



Food and Agriculture Organization  
of the United Nations

# **Research on rural women's economic empowerment and social protection**

The impacts of Rwanda's Vision 2020  
Umurenge Programme (VUP)

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## Abbreviations

CS	In-depth household case study
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
KII	Key informant interview
LODA	Local Administrative Entities Development Agency
MINECOFIN	Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning
MIS	Management Information System
PtoP	From Protection to Production programme
RWEE	Rural Women's Economic Empowerment
SACCO	Savings and Credit Cooperatives
VSLGs	Village Savings and Loans Groups
VUP	Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme
WEAI	Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index

## 1. Introduction

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has started a policy-oriented research programme on **Social Protection and Rural Women's Economic Empowerment** which aims to:

- gain a better understanding of how social protection policies and programmes can promote rural women's empowerment as a strategy for rural poverty reduction;
- identify good practices in social protection policies and programmes to ensure that both women and men have access to social protection benefits; and
- identify good practices in the design and implementation of social protection programmes that reduce gender inequalities in rural areas and promote rural women's economic empowerment.

The research is undertaken under the From Protection to Production (PtoP) programme based at FAO which carries out impact evaluations of cash transfers in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as policy research and support on social protection and agriculture. The project is a collaborative effort between FAO, UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office and the governments of Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Rwanda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The PtoP programme is also part of the larger Transfer Project in which FAO has joined UNICEF, Save the Children UK and the University of North Carolina in supporting the design, implementation and impact evaluation of cash transfers in sub-Saharan Africa.

The present report summarizes findings of the first PtoP case study on rural women's economic empowerment and focuses on the public works component of Rwanda's Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme (VUP) – the Government of Rwanda's flagship programme for poverty reduction providing countrywide social protection. The research was based on a mixed method approach comprising in-depth qualitative methods and quantitative surveys conducted in Rwanda during the autumn of 2014.

## 2. Areas of inquiry, research hypotheses and theory of change

The theory of change guiding this research outlines the possible pathways through which public work programmes can stimulate rural women's economic empowerment. The theory of change is based on McCord's framework (2012) describing how public works provide benefits through three main ways: wage transfers, assets created, and the work experience, skills and training transferred.

The hypotheses and theory of change for this research is as follows:

**Ho 1-Economic advancement:** "VUP Public works will promote the economic advancement of women by increasing their incomes and access to credit and savings facilities. It will also improve women's skills and employment opportunities."

- By providing temporary employment and access to cash through wage payments delivered through financial institutions, VUP public works will contribute to the economic advancement of rural women.
- Women's participation in public works can enable savings and investments in productive resources (such as the purchase of agricultural inputs or other assets) that

further increase their capacity to generate income and attain a more sustainable livelihood.

- Through public works employment and skill development, women can build and enhance their skills to facilitate their engagement in the labour market once the programme ends.
- Cash wage payments can enable women to avoid or minimize detrimental risk-coping strategies, such as the withdrawal of children from school or distress sales of assets, while improving their households' welfare and living conditions, as well as breaking the intergenerational transfer of poverty through investments in health, education and housing.

**Ho 2-Power and agency:** VUP public works “will strengthen women’s power and agency by increasing their bargaining power within the household and wider community. This will increase women’s self-confidence, their ability to engage in social networks and participate in decision-making in the public arena.”

- When women participate in VUP public works they can exert control and make decisions on the use of cash that they earn, strengthening their bargaining power within the household. Wage payments that are delivered through financial institutions and directly into women’s accounts can further increase women’s control of cash.
- More control over their own resources can boost women’s self-confidence and self-esteem, heightening their own sense of worthiness and competence with positive spillover effects on their ability to engage in social networks and participate in decision-making in the public arena.
- Cash injections can stimulate the formation of women-only or mixed groups of mutual support and economic collaboration among public work beneficiaries or within the community at large, thus strengthening social capital and economic advancement.
- Through complementary sensitization activities, women can gain increased access to information regarding a range of relevant topics of their concern through messages delivered by the public works programme or support networks formed among public work beneficiaries.
- Through sensitization, men can also learn more about their role in reducing gender inequalities and empowering women, changing their attitudes towards women’s economic roles.

**Ho 3-Operations:** “Operational and design features of VUP public works that provide women’s equal access to benefits and opportunities and build linkages with community-based services and livelihood interventions, will promote gender equality and women’s economic empowerment.”

- The potential of public work programmes to catalyse rural women’s economic empowerment can be realized only when programmes are shaped by gender-sensitive design and implemented according to initial design. The extent of public work programmes’ impact on rural women’s economic advancement and power and agency is mediated by their operational arrangements and effective implementation;
- ensuring regular and predictable transfer payments;
- guaranteeing a minimum number of days of employment at relatively competitive wage rates within the given context; and
- ensuring appropriate targeting criteria and mechanisms which are respected and implemented on the ground.

- Women's empowerment can be further enhanced through:
  - programme design with explicit gender-equality objectives and features that intentionally promote the inclusion of women (e.g. establishing women's targeting quotas or explicitly seeking to reduce existing gender gaps in employment opportunities);
  - delivery and design mechanisms that promote women's participation (e.g. facilitating female beneficiaries' transportation to public work sites or addressing women's constraints in terms of household and care responsibilities by providing child care options);
  - coordination and linkages with gender-sensitive livelihood interventions and social services.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Qualitative study

The **qualitative study** (Pavanello *et al.*, 2015) was conducted in two separate sectors within two different districts of two provinces as follows: Kigembe sector of Gisagara district in Southern province and Ndego sector of Kayonza district in Eastern province. The Southern province and Gisagara district were intentionally selected to ensure that one site in the qualitative study overlapped with the quantitative study.

One village in each district of relatively similar agro-economic, livelihoods and institutional profile was selected as a “comparison” community where the VUP public works did not operate. Comparison communities were included in the study to understand characteristics of communities without the programme intervention, including households' activities and livelihood strategies, and intra-household control and decision-making dynamics.

The design of the qualitative study was based on three main methods: focus group discussions (FGDs), semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) and in-depth household case studies (CS). A number of participatory tools were applied during FGDs. A fieldwork “roadmap” was applied in each treatment location including at least six FGDs with: female VUP public works beneficiaries; male VUP public works beneficiaries; female non-beneficiaries (including eligible but not participating in public works); male non-beneficiaries (including eligible but not participating in public works); opinion leaders; and community members who contribute to VUP implementation. In each comparison community, a total of three FGDs were conducted with female non-beneficiaries, male non-beneficiaries and opinion leaders.

The selection of KIIs was iterative and in response to emerging themes; they included administrative officers, members of the structures that contribute to the VUP programme (LODA at national level, VUP managers at sector level); social sector professionals including teachers, social welfare, health and agricultural extension workers, representatives of the National Council of Women and of Village Loans and Savings Groups (VSLGs) and other resource persons. Daily and end-of-fieldwork debriefings served to synthesize and hone collected data and develop cohesive narratives and analyses around each hypothesis. Conclusions were shared at community, district and national levels.

### 3.2. Quantitative study

The **quantitative study** (Warring and De la O Campos, 2015) uses a sample of 369 participant households from sector cohorts II and III<sup>1</sup> (joining the VUP in 2009 and 2010 respectively) of the VUP public works component in four districts in Rwanda's Southern province<sup>2</sup>, as well as a sample of 247 comparable households in terms of poverty levels (eligible households for participating in VUP public works not yet covered by the programme) from three districts in the same province where the programme had not yet started at the time of survey. Districts covered by the quantitative survey included Gisagara, Muhanga, Nyanza and Ruhango, all in Southern province.

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<sup>1</sup> Since the VUP was first rolled out in 2008, it has expanded at the rate of 30 sectors (one per district) each year. Each group of 30 sectors represent a cohort. As such, the 1st cohort of 30 sectors was launched in mid-2008, the 2nd in mid-2009, the 3rd in mid-2010 and the 4th cohort was added in mid-2011 (Devereux, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Rwanda is comprised of five provinces (*intara*), Southern, Western, Northern, Eastern and Kigali city. Provinces are subdivided into 30 districts (*akarere*). Each district is divided into sectors (*umurenge*); there are currently 416 sectors in Rwanda. Sectors are further divided into 2 148 cells (*akagari*) and 14 837 villages (*umugudugu*).

The study consisted of a household and an individual survey in order to capture both household and individual-level impacts related to women's empowerment. The study at household level is run disaggregated by female-headed (or "female-only") households and "double households" (where both men and women adult members are present). The individual survey was an adaptation of the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) methodology (Alkire *et al.* 2012; Malapit *et al.* 2014), collecting data on the primary adults of the household – a male and a female – in all households included in the household survey.

The absence of baseline data for the research sample restricts this study from conducting a double-difference impact evaluation and as such restricts the quantitative analysis from attributing significant differences between participant and comparison households to the programme. The study can provide evidence for or against the hypotheses, however, by using associations in the data. The findings of the quantitative component of this research should be read with this caveat in mind.

Finally, the consistency and integration of both qualitative and quantitative methods was guaranteed by a consistent use of the research questions and hypotheses and by constant triangulation of the findings from each research analysis.

## 4. Rwanda's Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme and the public works component

VUP is a large-scale social protection programme owned and led by the Rwandan government, and is considered one of government's flagship programmes for poverty reduction. Implementation of the VUP started in May 2008 in 30 sectors (the first cohort), the poorest sector in each of Rwanda's 30 districts. VUP is managed by Local Administrative Entities Development Agency (LODA). According to the latest data provided by LODA in March 2015, the VUP public works component covers a total of 130 000 households across the country.

The programme consists of four components: public works, direct support, financial services and sensitization. Public works was the first component rolled out in May 2008. Through this component the VUP offers temporary employment to extremely poor households with at least one adult member able to work in building and rehabilitation of community assets, aligned in principle to existing local development plans (MINALOC, 2008). Nationwide, the majority of VUP projects are geared towards support of agricultural livelihoods and land conservation, including radical terracing, anti-erosive ditches and water resource management. Other projects seek to build, upgrade or maintain physical infrastructure such as roads (e.g. feeder roads), bridges and schools (Devereux, 2012).

The VUP public works component targets the poorest households (*ubudehe*<sup>3</sup> categories 1 and 2) with labour capacity. The *ubudehe* categorization takes place at the village level by the *ubudehe* committee and the list of beneficiaries is then sent to the cell and sector levels.

According to the VUP design, employment depends on project availability; jobs are usually not available for all targeted beneficiaries. The duration of jobs can vary from one to several phases; normally, each phase has a period of 15 days (Pavanello *et al.*, 2015). Although the target number of days, as per VUP policy, is 71 (*ibid.*), the average number of days worked per beneficiary household in financial year 2013-14 was 54 with a median of 49 days. This likely reflects a lower-than-expected provision of public works to targeted household beneficiaries. Fewer available days to work than intended has had implications in meeting programme objectives as discussed below.

The design of the programme also envisages "gender parity" in the selection of VUP public works participants where at least 50 percent should be females (MINALOC, 2009); the policy does not explicitly say whether these females should be from female-headed households. The VUP is intended to target households rather than individuals and beneficiaries are registered in the name of the household head. In male-headed households this is typically the husband, whereas in female-headed households it is the woman head, regardless of who within the household works in the programme. Household members are also given the choice of deciding who actually works on VUP sites and can rotate participation among (labour-able) adult members, for example between spouses.

When beneficiary households enrol in VUP public works projects the household head is asked to open a bank account if he or she does not already have one. While it is not a compulsory requirement of the programme for the primary account holder to add a co-signer, the VUP

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<sup>3</sup> *Ubudehe* is a community-based social poverty mapping (based on Rwandan culture of collective action and mutual support to solve problems) comprising six categories – Category 1: abject poor (*umutindi nyakujya*), Category 2: very poor (*umitindi*), Category 3: poor (*umekene*), Category 4: self-sufficient or resourceful poor (*umukene wifashije*), Category 5: food rich (*umukungu*), and Category 6: money rich (*umukire*).

encourages husbands to have their wives becoming co-signers – this is actively promoted through sensitization messages.

Savings and Credit Cooperatives (SACCO)<sup>4</sup> accounts have become the most popular mechanism for VUP public works wage payments (and direct support cash transfers) with more than 90 percent of beneficiary households being SACCO account-holders (RLDSF, 2011). According to programme design, wages are to be paid to beneficiaries fortnightly, at the end of each project phase or two-week working period, directly into their bank accounts, since no direct cash payments are allowed under the VUP (ibid.; MINALOC, 2011).

**Note:** in this report, the term “beneficiary” is used to refer to beneficiary households, or individuals in beneficiary households. The term “VUP participants” refers to individuals, male and female, who have worked on public works projects. It is important to differentiate between the two as not all members of beneficiary households participate in public works sites.

## 5. Summary of findings from the quantitative and qualitative studies

### 5.1. Area of inquiry 1: Economic advancement

The research explored effects of VUP public works wages in improving women’s economic conditions, specifically testing the hypothesis: “VUP public works will promote the economic advancement of women by increasing their incomes and access to credit and savings facilities. It will also improve women’s skills and employment opportunities.”

#### Sources and control over income

General findings of the study indicated that women have more limited opportunities than men to access cash income sources, both from agricultural and non-agricultural activities. In turn they also have less cash income at their own disposal.

At the household level, agricultural activities – both crop and animal production – are allocated by gender, which prescribes activities such as transporting crops or milking cows strictly as “men’s work”, and planting, winnowing and threshing as “women’s work”. Activities that entail handling cash, especially relatively large amounts, are typically controlled by men. For example, men are usually responsible for transporting livestock and cash crops – both considered valuable productive assets – to the market and control sales and corresponding revenues. By contrast, some women are involved in petty trade, typically of fruit and vegetables, which entails comparatively smaller amounts of cash.

A similar pattern is found in relation to non-agricultural activities. Temporary or permanent migration to access wage labour opportunities (e.g. building work, carpentry and clothes washing) in urban centres is an important consumption-smoothing strategy for young and adult males. Conversely, for the majority of women and girls, domestic obligations limit migration to temporary periods mostly close to the homestead; these are predominantly distress strategies in times of acute household financial crisis (e.g. as a result of weather-induced shocks) rather than a more habitual livelihoods strategy to avail of wage work opportunities.

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<sup>4</sup> SACCOs are member-based cooperatives regulated and supervised by the National Bank of Rwanda. To increase access to financial services in poor and remote areas of the country, the Government of Rwanda has been supporting the creation of SACCO accounts at sector level since 2009 (RLDSF, 2011).

These qualitative findings are consistent with those of the quantitative study which show that men are the main cash income earners. The quantitative survey showed that males are more likely to hold wage-paid jobs and to have more decision-making in cash income than women. In addition, the survey showed double households as having higher household cash incomes than female-headed households<sup>5</sup>. The quantitative analysis also found that females are more likely to report having input into decision-making on food crop farming, while men dominate when it comes to cash crop farming and wage employment. This is in line with the finding that men have greater say in activities that lead to cash income for the household.

The study found that participation in VUP public works is positively enabling female beneficiaries to access wage labour and earn cash, some for the first time and, for a number of them, it encourages them to look for other similar work in the labour market. The majority of public works employees are women and are likely, but not always able, to retain full or partial control over their own incomes through SACCO accounts (e.g. several beneficiaries reported opening their own individual accounts after the first payment cycle). Joint control was also reported between spouses, reflecting variations in persons in the household working and/or decisions made within the household to open the account in joint names. Regression results in the quantitative study corroborates this finding indicating correlation between VUP public works participation and achieving “adequacy in control over use of income”<sup>6</sup> for both male and female beneficiaries.

For a minority of female beneficiaries, the wages are serving as a catalyst for small investments in economic activities, particularly in petty trading, brewing and selling local beer or renting a small plot of land to expand household agricultural production. This is due to their newly acquired ability to earn additional cash and control it and to their increased access to credit sources, discussed below.

### **Time use for domestic and care activities**

The study found that there are wide gender disparities at household level in time use for domestic and care activities. Engendered socio-cultural norms ascribe women a subordinate position in the household and this plays an important role in defining and reproducing gender-differentiated time use patterns. The findings of the quantitative survey indicate that men in both VUP and comparison households spend significantly longer hours than women working in income-generating activities, significantly less time on domestic chores (by a factor 2.3 and 2.7 respectively) and report having between 50 and 75 percent more leisure time than women<sup>7</sup>.

The qualitative study indicated no changes in time allocation for domestic activities between spouses as a result of the VUP public works. Men’s involvement in household and care activities has not increased as a result of female participation in VUP public works. The study found that in general, VUP participation has actually increased the workload of many of the participating women and also of children, as female beneficiaries offload part of their domestic burden on them. But these higher workload demands were reported specifically with regard to

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<sup>5</sup> Annual household cash income – which includes household business, livestock sales, salaried jobs, rent income, transfer (non-VUP) and VUP transfers- in double households is between 67 756 and 60 454 RWF (USD 68-60). This is nearly double that of female-headed households (between 36 842 and 31 261 RWF (USD 51-43). Within VUP double households, the average annual wage income of males is much higher (37 275 RWF or USD 51) than that of females (12,955 RWF or 18 USD).

<sup>6</sup> Adequacy in control over use of income is reached if the 5DE individual score is 0.80 or higher, as per the WEAI methodology. This means that an individual is “empowered” in this domain, having input into decisions about income generated from an activity she/he participated in.

<sup>7</sup> Each individual participant is asked about his/her time use in the past 24 hours, noting when the reported day was a work or rest day.

the period of the public works. Married female beneficiaries without older children, typically above the age of five, were balancing competing demands on their time and energy as best they could. Some were confronted with heavier workloads by participating in public works while their domestic workload remained unchanged. Married female beneficiaries with older children typically task them with carrying out domestic chores while they participate in public works. The qualitative study found that these competing claims on female beneficiaries' time and their inability to carry out some domestic tasks had the potential to ignite tensions between spouses, even if female beneficiaries' participation in public works is widely reported as a decision taken jointly by husbands and wives

The quantitative study found no indication that VUP beneficiary households are hiring-in additional labour (for agricultural and livestock activities, or other activities such as care) to make up for less time available to work as a result of participation in public works. This is likely due to insufficient resources, despite the VUP wages.

### **Access to financial services**

Qualitative findings indicate that most informants identified SACCOs as the most popular financial institutions and formal sources of credit. Village Savings and Loans Groups (VSLGs)<sup>8</sup> are also a popular informal lending source, especially among females. The quantitative study found that the most popular sources of credit are families and friends, followed by SACCOs and VSLGs.

Gender is a key determinant shaping access to financial services and borrowing behaviour. The qualitative study found that compared to their male counterparts, women are less likely to own an account with a financial institution such as a SACCO. The typical borrower profile from a SACCO is male, whereas VSLGs and other informal lending sources (e.g. merry-go-rounds) are the main lending sources for females.

A number of factors contribute to gender differences in access to financial services and borrowing behaviour. These include notably women's unequal bargaining power *vis-à-vis* men, where men exercise control over household physical capital (e.g. land, house and valuable livestock, such as cows typically used as collateral) and over the bulk of household cash. Women's minimal literacy skills and limited self-confidence to compile applications for commercial loans are also key reasons restricting women's initiatives in seeking loans from formal institutions.

VUP public works provide access to cash through wage payments delivered through financial institutions (typically SACCOs). This has promoted female VUP participants' financial inclusion, allowing many female beneficiaries to own a financial account for the first time and thereby the possibility of accessing other financial services such as savings and credit.

The quantitative study explored the extent to which women in VUP households are active members of microfinance groups – which include SACCOs, merry-go-rounds and VSLGs – compared to those in the comparison group. While we cannot ascribe this difference only to the VUP programme as such, the programme does appear to expose beneficiaries to formal banking through its requirement of payment through SACCO accounts. The quantitative

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<sup>8</sup> VSLGs had been established by local communities on the basis of a group model approach introduced by CARE Rwanda around 2010. Savings in VSLGs typically functioned as follows: each week group members saved and pooled a given amount of cash with members receiving the money in the pooled fund on a rotational basis. In addition, VSLGs also offered small loans, reportedly of approximately 5 000-6 000 RWF (USD 7.12-8.54) to members who put forward a request.

analysis suggests that the VUP does increase probability of female public works employees in reaching “adequacy in access to and decision-making on credit”<sup>9</sup>.

While financial inclusion is a positive outcome of the VUP, it is having only marginal effects on female beneficiaries’ actual access to commercial loans from SACCO institutions. Factors underpinning gender differences in borrowing behaviour outlined above are found to be key barriers in this regard. In addition, a requisite for married individuals applying for a loan from SACCO is the spouse’s consent. Some female respondents feared that this would open the door for appropriation of loans by their husbands and misuse of funds, exposing them to high risk of loan default. Expressing a risk adverse attitude, one female FGD participant stated, “We know that our husbands will waste loans on drinking so we don’t take out loans.”

Only a minority of female beneficiaries in the qualitative study have reported accessing commercial loans from SACCOs largely due to their limited income from public works or access to other income-generating activities and limited control of physical assets that could serve as collateral; those that did access loans, used them as a springboard for investment into economically productive activities, e.g. purchases of livestock for sales of off-spring and the opening of small businesses.

In terms of membership in informal credit groups, VUP wages were found to have enabled a number of female beneficiaries to join VSLGs for the first time and access loans from those groups. These loans are predominantly used to smooth household consumption and address household basic needs. For a small number of beneficiaries, loans obtained through VSLGs are catalysts for economic investments, since the loans (total or part of them) have been used to start economic activities.

### **Risks and shocks: effects and coping strategies**

In Ndego sector drought is indicated as the main shock, followed by malaria. In Kigembe sector, prolonged dry seasons followed by heavy and destructive rains and hailstorms are perceived as main risks. Heavy rains are contributing to soil erosion and loss of crops, with detrimental effects on agricultural production.

Distress migration and distress sales of land were main coping strategies adopted by respondents in both qualitative sites. The qualitative study findings indicated that socio-economic factors, particularly household wealth and gender, have a determinant role in the coping strategy adopted. Poor and very poor households were found to widely adopt strategies such as distress migration in search of food and employment, and distress sales of land to better-off households. Reflecting intra-household gendered patterns of responsibilities and labour, the length of distress migration and distance to migration sites were found to differ between males and females. Men typically migrate to urban centres (e.g. Huye or Kigali) or to other agricultural areas for weeks or even months. Married women also migrate, typically to engage in daily agricultural wage labour, but for a relatively short time and to areas close to their homes. There were also indications that elderly female-headed households face major vulnerabilities during times of distress such as drought. As one woman beneficiary in Busasamana starkly put it, “when drought comes, elderly female-headed households either wait on God or die of hunger.”

Qualitative findings indicate that VUP wages contribute to the reduction of these negative coping strategies for some beneficiaries. In Ndego sector, participation in VUP public works,

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<sup>9</sup> Adequacy in access to and decision-making on credit is reached if the 5DE individual score is 0.80 or higher, as per the WEAI methodology.

for example, reduces distress migration for some female beneficiaries. However, given the low number of work days in the sector, this benefit was viewed as temporary and short-lived. VUP wages also enabled investments in precautionary savings in the form of livestock (e.g. goats and pigs)<sup>10</sup> or in SACCO accounts for a small number of beneficiaries. There were indications that such purchases have a protective, compensatory effect on household assets as they prevent distress sales such as that of land. As one female non-beneficiary in Iramiro stated “instead of selling a piece of land, beneficiaries can sell livestock.”

In Kigembe, low numbers of work days<sup>11</sup> and recurrent payment delays were key reasons why VUP wage transfers were widely considered as highly unreliable. In times of household heightened stress addressing immediate needs becomes imperative. Beneficiaries did not see VUP wages as providing a much-needed safety net during these periods. In parallel, the quantitative study did not find indication that VUP wages served as a buffer in times of stress and shock. No significant differences in food insecurity experienced over the past 12 months were found between VUP and comparison households.

### **Skills development**

The VUP public works aim to provide opportunities for on-the-job training in specific tasks to equip participants with technical skills while executing the works. Qualitative findings indicate that this has been the case for both male and female participants (e.g. levelling roads, digging ditches and constructing terraces). However, the overwhelming majority of females stated that they did not use their newly acquired skills to find similar jobs elsewhere, mostly because of domestic obligations, which was a key constraint to marketing new skills, and also because there were few viable opportunities available. By contrast there were indications, albeit limited, that male participants used skills acquired through VUP employment to find jobs (e.g. terracing and road construction).

The quantitative study revealed that only about a fourth of public works employees received training to perform their jobs. The qualitative fieldwork found that training courses are only provided to a minority of beneficiaries who worked in higher positions for the VUP public works, such as captains or supervisors, and not to all public works beneficiaries. This is taking place despite the VUP manual stating that participants should receive on-the-job training (MINALOC, 2009:15).

## **5.2. Area of inquiry 2: Women’s power and agency**

The second research area of inquiry explored the ability of men and women to control and make decisions on economic activities, resources and profits, specifically testing the hypothesis: “VUP public works will strengthen women’s power and agency by increasing their bargaining power within the household and wider community. This will increase women’s self-confidence, their ability to engage in social networks, and participate in decision-making in the public arena.”

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<sup>10</sup> Small stock purchases are seen as providing a buffer in the face of weather uncertainty because of their easy conversion into cash.

<sup>11</sup> The quantitative study finds that the majority of beneficiary households worked between one and three cycles (of 15 days each).

## **Perceptions of women's economic roles**

Findings of the qualitative study indicate a favourable enabling environment for the promotion of women's economic empowerment in Rwanda, largely thanks to strong government commitment to achieving gender equality.

In the past, women's subordinate status was perceived and accepted as the norm. Women were rarely consulted on household and community-related matters and decision-making rested solely in the hands of men. With the establishment of the current government however, a strong policy commitment to gender equality has underpinned sensitization efforts by local authorities on the importance of women's inclusion and economic empowerment. This is widely perceived as contributing to changes in attitudes of husbands and people more broadly towards gender and economic roles. Across study locations, perceptions of and praise for women's ability to save and manage day-to-day household expenditure allocations more than men were common. There was also a general view that females are capable of engaging in economically productive activities just as their male counterparts.

At the same time however, the qualitative study found that women are confronted by interrelated gender-based obstacles that continue to constrain their economic opportunities. These obstacles include dominant sociocultural beliefs and value systems biased in men's favour, weakening women's bargaining power and limiting their control over key household assets and resources including cash. Men have wider opportunities for handling and managing cash, particularly for larger quantities, than women. Common perceptions of women's ability to save and manage money wisely refer mostly to small amounts of cash, typically for budgeting day-to-day household expenses in correspondence with women's roles and domestic responsibilities.

Despite evidence of increasingly positive perceptions of women's capabilities and economic roles, deep-rooted sociocultural norms that assign women a subordinate position in the household remain key constraints to women's economic empowerment and gender equality.

Women's VUP participation was widely considered as positive, setting a good example for other women in the village, demonstrating their economic potential, ability to earn income for the household and capabilities beyond domestic and agricultural traditional roles. The provision of temporary employment to women through the VUP can therefore be seen as contributing to changing perceptions of women's economic roles.

## **Intra-household bargaining power, control and decision-making**

Knowing to what extent women contribute to the economic decision-making in the household is important for understanding to what extent the VUP can promote and accelerate women's economic advancement, power and agency. The qualitative study found that gender-related obstacles drive inequalities around household decision-making processes and control over assets, agricultural produce and cash, with wives having limited ability to negotiate, voice their opinions or assert their rights.

Even if legally both spouses enjoy equal ownership rights over the family land and house, women reported that claims over those assets, including using them as collateral to access loans, remains on unequal footing to those of men. Intra-household gender hierarchies often result in decisions concerning assets being taken by the husband. In the qualitative study, data collected indicated that wives appeared to simply endorse their husbands' decisions to sell or buy properties or use them as collateral (e.g. by signing) without real conviction, discussion or perhaps even understanding.

In alignment with the description above, the quantitative study shows that men report a significantly higher incidence of ownership (sole or joint) than women across most categories of assets, such as the house, agricultural land, livestock and farm equipment. In households where both men and women adults are present, women in both VUP and comparison groups own lower shares of household plots than men, despite working on a higher share of plots than men. Also, women in VUP households own fewer cattle than men, but take care of cattle as much as men do. These findings suggest that while women bear similar responsibilities as men, they are less likely to own household productive resources. Men are also found to experience a larger degree of security over assets than women. Within both VUP and comparison households, men tend to be significantly more likely than women to state that they are able to keep large agricultural assets such as land and livestock when their spouses die.

While the quantitative study finds that men and women report about the same levels of input into household decision-making, the study also finds differences in the extent women and men report making these decisions. For example, women, to a significantly larger extent than men, find that it is normally women who make the decision about different aspects of household productive activities, particularly in agricultural and household/subsistence crop production, taking household crops to market (referring to petty trade) and on VUP income. Men do not report on women's participation and decision-making in the same way that women do and report lower involvement of women in decision-making. This denotes that men and women have different perceptions about women's economic decision-making in the household and highlights the complexities of capturing decision-making at household level.

### **Use of VUP cash wages**

The majority of females interviewed in the qualitative study stated that they exercise control over the VUP cash wages that they earn. A key reason is that VUP cash wages consist of relatively small amounts, and are not a particularly valuable or attractive resource to elicit husbands' control. The majority of female beneficiaries interviewed for the qualitative study in Kigembe reported opening their own accounts for the first time after joining VUP public works without adding their husbands as co-signatories. These examples show how the VUP can enable female beneficiaries to control cash wages that they earn. For some women this is the first time they have cash in hand. The newly acquired ability to earn cash also enables private savings, use of cash for personal items (such as *igitenge*<sup>12</sup>) and economic investments for a minority of female beneficiaries. All of these are found to positively contribute to heightened feelings of self-esteem, dignity and increased ability to make independent choices.

How VUP cash wages are used and what expenditures are prioritized within beneficiaries' households largely depends on their poverty status and asset base. In general, through qualitative study, the bulk of the wages appears to be used to help smooth household consumption on basic household needs, namely food, education and health. In Kigembe, repayment of debts accumulated with friends, relatives or shopkeepers while waiting for wages to be paid into their account is also mentioned. Only a minority of male and female beneficiaries were found to have used VUP wages as a springboard for investment into economically productive activities, such as livestock, with some accessing credit to do so. The quantitative findings align with this, indicating that most of the VUP income is spent on food for the household, followed by purchases of assets and shoes or clothing.

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<sup>12</sup> Colourful printed fabric used by Rwandan women as traditional clothing.

## Social networks

Qualitative findings show that people rely upon a number of community-based networks of risk-sharing or mutual aid and economic collaboration for support.

*Dutabarane*, or funeral society, in Ndego sector provides material support in the event of a funeral and organizes transport to health facilities for ill people to its members. The local Pentecostal church in Kigembe offers a range of informal assistance to disadvantaged individuals and households. In both sectors, “mothers’ evening” (*akagoroba k’ababyeyi*)<sup>13</sup>, consisting of regular meetings held at the village level, is considered by women as a valuable platform for sharing and reflecting on common experiences, peer support and conflict resolution. VSLGs are also important social networks for economic collaboration and informal sources of credit.

Findings from the qualitative study indicate that to some extent VUP public works is catalysing women’s inclusion in social networks and facilitating the formation of new friendship networks. VUP participation has motivated a number of female beneficiaries to join VSLGs and “mothers’ evenings” for the first time. Increased attendance and engagement in “mothers’ evenings” have positive impacts on female beneficiaries, accessing and sharing information and boosting their feelings of confidence and self-esteem. Acute poverty levels, feelings of exclusion and lack of self-worth are often key obstacles confronting the poorest segments of the population (both male and female), deterring their participation in “mothers’ evenings” and the public sphere more broadly. Participation in public works is redressing some of these obstacles, thanks to increased personal hygiene, exposure to work life and interactions with peers at work sites.

While working on VUP projects female beneficiaries in Kigembe reported having established new friendships with other female beneficiaries from nearby villages. These friendships are a newly found source of mutual social support and material assistance in the form of small loans or food that can be drawn on during times of financial difficulties. Women respondents described feelings of an increased sense of social connectedness and a “feeling of being more united,” as one woman in Taba stated, because of more home visits among friends to “keep in touch and discuss family problems.”

The quantitative study aligns with findings of the qualitative study, indicating that female beneficiaries are more likely than their non-beneficiary counterparts to engage in social networks. The study finds that a higher percentage of women in VUP households belong to merry-go-rounds, VSLGs and have a SACCO account (48 percent) than those in the comparison group (28 percent).

## Participation in public life

There are mixed findings regarding women’s agency in the public sphere and their ability to influence deliberations and voice their opinions on equal footing with men. On the one hand, qualitative study findings indicated people viewed women as increasingly taking active part in public meetings without being afraid to express their opinions. In turn, their opinions are listened to and acted upon, just like those of men. However, this was found to be linked to

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<sup>13</sup> “Mothers’ evening” is a national initiative established in 2011 by the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion consisting of regular meetings held at the village level – open to all but predominantly attended by women – to discuss a range of practical social and health issues (e.g. gender-based violence, nutrition, education, family planning and conflict resolution).

ongoing government-led gender equality efforts which are encouraging women's active participation in public life. In contrast, in Kigembe sector, as a result of longevity and continuity of VUP public works employment, some respondents believed that VUP participation had positive repercussions on female beneficiaries' engagement in public life, mainly as a result of enhanced feelings of confidence and self-worth: "Before, I was afraid to go to community meetings including 'mothers' evenings' because I had dirty clothes, but now I am clean, I feel better to attend and sometimes I speak up."

On the other hand, there are perceptions that women's participation in the public sphere is lagging behind and continues to remain on unequal terms with men. In the qualitative study, people reported that women often lack confidence, and feel "embarrassed and uncomfortable" and too "shy" to intervene during public meetings – seldom voicing their views to convey their interests to the audience. These findings align with those of the quantitative study, showing that men in VUP households speak up to convey needs and priorities to authorities significantly more than do women. Findings for men and women in comparison households parallel this.

### **Results of the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index**

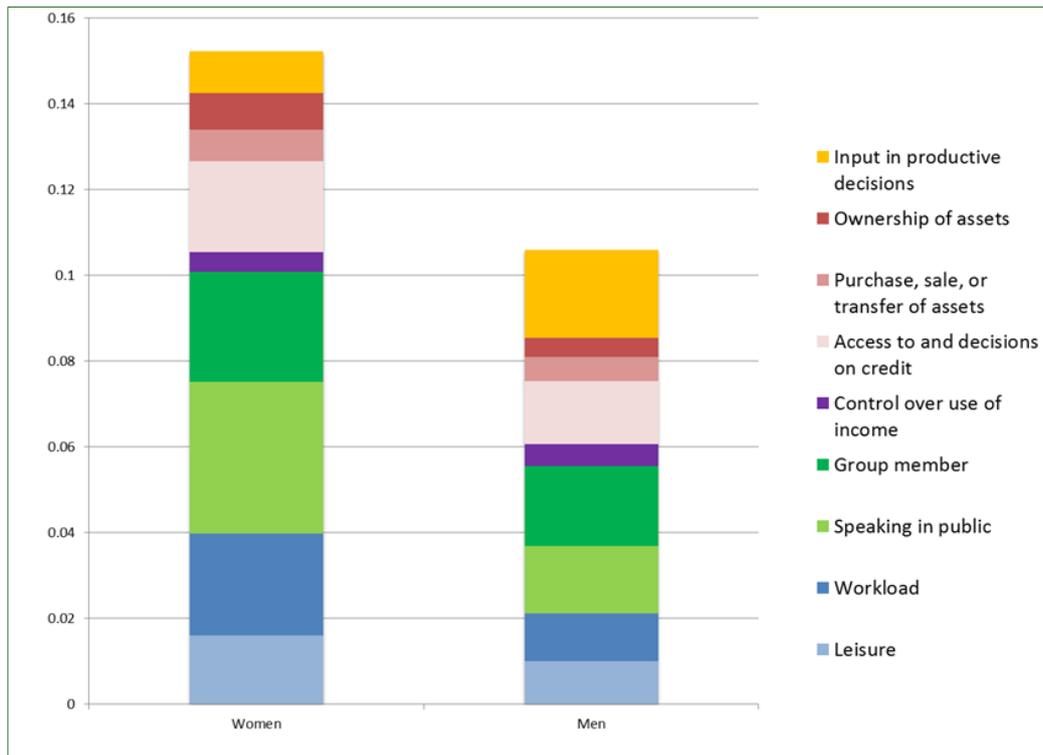
The quantitative study used the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) to assess the level of women's economic empowerment in villages sampled in Southern Rwanda. For this study, a slight variation of the original WEAI was used; the resulting composite index covered five "empowerment" domains: production (input in productive decisions), resources (ownership of assets; purchase, sale or transfer of assets; and access to and decisions about credit); income (control over use of income); leadership (speaking in public and group membership); and time (workload and leisure). A person is defined as "empowered" if her or his score is 0.8 or higher (e.g. reaching adequacy in 80 percent of the domains).

The resulting WEAI index for the total sample of the study is relatively high, 0.86 (a value of 1 is the maximum score of empowerment). The sub-index 5DE, denoting empowerment in five different areas, is 0.85; and the GPI sub-index, denoting gender parity (or the extent to which there is a gender gap in empowerment within the household) is 0.93. Overall, 56 percent of all women in the sample – both beneficiaries and from the control group – are "empowered" according to WEAI, while 65 percent of women in double households achieved gender parity in empowerment *vis-à-vis* their male spouse or relative. These results show that the women surveyed appear to be empowered along different empowerment dimensions. This denotes the potential of the VUP to promote women's economic advancement, power and agency, as these results show that women in these communities can make decisions when they access resources.

Figure 1 illustrates how different aspects contribute to male and female disempowerment. It makes evident, first of all, the extent to which women are less empowered than men (their disempowerment is larger); and second, that men are disempowered to a smaller extent than women in all indicators except inputs in productive decisions. Disempowerment for women comes mostly from inadequacy in speaking in public, followed by workload, group membership and access to and decisions on credit. Disempowerment for men comes mostly from inadequacy in input in productive decisions and group membership, followed by speaking in public and access to and decisions on credit. In this respect, the VUP public works programme – if well implemented – is in a strategic position to redress some of these areas of women's disempowerment specifically concerning access to credit (through SACCOs), and more broadly in promoting group formation and strengthening of social networks, as presented below.

However, the study found no indication that the VUP is currently functioning as a catalyst for promoting women’s empowerment. Regression analysis using the WEAI index as a measurement of overall empowerment suggested that individual employment in the VUP is not associated to a higher index. The analysis also suggested that within double households (households where there are at least one adult male and one adult female present), the VUP is rather empowering men as opposed to women (Warring and De la O-Campos, 2015).

**Figure 1 Rwanda: contribution to men and women’s disempowerment from nine indicators (full sample – VUP and comparison groups)**



Source: Warring and De la O-Campos, 2015.

Figures are calculated using the full sample of all female and male primary adults. Columns show the average disempowerment score for women and men, and the contributions to the scores from each indicator. The disempowerment score is 1 minus the empowerment score.

### 5.3. Area of inquiry 3: programme operations

The research examined operational issues which mediate impacts of the VUP, specifically testing the following hypothesis: “Operational and design features of VUP public works that provide women’s equal access to benefits and opportunities, building linkages with community-based services and livelihood interventions, will promote gender equality and women’s economic empowerment.”

#### Delivery of benefits

##### Targeting and household eligibility

The qualitative study found different criteria and protocols used in the selection of VUP public works beneficiary households in Ndego and Kigembe sectors. Targeting implementation was also not fully aligned with the criteria or processes established in programme design.

Participants from FGDs and KIIs in Ndego sector for example stated that since 2011, selection of public works beneficiaries in Ndego is no longer based on the *ubudehe* category system. This was said to be linked to occurrences of incorrect categorization of households found in the *ubudehe* list and related concerns that selection based on this list could give rise to high inclusion errors. Every time a new public works project is about to be rolled out, village leaders organize public meetings at village level to discuss and compile a list of eligible households on the basis of the following criteria: being poor, with labour capacity and willing to work. The list, which is validated by the villagers attending the meeting, is then passed onto cell and sector levels.

The qualitative study found mixed views on the functioning and inclusiveness of this targeting process. According to some, if members of potentially eligible households – such as labourable female heads of households who are widely considered eligible because of their poverty levels – have not attended the public meeting and have not been included in the list, they can put forward a request and be subsequently included. According to others however, inability to attend the meeting (e.g. because of illness, high dependency ratios and low household labour capacity) can result in exclusion from the list and, in turn, from VUP employment. In this light, the targeting mechanism risked excluding the poorest and most vulnerable households, particularly those with high dependency ratios (e.g. female-headed households) and those who are not able to attend VUP meetings.

In Ndego sector, many of the poorest households (*ubudehe* 1 and 2) are reported as not enrolled in VUP public works because they did not attend the public meeting where the list of eligible households is compiled. Common obstacles to attendance of the poor in public meetings in general (e.g. acute deprivation levels, low self-esteem and a sense of exclusion as discussed above), appear to be the cause for non-attendance in VUP public meetings and, in turn, the exclusion of the poorest from the programme.

In Kigembe sector, the first step before rolling out a public works project is also the organization of a public meeting by village leaders. Unlike in Ndego however, the purpose of this meeting is to encourage eligible and willing to work households to register at cell level. The list is then filtered at cell level against the *ubudehe* list to select households from categories 1 and 2. Some noted that the implementation of this targeting process is becoming increasingly loose since the public meeting is mainly used to announce the roll out of a new VUP project and whoever is willing to work simply enrolls, regardless of his/her *ubudehe* category.

The public works component of the VUP is found by this study to be attracting better-off segments of the population. The majority of VUP public works beneficiaries in Ndego and Kigembe sectors are from *ubudehe* category 3, which according to programme design should not be eligible. The quantitative survey also found some – although small – inconsistencies in the targeting of beneficiaries, as 6 percent of the total sample of VUP beneficiary households belonged to *ubudehe* category 3 at the time of the survey in Southern Province.

### **Days worked, uptake of public works and participation of household members**

The number of days eligible households should be employed in VUP public works is targeted at a minimum of 71 working days per financial year. Findings from the qualitative study show numbers of days worked varies between the two sampled sites. In Kigembe the VUP Manager stated that beneficiaries worked between 80 and 135 days annually. The quantitative study in the Southern Province found that beneficiaries in the sample worked on average 45 and 42 days annually, for double<sup>14</sup> and female-headed households respectively. By contrast, informants of the qualitative study in Ndego sector, Kayonza district, (Eastern Province) indicated the average number of working days annually was only 15 or one project phase since VUP roll-out. Many confirmed having worked only once in one VUP project ever for 15 days. Administrative data at district level shows an average of 26 days. The higher number of working days in Gisagara district (Southern Province) compared to Kayonza district (Eastern Province) might be explained by different levels of resources allocated to different districts, determined by district proposals of prioritized projects within district development plans and district medium-term expenditure frameworks. The limited days worked, particularly in Ndego, result in modest levels of income earned from public works and compromise the potential for improving women and men's economic empowerment and agency.

The qualitative study found that in only one village in Ndego sector (Eastern) scarcity of VUP jobs is reported, with more people eligible and willing to work than jobs available. Conversely, in all other villages of the qualitative study, low uptake of VUP employment is common, with more VUP jobs available than willing to work eligible households. As such, VUP employment appears to be considered by the majority a “second-best” livelihood source.

In the village Iramiro, in Ndego sector, qualitative findings show that the low uptake of VUP employment is linked to two factors. First, the availability of better paid and more consistent year-round wage work offered by the nearby Bramin Farm<sup>15</sup> appears to contribute to making VUP employment a less preferred livelihood source. Second, the roll-out of VUP projects usually takes place during the rainy season when households are busy with agricultural activities on their own farms and there is a high availability for agricultural wage work. As such, short-term and poorly paid VUP employment is not considered attractive enough to forgo longer-term agricultural labour opportunities or work on one's own land.

In general, households participating in VUP public works are found to be those who have labour capacity to allow one member to be employed in the VUP – typically females who could work in sites relatively close to the homestead, requiring no temporary migration, and gain some extra, albeit unreliable income; while others – typically males – engage in more reliable and possibly lucrative economic activities, such as agricultural work on the family land or wage work. This is also found by this study as a key reason why the majority of VUP public works

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<sup>14</sup> Double households refer to households where at least one adult male and one adult female are present.

<sup>15</sup> The Bramin Farm is a joint venture between Bralirwa, the Heineken Group brewery in Rwanda, and Minimex, a leading national maize milling company which produces maize and soya beans through mechanized and irrigated production systems. See [http://www.newtimes.co.rw/PDF\\_ads/BRAMIN-SAP-NT.pdf](http://www.newtimes.co.rw/PDF_ads/BRAMIN-SAP-NT.pdf).

beneficiaries in the research locations are females. Public works employment is considered a less attractive source of income which is most likely taken up by women rather than by men. The quantitative study also finds that women make up the majority of public work participants (i.e. workers). In addition to female-headed households, in 41 percent of beneficiary double households only women are employed by public works, while in 20 percent of these households, men and women alternate work at public works sites.

### **Distance to public work sites and challenges in performing job tasks**

The findings of the quantitative study in the Southern Province indicate that public works sites are remotely located from beneficiary households. On average, public works sites are 2.9 and 2.4 hours away from double and female-headed beneficiary homes, respectively. Considering that participants have to commute every day for a work cycle period of at least 15 days, the burden of commuting to collection sites becomes relevant. In addition, collection sites at SACCO branches are generally closer, but still remotely located from beneficiary households, about 2.4 hours distance from overall VUP households, making cash payments not very accessible for beneficiaries.

Over half of VUP households in the quantitative survey found that work at VUP sites is not easy, primarily because of the high intensity of physical work involved, and the fact that sites are too far, with beneficiaries not having the means of transport to reach them more easily. This is particularly problematic for female-headed households or households with low labour capacity as demands for both their labour and time by public works – compounded by long commuting times – increases competing demands for their labour and time in normal activities respective to household care and income-generation.

### **Delays in payments**

In Kigembe sector, ongoing delays in payments of VUP public works wages were continuously mentioned as a problem during the qualitative research. This issue is well-known to sector authorities, who attribute it to inefficiencies in compiling the payroll list. Payment delays coupled with relatively low daily wages made VUP employment an unreliable and therefore unattractive source of income for beneficiaries. This was felt in particular by the poorest households (which the programme seeks to target) because of their high vulnerability and “hand-to-mouth” existence. As one study participant in Kigembe stated, “VUP is for people who can afford to wait for payment.”

Calculations based on the survey data suggests that about 32 percent of household beneficiary wages had not being paid by the time the survey was conducted, with lack of payments being more pervasive among the female-headed households of the quantitative study.

### **Monitoring and Management Information System**

The findings of this study show the absence of a multi-year monitoring system which would allow VUP staff to track public works beneficiary households across financial years. At sector level, key programme data is unavailable and includes: the cumulative number of days that households have worked in different projects; when have they worked (i.e. phases) and what years; and which household members have worked.

Both the quantitative and qualitative studies found that the public works payroll lists and targeting lists obtained from the Rwanda Ministry of Local Government (MINALOC) and National Institute of Statistics (NISR) were often incomplete and had several inclusion and

exclusion errors regarding beneficiary households, which was discovered and confirmed during fieldwork.

The absence of a multi-year monitoring system limits the ability of VUP staff to understand and monitor over time the impact that the VUP public works component is having towards improving the welfare and economic advancement of beneficiaries, and more specifically, towards enhancing women's economic empowerment. In addition, in most sectors the lack of baseline data with information on income, employment participation and wages, as well as empowerment indicators (e.g. related to intra-household decision-making) hampers the ability of the programme to measure impact on economic advancement and power and agency.

## Communication and participation

### Sensitization activities

In 2013 UNICEF, in collaboration with the VUP, developed the “Community Sensitization and Training Manual” (“Sensitization Manual”). Covering several topics, including gender issues and women's rights, the Sensitization Manual is intended to serve as a tool and guideline for VUP managers and other local administration staff in providing information and training activities to communities and beneficiaries targeted by the VUP.

At the time of research, the Sensitization Manual had yet to be disseminated to VUP-targeted sectors. In the meantime, sectors continued to organize and provide sensitization and training activities in an ad hoc manner, without systematically following a common structure or set of topics. The qualitative study findings indicate that a majority of beneficiaries have not been reached with sensitization messages. Messages that have reached beneficiaries the most concerned use of wages, including savings and investments in livestock or small economic activities and joint discussion between spouses in this regard.

### Selection of VUP public work projects

According to VUP design, the selection of VUP projects should be integral to the national planning system (i.e. decentralized development plans) and the *imihigo* performance contracts<sup>16</sup> process. VUP project selection starts at the lowest level of the administrative structure, the community. During public meetings held annually, community members select activities and investments that they consider to be priorities for their socio-economic development. These also include investments that can be realized through VUP projects, although this is not necessarily explained to participants during public meetings.

The qualitative research found a general lack of awareness among beneficiaries of how VUP projects are selected and a lack of understanding how project selection is part of the decentralized planning or *imihigo* processes. Instead, there seem to be widespread perceptions that projects are identified by the sector and only communicated in a top-down fashion to communities. This reflects communication gaps between VUP programme implementers at sector level and communities.

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<sup>16</sup> *Imihigo* is a nationwide performance-based management tool aimed at strengthening planning, accountability and service delivery. Every year, line ministries, public agencies and districts are required to sign formal public service agreements – performance contracts – to deliver specific outputs or activities (ADB, 2012). When performance contracts are repeatedly evaluated as unsatisfactory district mayors can be removed, whereas high-performing districts can receive special funding allocations for projects (Scher and MacAulay, 2010).

In this study, the design and selection of VUP public works projects were also found to have limited sensitivity to the specific challenges, needs and priorities of female beneficiaries (e.g. the lack of construction of water wells to ease the burden of water collection on women and children or the provision of child care services). That said, females as well as males, widely expressed satisfaction with projects implemented by the VUP, particularly construction and rehabilitation of feeder roads, which were perceived as reducing isolation while improving communication and connectedness, for example, by improving access to health services.

### **Appeals and complaint mechanism**

The organizational structure at public work sites – captain, supervisor, vice-president and president – was widely indicated by beneficiaries as the main mechanism through which public works participants, both males and females, can raise complaints. Conversely, findings of the quantitative study in Southern Province point to a lack of awareness of the existence of this complaint mechanism. The majority of beneficiary households reported not knowing where to go to file complaints about the programme: about 50 percent of double households and 61 percent of female-headed households did not know where to file complaints.

There are mixed findings in relation to the effectiveness of the complaint mechanism. Some beneficiaries stated that their complaints have been listened to and solved, whereas others mentioned frustration, for example in Kigembe, with the inability to use this mechanism to obtain information on ongoing wage payment delays and find solutions.

## 6. Conclusions

### Hypothesis 1: Economic advancement

Findings from this research show that the public works component of the VUP only partially promotes the economic advancement of women. VUP public works has marginally increased beneficiary households' incomes, broadening temporarily sources of household income streams through temporary employment. Gender inequalities in employment and income generation, particularly in wage employment, however are still prevalent. Women spend significantly longer time than men on domestic tasks and have less time for leisure and for seeking other work using their new skills, for personal care and for rest. Overall, indications are that women's workloads have increased with the VUP public works.

VUP has promoted women's financial inclusion through wage payments delivered through financial institutions, and facilitated savings and investments in productive resources for a minority of female beneficiaries. However, VUP public works have not functioned as a safety net to serve as a buffer in times of stress and shocks for beneficiary households.

Limited workdays available in Ndego sector (Eastern Province) and pervasive payment delays in Kigembe sector (Southern Province) have constrained the potential of the VUP public works to support greater women's economic advancement.

Women own fewer agricultural assets than men (land and livestock) and while women participate in household decision-making, there is a distinction between day-to-day decision-making, particularly related to agricultural production and control over productive assets and large income streams, which men typically dominate. The public works were seen to only marginally increase women's bargaining power in the household. For a minority of female beneficiaries they enabled private savings, use of cash for personal and children's items and economic investments.

### Hypothesis 2: Power and agency

Relatively small cash wages and programme implementation challenges are key reasons for the VUP's limited effect in enhancing women's power and agency at the household level.

While female beneficiaries' temporary employment in public works is not altering deep-rooted patriarchal sociocultural norms, there is evidence that it is complementing a gradual change in perceptions regarding women's capabilities and economic roles generated by the positive enabling policy environment promoting women's economic empowerment. The VUP complements this momentum and is contributing to these objectives.

VUP public works catalyse women's inclusion in some social networks for risk-sharing, economic collaboration and mutual support and are generating the creation of friendship networks with positive spillover effects on women's self-confidence and self-esteem. The majority of women in the quantitative sample – both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries – reported a high level of overall empowerment, meaning they reached minimum adequacy in most WEAI indicators of empowerment on average (i.e. input in productive decisions; ownership of assets; purchase, sale or transfer of assets; and control over use of income). However, quantitative findings show no correlation between VUP public works participation and overall empowerment, and in double households it appeared to be empowering men rather than women.

### **Hypothesis 3: Programme operations**

Despite the existence of a favourable enabling policy environment for the promotion of women's economic empowerment, the design and, importantly, the gaps between design and implementation of the public work component of the VUP are limiting the achievement of this objective. A number of VUP features pose constraints for women's participation (e.g. ensuring inclusion of women who cannot participate in community meetings and walking distances). Other more general implementation weaknesses include: low number of working days resulting in low wage transfer values; payment delays; SACCO account opening fees and government tax levies on the transfers; lack of a MIS with multi-year monitoring of impacts which could provide the basis for improving the welfare and economic advancement of beneficiaries; payments not being easily accessible; and considerable distances to public works sites.

While aspects of programme design – targeting in particular of female-headed households – have brought attention to ensuring women's equal access to benefits, there is more opportunity in the design of the public works programme which could further enhance women's inclusion and economic advancement, such as sensitization activities targeted to women's needs and linkages with complementary interventions.

## 7. Recommendations

Given the findings of both quantitative and qualitative studies, the following recommendations are proposed:

To strengthen VUP's **promotion of women's economic empowerment**:

- Ensure that wage payments are delivered on time and that VUP public works beneficiaries work a minimum number of days in each financial year (e.g. 71 days as outlined in the Social Protection Strategy). The latter means that not only sufficient number of workdays is available to VUP beneficiaries, but also, that beneficiaries are encouraged to use up all workdays to which they are entitled to.
- Sensitize VUP female beneficiaries opening accounts with a financial institution for the first time on the importance of holding their own bank accounts as a channel for promoting economic advancement, decision-making power and agency. Accordingly, SACCOs should adopt more gender-sensitive regulations and norms, e.g. lowering opening fees, providing financial literacy training as well as guidance on financial planning, budgeting and management to beneficiary members.
- Explore how to best develop synergies between the VUP and other programmes, for example, between existing extension services and rural development programmes, such as the Ministry of Agriculture (MINAGRI) public works, as well as existing initiatives from NGOs that aim at strengthening women's empowerment through microcredit, financial literacy and women's income-generating groups and networks.

To **enhance women's voice and bargaining power in household decision-making**:

- Strengthen implementation of sensitization activities concerning intra-household gender relations. Initiate dissemination and ensure systematic use of the existing Sensitization Manual across all sectors targeted by the VUP to explicitly address issues related to intra-household power relations and decision-making processes.
- Establish or extend support to local community spaces to enhance participation in social networks and public life by female beneficiaries. These include public work sites, where female beneficiaries can come together to discuss problems, find support and strengthen social relations. Such spaces could also be used to facilitate exchange of information on the VUP between programme staff and beneficiaries and to provide sensitization activities focusing on group formation and economic and livelihoods development.

To **strengthen VUP design and implementation features** toward better supporting women's economic empowerment, power and agency:

- Strengthen the overall VUP MIS to better track beneficiary households and understand pathways to more productive livelihoods and economic empowerment. More specifically, develop a monitoring system that enables regular tracking of public works beneficiary households and individuals directly working at public works sites in the cumulative timing and number of days that households/individuals have worked in different projects and phases, the value of transfers, while including basic indicators that measure programme performance according to household.
- Include baselines and basic indicators in the monitoring system that measure progress in women and men's economic empowerment, particularly in intra-household decision-

making. The different thematic areas covered by this research could be used as a starting-point for developing innovative women's economic empowerment indicators.

- Strengthen the programme targeting mechanism to ensure compliance and consistency in implementation; in specific, consider redirecting those “eligible” public works households with available labour – but self-excluded due to a high dependency ratio (e.g. single female-headed households with low adult labour capacity) – to the direct support component.
- Expand the VUP project portfolio to include projects which can be performed closer to the household. Address the priorities and interests of women together with men's in project selection, including child care services, health and educational services, construction of water wells, nutrition clubs and providing agricultural labour to labour-constrained households.

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