



VfD Evidence in Agroecology outcomes in VSO Programmes 2022-23

- A Global Synthesis



Acknowledgement

This study has been led by Ashish Srivastava, Evaluation and Learning Specialist of VSO. We acknowledge the support provided by respective country teams of VSO, research volunteers and communities in gathering the field data, engaging in focus group discussions, and providing analytical insights.

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Disclaimer

Views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect UK Government's official policies.

Introduction

VSO defines Agroecology as a climate resilient farming approach which includes locally appropriate practices and leads to greater resilience. It is more than a set of techniques; Agroecology is also a movement of smallholder food producers. It emphasizes local economies and food systems which means shorter supply chains. It will make our food system more robust against extreme climate change-fueled weather and other shocks, such as the instability that we are now witnessing considering the war.

The Resilient Livelihoods practice area has designed and delivered agroecology interventions in projects across Asia and Africa since 2021.

There is scope for using agroecology as an integrated programming but for that to be achieved, there is a need to develop organizational learning on this, particularly the key good practices and challenges. Ultimately, these learnings would help VSO in developing capacity among staff and volunteers, infusing the VFD methodology in the process, and would ensure that agroecology is well designed contributing to the various thematic and overall VFD outcomes.

A learning study was conducted on exploring models of Agroecology interventions in VSO Programs to gauge knowledge on the key highlights, successes and challenges encountered by the primary actors and project teams. The study was conducted in Bangladesh, Kenya, Nepal and Zimbabwe where the Resilient Livelihoods Practice Area has designed and delivered Agroecology programs.

Objectives:

The case study will be conducted to document the process and results of the agroecology implementation across 4 project sites in Nepal, Bangladesh, Kenya and Zimbabwe. This study will help us to see how outcomes are being achieved and for who. the study will also gather learning of major challenges faced and recommendations from the primary actors and stakeholders.

More specifically the study will seek:

- To assess the potential of agroecology interventions as an approach for climate just food systems, it's effect on current knowledge and practices of the primary actors
- To develop an organizational understanding of different operational approaches followed to arrive at elements of 'a model' implementation approach that can be advocated for replication
- To identify the key challenges faced by the primary actors and recommendations for course correction

Learning Questions

The key focus of the case study would be to assess learning based on the evidencing logic while determining the key processes, results, and challenges of the agroecology interventions in VSO livelihood programs.

The key learning questions would be:

1. How is the agroecology program bringing about change in the climate just food systems ecology?
2. How is VSO's agroecology relevant and useful to the primary actors?
3. What have been the key outcomes of the interventions and for whom?
4. What were the key operational elements of each of these approaches and how they relate to VfD pathways and primary actor centric engagement of VSO?

To explore the learning around VfD pathways the following guiding questions would be used:

VfD Pathways	Learning questions
Social Inclusion & Gender	<i>Criteria and tools used for primary actor identification into the project and intentional efforts towards inclusion. Efforts of gender mainstreaming both in project delivery, teaching-learning process and related learning engagements</i>
Accountability	<i>How agency of primary actors (parents/care giver) sought to be built to engage with duty bearers to establish accountability in the context of fragility and conflict?</i>
Resilience	<i>How did the project sought to build resilience among primary actors as well as institutional structures that intend to deliver services (especially in the context of fragility and conflict)</i>
Engagement Partnership & Leadership	<i>How the project envisaged engagement and leadership of primary actors? What have been the efforts to build leadership and what have been the results?</i>
Volunteering	<i>What is the contribution of the volunteers to observed and emerging outcomes?</i>
Safeguarding	<i>How did the project address abuse, discrimination, neglect amongst the primary actors?</i>
Policy & Advocacy	<i>Were there any efforts to influence policy change in support marginalized groups through this project?</i>

Methodology

The study was based on the review of project documents as well as primary data collected from various respondents in identified countries. Selection of countries was undertaken in consultation with the practice area team. VSO evidence principles were followed while designing the methodology of the study.

Information was gathered from the primary actors and implementers on various parameters using participatory tools. The study was broadly qualitative in nature and based on primary actor's perceptions, their experiences, and recommendations. FGDs and KIs formed the core of data collection tools and were complimented by other participatory methods like ranking and scoring, battery tool and participatory mapping.

Data quality and objectivity of opinions has been maintained through following a uniform protocol for data collection across locations as well as use of experienced field researchers. By focusing on quality and interacting with few but diverse stakeholders, rigor and integrity of data collection will be maintained.

Sampling Framework: Where possible, the study selected respondents across the primary actor categories; youth, women, men, people with disabilities and any other groups. There was also representation of the various age groups that VSO reports against and which are relevant to the assessment. All key actors and stakeholders targeted by the intervention were engaged in the exercise including volunteers, partners, and project staff.

Details of the sample interviewed:

Country	FGD with primary actor groups	KIs with stakeholders	KIs with partners	FGDs / KIs with volunteers
Bangladesh	5	2	2	2
Kenya	4	2	2	1
Nepal	2	1	1	1
Zimbabwe	6	3	2	2
Total	17	8	7	6

Findings

Agroecology is an agricultural practice which combines traditional knowledge with modern technology to create sustainable production systems that maintain the health of soil and aquatic ecosystems while providing long-term benefits for farmers. It focuses on ways to reduce environmental damage, improve resilience in food supply networks, increase farmer incomes, enhance soils' productivity as well as their ability to conserve resources over time.

VSO's Resilient Livelihoods Practice Area Team has identified this approach as a key part of its global programs because it builds upon existing farming systems by giving regional farmers access to the latest research and best practices. Additionally, agroecological techniques not only have advantages in terms of output but also allow for increased income potential from local markets through diversification into fruits and vegetables or other crops such as medicinal herbs. By implementing these principles across its program areas worldwide, VSO seeks to enable sources of secure nutrition, build more equitable livelihood pathways that respect nature conservation and empower communities left vulnerable by climate change.

Agroecology is an integral part of VSO's global livelihood portfolio which seeks to improve the lives of individuals, communities, and societies in need. Through its people-centered design and delivery approach, it helps build agency among those affected by climate change, enabling them to adopt safe food systems that are resilient to fluctuations in weather patterns. Despite only having been implemented since 2021, there have already been positive outcomes reported from some projects - though much more work needs to be done before agroecological strategies can truly make a difference.

The two agroecology projects in Bangladesh deliver interventions to different groups of people. The first project works with women farmers from the Ramu Upzilla region, while the second is integrated into the EiE program and works with vulnerable women from local host communities.

In Nepal, VSO's Agroecology interventions were piloted through the PRAYAS (Promoting Inclusive Resilience and Accountability through Youth Association Strengthening) project. The goal of the program is to strengthen collective action amongst youth and create accountability between citizens and duty bearers to establish increased resilience within communities.

In Kenya, the agroecology interventions are a part of the VfD (Volunteering for Development) program which has incorporated agroecology into approaches to both combatting and adapting to climate change as well as an integral component of addressing food security challenges.

In Zimbabwe, agroecology interventions have been a part of the SPARC (Safe Peaceful And Resilience Communities) that aims to to enhance farmer to farmer learnings and promoting horizontal advocacy.

The study observed the various processes involved in the agroecology interventions and based on the data; an evidence-based process design is interpreted as below:

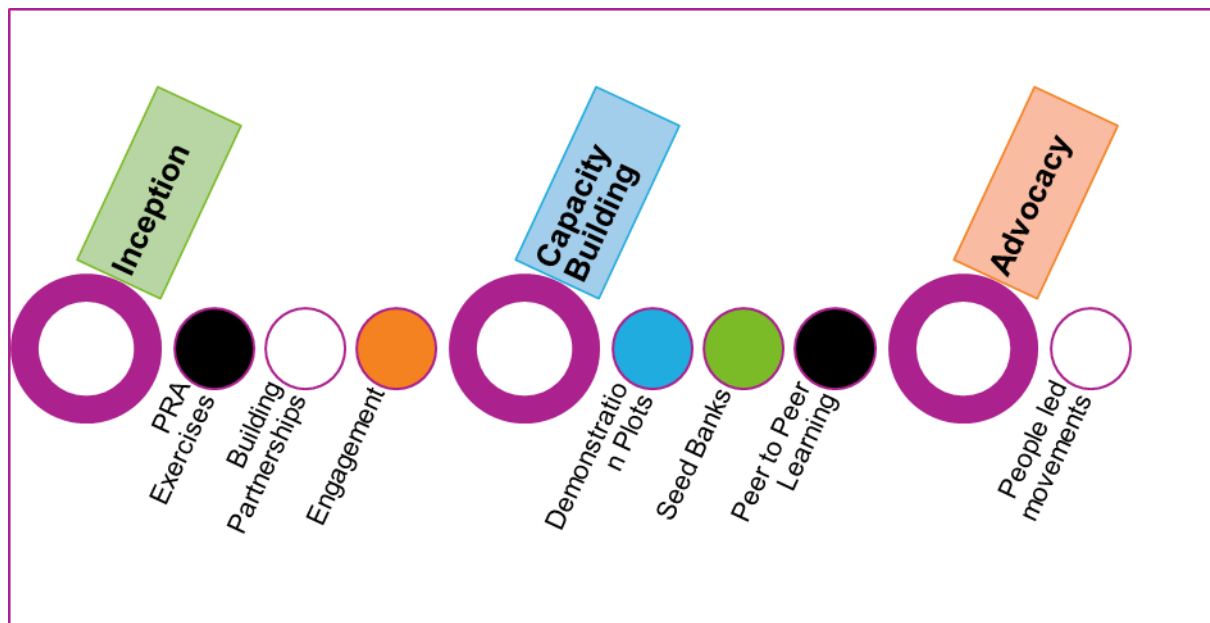


Figure 1: Evidence based design.

Based on the review of project documents and discussion with project staff, partners and volunteers, it seems like the agroecology interventions are designed in three broad categories:

1. Inception stage – During this stage VSO and partner staff and volunteers conduct a PRA exercise to identify and select the primary actors and their groups for this project. Through this exercise the focus is to reach out to women and youth as per VSO’s primary actor criteria. Also, during this stage partnerships are formed with training and input providers and working relationships established with government stakeholders.
2. Capacity building stage – during this stage various capacity building activities are conducted which include trainings on safe and sustainable agricultural practices provided by various govt and non govt stakeholders. During this stage demonstration plots are developed by the primary actors under the guidance of the technical experts. These plots are also used for educating the farmers regarding various practices. In Kenya and Zimbabwe farmer field schools are developed that promote peer to peer learning.
3. Advocacy stage – During this stage the primary actors conduct dialogues with the government stakeholders seeking support regarding their issues. This process facilitates the environment for developing farmer friendly policies. The examples of Nepal and Zimbabwe where primary actors successfully engaged and influenced government can be seen as a result of this stage.

Key results:

Improved Knowledge on Safe and Sustainable Farming practices

During the FGDs, the study investigated how the respondents felt about the change in their farming practices. About **90% (128/142)** respondents mentioned that they have shifted to the farming practices they have learnt in trainings through the projects run by VSO in their villages. The respondents attribute these changes to two major interventions; a) Trainings provided by various govt & non-govt experts and b) Demonstration Plots.

“Now I know how to produce safe food through vermi compost. Also, I would like to mention that due to maintain the process in food production I have a good food production this year.”

- FGD Respondent from Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh

Capacity building:

The data collected during the study suggests that the community training and capacity building activities has potentially increased adoption and shift from conventional production of food to agroecological systems. These practices include agroforestry, polyculture (mixed farming), crop rotation and rearing of livestock in sustainable amounts. The trainings also offered an avenue for linking women smallholder farmers to incubation and mentorship opportunities in agroecological innovations.

“The farmer groups are using local wastes using it as organic fertilizer, there is two good things here, one is that this is climate resilience, and another is they are saving their cost of buying the inorganic fertilizer which could be used to buy seeds.”

(Project Staff, Agroecology project, Nepal.

Demonstration Plots and peer to peer learning (FFS):

Farmers worked on a demonstration plot after receiving training in agricultural practices Women' Groups were instructed and motivated to alter the pattern of the crops, use of compost manure, vegetable production and balancing the nutritious food in their kitchen. Farmers groups coordinated with the local government to reduce the challenges of the agroecological practices.

Demonstration plots are an important tool used in farmer field schools in both Kenya and Zimbabwe. These plots provide a practical education environment for farmers to learn about sustainable agricultural practices through observation, direct instruction from experts, and collaboration with other participants. The demonstration plots offer hands-on learning opportunities that allow farmers to ask questions and compare differing methods of cultivation.

At the same time, it also serves as a platform for peer-to-peer knowledge exchange where experienced farmers can share their best farming techniques among

themselves while continuously adapting to new ideas suggested by others. This way they can carry out testing directly on their farms without costly experimental trials leading to improved overall yields due to more informed decision making skills.

“Our farmer's group has been proactively working on the agroecological demonstration plot. We work with a team spirit and learn from each other. Even during materials distribution, we prioritize needful ones, instead of complaints and disputes. We have been actively involved in planning activities until their execution collaboratively.”

- FGD respondents from Basghari, Surkhet, Nepal

Influencing Policy and Farmer led advocacy for food rights -

In order to make sure the needs of primary actors are met in all four countries, there is a concerted effort by VSO and other partner NGOs to communicate with relevant government departments. Through dialogue between civil society organizations and government administrations, they aim to raise community issues that need addressing as well as ensure an agreeable policy environment for improved service delivery. The study found two good examples in Nepal and Zimbabwe.

In Nepal, VSO partnered with NFGF Nepal for increasing engagement in policy advocacy at federal, provincial, and local government level. As part of this support, NFGF facilitated to develop the draft of RtF Policy at 4 local levels from Karnali and Madhesh province. Similarly, NFGF continued policy advocacy with Karnali and Madhesh province government for the preparation of RtF Policy. As a result, the 4 LGs have prepared the RtF Policy in this period and Karnali province has endorsed both RtF act and Policy.

This was done by VSO through providing supporting for organizing interaction events, bilateral discussion between farmers and local governments, advocacy through media, developing sample policy document as a reference for LGs, mobilizing farmer activists and volunteers for meeting with farmers for issue collection and sharing those issues during policy formulation workshops, organizing validation workshops of draft policy, and lobbying for endorsement of the prepared policy document.

In Zimbabwe, Government services were pronounced to be accessible especially AGRITEX, Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MOPSE), Ministry of Health and Child Welfare, and the ZRP as well as the local government. The local government attends meetings and trainings in support of the project in both provinces and ensures that the work VSO and partner organizations complement government efforts, like supporting the National Development Strategy (NDS), a Government of Zimbabwe policy with a vision of marching towards achieving an upper middle-income society by 2030.

There is advocacy from pressure group to have agroecology to be more widely spoken about. Government has realized that farmers need to grow crops that were grown by forefathers, Gov even encourages growing more pulses and nutritious crops. Policy is underway.

- Agriculture Extension Officer, Zimbabwe

Improved Harvest and Income

Though it is a bit early but there are signs of increase in income from the sales of vegetables in the study area. The agroecological activity has supported community people to bring changes in their traditional agricultural practices. Farmers have reported that they could harvest better crops even without the use of chemical fertilizers.

About **83% (119/142)** respondents mentioned that they had harvested better quality crops than earlier. Agroecological activities have enabled farmers to make a shift from traditional agricultural practices towards more sustainable, environmentally friendly alternatives. Crop yields have improved as they are no longer dependent on chemical fertilizers. Community members report greater satisfaction with the quality of their harvests and an overall decrease in pest infestations. Farmers have also realized cost savings since they do not need to purchase expensive chemicals or pesticides for use in their fields anymore. The adoption of agroecological systems has helped community people become self-sufficient and improve food security while managing natural resources sustainably and protecting their environment at the same time.

“Before intervention we were practicing traditional ways of farming and were using chemical insecticides, pesticides, and urea as per needs. But after the intervention, we are using organic vermicompost fertilizers, which have in fact yielded better harvest, and have been selling surplus products in the market too.”

- FGD respondent from Lekhibesi, Surkhet, Nepal

“I was a truck driver, this is a hard job, and my body fitness was not permitted as the driver. I joined the VSO Safe Food Promotion project in 2021. I received skill-building training and produced vermicompost. I produced saplings of papaya, tomato, chili, and capsicum. I also grew high-yielding and high-value vegetables like capsicum, latus leaf, broccoli, tomato, and chili. I grew different vegetables. I always used agroecology techniques like the mulching method for saving water, Vermicompost, ClyBio, and so on.

- Monijur Alam, a FGD respondent from Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

Improved Nutritional awareness and consumption

As a part of VSO's planned interventions, the project staffs made the primary actors aware on the value of safe food production and consumption. This helped the community relate with the ongoing health and nutrition awareness programs in their areas. In Zimbabwe, the women in the FGDs mention that it has become easier for them to provide balanced diets as they are now able to cultivate a variety of vegetables and grains.

Agroecology, to be specific gave farmers a better living condition with them now having a variety of vegetables and grain for a balanced diet.

- FGD respondent from Ward 22, Chimanimani, Zimbabwe

About **71% (101/142)** respondents mentioned that they have now more options of vegetables and grains to cultivate and consume. The respondents found that the information they received in their trainings allowed them to have more options when it comes to growing and consuming food. Before, they had limited knowledge of what vegetables and grains could be grown locally; however now with updated techniques used for farming, crops like ones that were previously unfamiliar have become available. They can now plant a greater variety and enjoy more nutritional benefits at home by expanding their diet beyond local dietary staples.

"This information has been helpful because we are practicing good hygiene and also our children are eating nutritious food. There is a shift now from modern (fast food) to more traditional (vegetables, fish, grain) foods."

- FGD respondent from Makueni county, Kenya

Learning on VfD methodology – integration, pathways, and relational volunteering

The essence of VfD in programming means improving the quality of life of the primary actors through the contribution of pathways, relational volunteering and a people centred approach thereby building their voice and agency.

Social Inclusion and Gender:

VSO's agroecology interventions involved a variety of activities to improve women's and marginalized groups' economic and food security. It encouraged more women to become decision makers, provided agricultural support for increased income generation, improved access to healthy foods through knowledge-sharing about safe practices related to hygiene and food production, as well as contributing towards better health outcomes for the whole family by educating them on proper nutrition.

“We are targeting women and being able to work with them. They are most affected with issues of climate change”

- Agri Extension Officer, Makueni county, Kenya

During the Key Informant Interviews (KII's) with partners, it was confirmed that both government stakeholders and VSO have a shared focus on working with women farmers. Furthermore, the government stakeholders expressed their appreciation of this emphasis from VSO.

“The project reached out to two Dalit communities, Birendranagar and Bheriganga municipalities in the Surkhet district.” we are working in the remote part of the local government where there are marginalized communities. And we are working with women and marginalized people. Most group members are female. Most participants in the project events are also women.”

- Chairperson of the NFGF, Nepal

Social Accountability:

The government has implemented various policies and initiatives, such as training workshops for community members on sustainable agricultural practices, the installation of expenditure billboards for nutritional garden plot development to promote transparency and accountability, and the development of local acts on right to food. All these measures aim to support sustaining agroecological practices.

Working in collaboration with local government officials has enabled research teams to identify agroecological innovations, challenges faced by farmers and other stakeholders on the ground. Furthermore, it has allowed these strategies employed by various players to be assessed over time through periodic visits for sustainability checks.

The meetings that are done in the project are supported by the government officials, for example, in Zimbabwe, the project inception meeting was graced by three DDC members from three districts in the country, two from Masvingo and one from Manicaland provinces. Working with government officers helps farmers to air their views and advocate for the strengthening and support of agroecology practices.

Resilience:

The findings from the FGDs revealed that respondents have increased their environmental awareness and knowledge, specifically on the negative effects of chemicals like fertilizers and pesticides. The training sessions they attended contributed a great deal to this new level of comprehension. VSO has worked at the systems level to improve the responsiveness and support towards the farmers. Conducting a DRR assessment and Plan is a part of the projects that focus on Agroecology in VSO.

“We now know the dangers of chemicals and pesticides and the harm to the environment. We now only use organic fertilizer and vermi compost that we learned at the demonstration plots.

- FGD respondent from Surkhet, Nepal

In Zimbabwe, the women are now better prepared to face disasters. Farmers attested to having contingency plans that enable them to cope with disasters thereby making the project sustainable. The farmers claim to be the initiators of the agroecology project and those that have partnered them have found them at an advanced stage, hence beyond the project span and in case of disasters, they are now resilient. Others indicated that because of the knowledge that they have through trainings and disaster management plans and through setting up structures such as seed banks, they will continue with the practices.

VSO and their partner, NFGF (National Farmers Group Federation) in Nepal, have facilitated conversations with local government in Nepal to help develop a Local Disaster Climate Resilience Plan. This plan is intended to support with responding to natural disasters such as flooding, or droughts caused by climate change. Additionally, through this dialogue process, primary actors are being included in the creation of strategies for improving resilience from potential catastrophes brought on by worsening environmental conditions.

“After the development of disaster plans in VSO project areas, other municipalities has also prepared (LDCRP) Local Disaster Climate Resilience Plan, and now are working to create inclusive services to the public.”

- NFGF representative, Nepal.

Evidence on Relational Volunteering

The group members mention NVs and IVs provided technical consultation to beneficiaries in implementing their livelihood options, facilitated training, assisted in saving group formation/constitution development and handholding support. They said that regular communication and consultation went well, and they are appreciative of the role of volunteers during their placement. However, the placements should have been for longer durations.

The volunteers play an important role. Pushing for climate change issues is a calling. VSO volunteers have been helping on the sensitization forums on these issues. They have been active on tree planting”.

- Assistant Director, Department of Environment, Natural Resources mining and climate change, Makeni County, Kenya

Many participants felt that the work carried out by the volunteers has led to better access to local services as people are now better informed about what services are available and relationships between government stakeholders and the community has improved.

Key learning

VSO's agroecology interventions have helped empower rural communities by allowing them to use sustainable production methods that increase crop yields even without relying on chemical fertilizers. Farmers have observed better harvest outcomes, resulting in increased income and improved quality of life for the people involved.

As per the study respondents these interventions have improved the lives of smallholder farmers, particularly women and marginalized groups by increasing their income and food security. This has been done by enabling greater female participation in decision-making, creating additional income opportunities for increased economic security, as well as promoting safe food practices and hygiene to enhance nutrition outcomes for women and children.

When communities manage the farmer-to-farmer learning process, they can draw on each other's knowledge to further their development. This is done through peer reflection and support which allows them to assess progress and identify ways of improving it. By making decisions together in a collective effort, the community can ensure greater success in taking agricultural development initiatives to the next level.

In Kenya, the food systems research and stakeholder dialogues brought out key asks to governments to adopt agroecological practices in development planning and implementation. Agroecology has proven to positively impact the education pathways, pathways for resilience, pathways for health and pathways for climate change and environment. This conversation has been escalating across county governments, Regional Economic Communities, National Government, Private sector, Farmers, Fisher folk & Livestock communities, Finance institutions, Academia, Civil Society, Development partners and UN agencies in Kenya.

Way forward

To improve the effects of agroecological practises supported by VSO, respondents shared various recommendations for future improvement. These include further increasing community awareness on organic fertiliser and agroecological practises, establishing more nutritional gardens at a group level, and involving other members of local civil society organisations in the implementation process. Additionally, they emphasised that there should be greater financial support from international donors and more long-term investments towards sustainable agricultural production systems in developing countries.

To help create market linkages for women farmers and improve consumer awareness, it is suggested to form partnerships with other organizations that have similar objectives. Through such collaborations, the quality of produce from female farmers can be improved while at the same time giving them access to larger markets where they can get better returns on their crops. The partnership could also provide a platform to spread information related to safe food production practices which would enable customers make educated choices when buying goods in the market.

The development of agricultural curricula incorporating food systems and innovative climate change responses into the Technical Vocational Education & Training (Vocational Training Colleges/Institutes) would provide a great opportunity to equip students with relevant knowledge, skills, and resources in a practical setting. It could also help raise expertise within various industries concerning strategies that reduce waste from inefficient processes while boosting quality yields.

Furthermore, this will enable training providers to facilitate linkages between businesses, research institutes, government departments, etc., thus fostering collaboration across disciplines to create more effective approaches towards building localised solutions around the greater challenge of climate change through responsible farming methods and production outputs.

Women in Agroecology



VSO works with rural and marginalized women in the remote and climate affected regions in Asia and Africa. Out of our overall outreach in the last 5 years, over 50% have been women. The Resilient Livelihoods practice area in VSO has designed and delivered agroecology interventions in projects across Asia and Africa since 2021.

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Key Findings

The women farmers in the FGD described the process as a preliminary consultation was done with the women and marginalized farmers' groups and officials of local government for exploring suitable farmer groups. The farmers' groups are oriented on establishing the demonstration plot, nature of soil and land, germination of seedlings, viability, and use of biodegradable wastes, use of compost manure, and proper utilization of grey water.

In the study countries, women are adapting to variations in weather and environmental changes. The collective groups embarked on the construction of water pans; water harvesting and storage; conservation agriculture; sack gardens at the household level; organic farming innovation; early planting; crop diversification; carbon footprint tree planting campaign and individual tree planting exercises at a family level to increase forest cover; establishment of high-value tree nurseries; advocating for governments to implement policies that reduce carbon pollution, support climate-smart agriculture and curb deforestation.

An example is the Mitsu Women Group (Matsangoni). This is a women group made up of intergenerational members with a largescale tree nursery. It started as a merry-go round. It is

comprised of widows and elderly from the community of Matsangoni, Kilifi County. Each member is delegated duties and seedling rows to tend to (protect and care for the seedlings). They have purchased their own farm where they carry out tree nursery initiative. The current valuation of the seedlings on the farm is Ksh. 300,000. They sell to the community and institutions around. The revenue is channeled to the group's bank account. They have a formula of sharing the profits from the sales.



Figure 2: Members of Mitsu Women Group (Matsangoni) in Kilifi County

Similar groups in Nepal, Bangladesh and Zimbabwe have been training community members on environmental conservation and the establishment of nurseries and seed banks. Because of this, there is a lot of intergenerational knowledge transfer and indigenous knowledge use to adapt to impacts of climate change. Through these they have assisted, four other youth and women groups establish successful tree nurseries and seed banks across the project locations.

Some key highlights:

- **92% (82/88)** women mentioned that they have shifted to safe and sustainable farming practices because of the trainings received from VSO.
- **86% (76/88)** women mentioned that they had harvested better quality crops than earlier.
- **78% (69/88)** women mentioned that they have now more options of vegetables and grains to cultivate and consume.

What VSO's women say:

<p>“Now I know how to produce safe food through vermi compost. Also, I would like to</p>	<p>Before intervention we were practicing traditional ways of farming and were using</p>	<p>“This information has been helpful because we are practicing good hygiene and</p>
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- FGD Respondent from Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh

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