

A Self-Help Group approach for vulnerable women

A participatory evaluation | FOST, Zimbabwe

About Farm Orphan Support Trust

FOST - Farm Orphan Support Trust - supports vulnerable children and their families in Zimbabwe, particularly in the farm worker communities. Farming communities lost income and support networks during land redistribution and have limited rights or access to social services. FOST acknowledges that children who are orphaned belong to the whole community, and through its work to enable community-based protection systems in remote areas FOST ensures that children can grow up with their siblings in a familiar environment. It provides access to education, vocational and life-skills training, psychosocial support and more.

Project evaluated: Self-Help Group approach for vulnerable women

FOST's Self-Help Group (SHG) approach exists to empower vulnerable women, particularly grandmothers and young mothers, both socially and economically. This project was implemented between 2021-2023, in collaboration with Zimbabwe's Ministry of Women Affairs, Community and Small and Medium Enterprises. A total of 1,043 women were reached through 78 SHGs.

SHGs support and empower women through a range of community-development initiatives such as Income Savings and Loans (ISALs), livestock rearing, low-input gardening and climate-smart agriculture. SHGs provide a feeling of belonging; they are safe spaces for discussions about domestic violence prevention, psychosocial support provision, and childcare-related issues. They also promote health and hygiene covering topics such as personal hygiene and household cleanliness, including safe water and sanitation.

The SHG approach structure has three levels which enable women's voices to be amplified within the community: SHG (which focuses on family strengthening), Cluster Level Association (there are several clusters within a community) and the Federation (these latter two levels focus on empowering women in relation to community development issues).



Family
for every child

Furthermore, SHGs have proved to be safe spaces for awareness-raising around both the cultural norms and values that contribute to violence against women and children, and the referral pathways available for reporting and provision of psychosocial support. This complements the wider awareness-raising work that FOST undertakes on these issues.

Participatory evaluation plan

FOST's participatory evaluation process took place between July and September 2024. FOST chose to evaluate the SHG approach using the Outcome Harvesting method, which it used in two districts: Bindura (Mashonaland Central Province) and Zvimba (Mashonaland West Province).

To implement the evaluation the following steps were taken:

- Designing the outcome harvesting process: Key questions were developed for interviews and focus group discussions with: i) Government Officers at district level in districts where the project was being implemented ii) community leaders, and iii) project beneficiaries (SHG women and their children).
- Consent forms for individuals and groups were developed.
- Gathering data: Focus group discussions were conducted.
- Substantiating data: Key Informant Interviews were conducted.

Analysing and reporting on the data

The evaluation questions were as follows:

- What did you think about the SHG project?
- What was the most important initiative that the SHG project brought to the community?
- How do you feel about a possible replication of the SHG programme in the district?
- Can you explain how you felt when the project came to an end?
- Can you tell me more about what you appreciated most about the project?



Tools selected

FOST chose to conduct its participatory evaluation using the Outcome Harvesting method. It harvested the outcomes using:

- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).
- Key Informant Interviews (KIIs).

120 people contributed their views via these activities, including 100 women SHG members from Bindura and Zvimba, and 20 Government Officers and community leaders. Activities were facilitated by local Project Officers.



Outcome Harvesting was chosen because it is a retrospective tool that seeks to understand the change or impact a project has made.

“This is a retrospective evaluation tool through which stakeholders and targeted communities react and share what changes they have seen. From there, the project’s role in and contributions to these changes (or lack of change) are discussed and captured.” Family for Every Child’s Toolkit for Participatory Evaluation of Practice.¹

“The outcome harvesting process has made us feel that we are part and parcel of the project from beginning to end. It is very inclusive.”

- A grandmother member of an SHG.

Evaluation outcomes

Several outcomes were harvested from the SHG approach:

- Grandmothers and young women in Bindura and Zvimba districts developed self-reliance: vulnerable women were supported to create community banks that allowed them to save, borrow and lend to each other, enabling them to create small businesses, thereby supporting themselves and their families.
- There was a shift in cultural narratives around gender norms: women participants of SHGs changed from having solely domestic roles to becoming contributors to the family finances and community development projects, which impacted gender norms in their communities.
- Government stakeholders identified SHGs as having a community development role in alleviating poverty and strengthening family systems; as such the SHG model has been replicated across districts.

The Ministry of Women Affairs, Community and Small and Medium Enterprises, a collaborator in the SHG project, has adopted the SHG approach as one of its approaches to empower women, acknowledging its role in alleviating poverty and strengthening family systems.

There has been a positive impact on levels of gender-based violence amongst SHG families due to the shifting of women’s roles; districts reported that as a result of the work of SHGs, cases of sexual and gender-based violence decreased by 65%.

Lessons learnt

FOST recognises the value of embedding outcome harvesting into its working cycles and has incorporated its usage organisationally from the project planning stage through to impact assessment. At the end of annual work cycles FOST will use outcome harvesting to reflect on its programmes. FOST values the wide participation of project beneficiaries and organisational staff which this tool enables.

1. https://www.changemakersforchildren.community/system/files/2023-03/ENGLISH%20-%20Toolkit%20for%20participatory%20evaluation%20of%20practice_0.pdf



Conclusion

FOST's SHG approach supported vulnerable women to develop self-reliance through a range of community-development initiatives. The participatory evaluation highlighted the important community development role that SHGs have had in alleviating poverty and strengthening family systems. It also demonstrated the positive impact of SHGs on shifting gender norms and cultural narratives around the role of women.

Through this experience FOST sees great value in inviting the wide participation of project beneficiaries and organisational staff and as such plans to incorporate Outcome Harvesting across its working cycles.

“It has allowed us to reflect back and realise some of the achievements and impact that the project indirectly achieved, such as prevention of gender-based violence and conflict resolution.”

- A Government District Stakeholder

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