Key lessons

- Strong farmers' cooperatives enhance social cohesion, financial inclusion and local governance.
- Savings and lending groups are powerful tools for resilience, enabling households to manage shocks and invest productively.
- Building the internal capacity (staffing, systems) of farmers' cooperatives contributes to sustained good governance and financial management beyond the project life.

Challenges

In addition to challenges noted in the sections above, review participants noted their concern with issues related to operations and delays in the implementation of activities. In particular,

- Fuel shortages have disrupted transportation and the running of the SOCOPA factory. In response, CAPAD farmers were supported to improve temporary storage and handling practices to minimise post-harvest losses, and farmer groups were encouraged to bulk transport produce strategically based on confirmed transport availability, minimising spoilage risks.
- There were delays in the supply banana suckers and bean seeds, being propagated and supplied by ISABU, which often arrive late in the season, reducing their effectiveness. To address this, CAPAD is strengthening local seed resilience mechanisms. Farmer groups are being encouraged to multiply their own seeds, especially those who received seeds, and share with fellow farmers. For banana, emphasis is being placed on establishing local mother gardens and promoting on-farm multiplication of healthy suckers to ensure timely access to quality planting material.
- Additionally, the installation of bottle filling and cleaning facilities at the SOCOPA banana factory was delayed, affecting processing and production efficiency. While the bottle filling and cleaning machine, manufactured by Ferrero Bottling Lines in Italy, has already been delivered to the SOCOPA banana factory, the equipment has not yet been installed by the Italy-based supplier due to scheduling conflicts, despite follow up by SOCOPA. The pending installation has affected the full operationalisation of the processing and packaging line.
- The implementing partner, IITA, funds are centrally managed and go through their headquarters in Nigeria before they are available in Burundi, delaying project implementation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There are tangible results from the project, including improvements in smallholder farmers' productivity, incomes, climate resilience and social empowerment by promoting agroecological practices, quality seed access, cooperative strengthening and inclusive community structures. The project is supporting farmers to adapt to climate change and building resilience. Higher and more stable production, combined with improved market access has enabled participating farmers to sell surplus produce at more favourable prices, resulting in increased and more predictable cash incomes. Such income gains have reduced vulnerability to shocks and enhanced farmers' capacity to plan and invest in other business ventures.

Despite strong results, implementation delays—particularly in seed delivery, processing equipment installation and fund flows—have hindered efficiency. Gender participation also remains uneven due to limited gender-targeted activities. Opportunities to strengthen nutrition education are also underutilised.

To build on successes and address challenges, the review makes the following recommendations:

- *Increase the size of the grants provided to cooperatives* to allow them to expand support to other crops and livestock. Additional funds would allow them to broaden their support to include avocado, coffee, potatoes, maize and groundnuts, which are important crops in the implementation areas. Support for livestock production will also complement already practiced agroecology principles. Larger and more diversified support will enhance resilience, allowing farmers to recover faster from shocks, diversify income sources and strengthen food security in the communities.
- *Expand the participation of CAPAD cooperatives.* The project is currently only serving nine out of CAPAD's 400 member cooperatives. Considering the success of the project so far, support to CAPAD should be increased to allow them to expand the inclusion of additional cooperatives.
- *Invest in clean energy solutions*, such as micro solar grids for cooperatives and the SOCOPA processing plant, to reduce their dependency on fuel, and ensure

uninterrupted operations. Reliable, clean energy would reduce production costs and build resilience against future disruptions, supporting economic stability.

- *Improve irrigation infrastructure.* Build small-scale irrigation systems to mitigate climate risks such as erratic rainfall and prolonged dry spells. Irrigation support would reduce dependency on erratic rainfall, stabilise production and safeguards livelihoods, helping farmers recover from climate shocks.
- *Enhance gender mainstreaming.* Integrate more gender-specific interventions, such as dedicated leadership training for women, provision of resources for women-led enterprises, and ensure women's representation in cooperative boards and MUSO groups. Empowering women strengthens household and community resilience, ensures equitable access to resources, and boosts food security, which is critical for a sustainable post-pandemic recovery.
- *Develop and implement a nutrition plan* that trains women on food preparation and preservation and allows farmer cooperatives to promote consumption of the increasingly diverse locally available foods supported through the project.
- *Support timely disbursement of funds.* To address delays in the flow of funds from IITA (currently routed through their headquarters in Nigeria), IITA should explore more direct disbursement mechanisms to ensure timely implementation.
- *Provide regular technical support* to ensure the project and services are provided within the given timeframe. For example, technical support by the supervising entity (IFAD) should address delays in the installation of the bottle filling and cleaning machine at the SOCOPA factory, and delays in the delivery of seeds to farmers.
- *Promote further climate adaptation measures.* The project's existing collaboration with the national meteorological institute should be expanded to support community-led early warning systems for weather variability.

- *Support consistent adoption of agroecological practices* across the project cooperatives, through the adoption of a project level strategy and benchmarks. While farmers reported that the project's integration of agroecological principles has assisted them in increasing production, improving soil health, and encouraging nutritious and diversified diets, the application of such practices across cooperatives shows wide variations.
- *Continue supporting cooperatives and farmer groups*, focusing on governance structures, leadership and financial management training, women's leadership and strengthening peer-to-peer learning platforms. Strong cooperatives ensure sustainability and continuity of activities beyond the project, allowing farmers to remain organised, access inputs, markets and financial services even after project support ends.

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COVER PHOTO: Smallholder farmers from Burundi holding banana juice produced by the SOCOPA factory. (ESAFF)

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