



# The Impact of Ebola Virus Disease on Village Savings and Loans Associations Montserrado, Margibi, Bong and Lofa Counties



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## ABSTRACT

*Women comprise over 90 % of VSLA membership.*

*13,000 groups working in Savings and loans initiatives such as SUSU, Rural Women and VSLAs spread over 15 counties;*

700 groups trained in VSLAs methodology. 12,300 groups formed not yet trained in methodology.

21,000 members. 105,000 indirect beneficiaries

85% of VSLA in agriculture production      15% VSLA traders in agriculture products

The outbreak and subsequent spread of the ebola virus disease had catastrophic effects on the income generating capacities of Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA) members throughout Liberia. The impacts were multidimensional and intense and have occasioned persistent decline in the service delivery of VSLAs in regard to their financial, economic, and social responsibilities.

Of the 63 VSLA groups surveyed, more than 95% of groups reported high level of absenteeism at weekly meetings, a situation which had serious financial implication for share purchases, loan repayment and by extension, the capacity to disburse loans during the second and third quarters of 2014. The net impact of these developments was that VSLA lock boxes were empty with no investment funds for loans disbursement. Equally troubling was the concern that persistent high level of absenteeism by members would have the propensity to undermine the social cohesion, self-confidence, community recognition, and independence developed over the years by members participating in VSLA activities. All indications however registered that the commitment of VSLA members to their groups remained strong and unwavering.

From the assessment, it was found that over 90% of VSLA members were indebted to their respective groups with no immediate prospects for payment or rescheduling of payments in sight. This situation in every respect was the direct result of members' inability to undertake meaningful income generating activities during the 2014 cropping season.

On the prospects for resuming business activities for the 2015 annual cycle, the below indicators capture the challenges that must be addressed. The challenges to a large extent have resulted from the inability of VSLAs to conduct normal income generating activities for the most part of the 2014 business cycle. Please note the following:

- 100% VSLAs reported no share contributions made by members since July due to suspension of VSLA activities occasioned by the outbreak and spread of EVD epidemic;
- Over 90% of VSLAs reported zero cash balance in lock box to meet members demand for loans as cash received is immediately disbursed to meet loan demands;
- More than 95% of VSLAs reported that their respective loan portfolios were at risk with no clear prospects of recovering past due obligations;
- 100% VSLAs reported that end of cycle ceremonies and the accompanying payout were in jeopardy of not occurring for the 2014 period; and hence

- Recapitalizing VSLAs investment account from members' own share contributions and loan repayment for the 2015 cycle was reported as a major challenge by all members (100% membership); and
- It would take approximately 2 business cycles, a period equivalent to 2 years of normal business activities to resume service delivery with members own contributions.

The ebola virus has fractured families, shredded communities, disrupted production activities, but more significantly, it has exposed the vulnerability and fragility of the VSLA network design and methodology in just matter of months. During the past six (6) years of VSLA operation in Liberia however, two elements are clearly evident. On the one hand, VSLA design and methodology have proven vulnerable to shocks. On the other hand it has however been positively transformational in furthering the social, economic, financial and political status of Liberian women.

As such, there is need for urgent interventions to arrest further erosion in the gains acquired by Liberian women through participation in their respective VSLA groups. Quite sadly, more than 60% of VSLA members interviewed in Lofa, Bong and Margibi Counties reported heightened concerns for the gradual erosion of their VSLA perceived privileged status. That concern resonated with all VSLA members. Positive gains that are reportedly at risk of being eroded include:

- Increased self-efficacy and ability to make decisions
- New skills, and changes in business practices
- Increased bargaining power
- Access to new markets
- Increased control of household resources
- Increased profits
- Increased financial independence and
- Improved livelihoods

The above findings call for urgent action and suggest that it is of moral imperatives that the international community (FAO) intervenes appropriately to arrest any further decline in the hard earned financial and social independence of Liberian women within the VSLA network. The aspirations of all VSLA members in realizing its dream in the years ahead;" from zero to hero".

Key: (700 groups trained in VSLA methodology) (30 members per group) (average 5 persons per household) = 105,000 indirect beneficiaries adversely affected by EVD.

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<b>ABBREVIATION</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
<b>CARE</b>	Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere
<b>EVD</b>	Ebola Virus Disease
<b>LISGIS</b>	Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services
<b>LOWAGPD</b>	Lofa Women for Agriculture Processing for Peace and Development
<b>PRS</b>	Poverty Reduction Strategy
<b>VODWOPED</b>	Voinjama District Women for Peace and Development
<b>VS&amp;LAs</b>	Village Savings and Loan Associations
<b>WOFPD</b>	Women Organization for Peace and Development
<b>ZOA</b>	Zionist Organization of America

## **1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In its six (6) years of existence, the number of Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) increased significantly. Total membership rose from 144 in 2009 to an estimate membership of 5,000 in September 2014, an increase of over 3,000 percent. The average membership per group is 30, with women comprising 99 percent of the membership.

The original share contribution of the VSLAs was L\$100 (est. USD 1.25) paid at every meeting. Fifty two per cent of the groups sampled had retained that, while 48 per cent had increased share contribution to L\$200, L\$300, L\$400 and L\$500 (est. USD 6) depending on their capacities. In order to understand the impact of the Ebola outbreak, the survey compared the collective share value of the 63 VSLAs for the period January to September 2013 which amounted to LD\$105,840,000 (est. USD 1.25 million) with 2014 (see below). On average, each VSLA member purchased 5 shares at L\$250 each (est. USD 3) per week/meeting. This amounted to L\$1,250 monthly share purchased; an amount adequate to fund an economically viable small scale business venture, but some members waited longer to get higher amounts.

During the 2014 period however, cumulative share value for the 63 VSLAs surveyed dropped to only LD\$68,922,000 (est. USD 850,000). This amount represented 34% drop in the total contributions (share value purchased). This drop in share purchased meant that members could not access loans of significant amount due to this reduction in shares and capital available for lending. On average each member purchased 3 shares at L\$250 per week amounting to L\$750 monthly share purchased compared to the L\$1,250 last year for the same period. The downward trend in share purchased was associated with progressively increased absenteeism by members from meetings and an increasing rate of loan delinquency. This downward trend in share purchases rendered (for the first time since 2009) VSLAs illiquid and unable to raise funds from members share contributions to meet loan requests of members. To a large extent, the reason given for increased absenteeism from meetings was the Ebola epidemic outbreak and the accompanying restrictions placed on public meetings and gatherings.

The overall impact of these adverse developments was the inability of all VSLA to raise funds to support disbursements of loans to members in amounts and quantity demanded. As a consequence of the downward trends in activities, the National Apex body took an administrative decision to suspend all VSLAs activities as of September 2014. The suspension on VSLA activities meant, share purchases were discontinued, loan repayment suspended, hence all loans disbursed could be classified as inactive loans

upon resumption of regular activities. It is interesting to note that the decision to declare the loan portfolio of VSLAs at risk of default was based the fact that rural communities suffer from income poverty, living below the universally established poverty line of US\$1/day. Hence the loss of VSLA support to members to conduct business was assessed to have worsened the capacity of members to provide food and medical for their respective families and at the same time finance obligations to their VSLAs during the EVD outbreak.

This impact of the EVD outbreak was additionally manifested in deterioration in the living standards and quality of life of the VSLA members, with most having income generating activities halted and living with no income to support a decent standard of living. A more compelling reason given for the suspension of loan repayments by the VSLA leadership was the recognition that Income-generating opportunities in rural Liberia was limited, the economic base of the sector being characteristically narrowed, widespread disruption of local farming and trading systems, loss of personal assets and a breakdown in social capital. Moreover, due the shock related to the EVD outbreak and the current lack of cash in rural households, it was expected that the downward trend in the purchase of shares and distribution of loans will further decrease in 2015 unless tailored financial support is provided to the VSLAs.

A major positive development associated with the decision to suspend VSLA activities however was the intent of preventing members from accumulating interest charges (10 percent monthly) on loans that would become unsustainable by progressively increasing their indebtedness to the groups. Available data from the survey indicated that members of VSLAs have remained attached to their respective organizations even during this period of no activity and the EVD crisis. This attachment in large part reflects the level of the financial benefits derived from membership. All across the spectrum of members (mostly women) surveyed, women spoke of improvements in their livelihoods and their enhanced status in the household decision making and community recognition since joining the VSLA network. Another major reason expressed for joining a group was the possibility of having loans on a regular basis to undertake year round business activities as opposed to seasonal loans.

Besides the financial and economic reasons given by members for their attachment to their respectively VSLAs, it was evident that the groups were seen as a haven for psychosocial support for troubled group members during the EVD crisis. In large part, VSLA group members' commitment to each other was



unquestionably strong which in effect enhanced the level of social cohesion within the groups, the communities and amongst the VSLA network at large.

In general, loans requested by members were used to finance activities in this order of priority:

- Small business expenditures such as dry goods purchases for retail sale;
- Health
- Education and
- Agriculture (vegetable production)

Assistance to family members was mentioned as the third priority area of expenditure replacing education as all academic institutions were ordered closed during the EVD outbreak.

At end of cycle payout, approximately 90 percent of members mentioned:

- Land preparation and plot size increases;
- Household assets (radios, cooking utensils, etc.); followed by
- Health.

In general, VSLA members prior to and during the crisis mentioned productive economic/business activities as their highest priority for use of both loans and end of cycle cash payout.

The spread of the EVD took a toll on the all sectors of the economy paralyzing economic and business activities for the vast majority of rural woman whose livelihoods depend on access to loans from their VSLA networks. For many members, farming activities were curtailed as restrictions were placed on people gathering during the agricultural season. For members who purchase agriculture products at local rural markets for sale in urban centers restrictions on movement of people and goods significantly disrupted their enterprise. Border closure with Guinea, Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast prevented cross border trade hence loss of income generating activities. As a consequence, VSLA members' capacity to repay outstanding loans disbursed to them during the 2014 operating cycle remains uncertain. Members with cash on hand which have been expended for consumption and other household related purposes have limited their possibilities to generate income to repay their obligations.

Recapitalization of VSLA loanable funds from members own contributions will be a major challenge for all members for the 2015 operating cycle. This forecast is premised on the continued sporadic outbreaks and spread of the EVD throughout 2014 coupled with the persistent decline in members' business activities due to the lack of cash. The inability to recover loans from indebted members coupled with members' lack of capacity to restart purchases of share contributions suggest that end of cycle payout for 2014 will not be

possible and the resuming of the 2015 contribution cycle may also be jeopardized if not supported by outside infusion of funds.

Against this backdrop, there is need for urgent assistance to revitalize VSLAs using a multi-dimensional assistance approach through cash transfer related programs which would ideally be conditioned by commitment of VSLA members to promote EVD awareness, increase food or seed production, improve storage facilities and/or post-harvest handling. These activities will be determined according to specific needs and capacities of local population and context. What is clear, the EVD outbreak did expose the level of vulnerability of the VSLA network in Liberia. The dependence on own contribution singularly as a source of funds for lending is a fundamental weakness in the VSLA design in regard to withstanding shocks. On the issue of cash transfer related program to assist in VSLA recapitalization, it may be prudent to invite the participation of FAO in providing support for a second account (contingency fund) that could be used to absorb shortfalls in loanable resources which results from shocks (manmade or natural). The replenishment of such account will have to be well designed with members to ensure sustainability of this account. The above recommendation does not preclude the use of traditional assistance arrangements which could take the form of:

- Ebola Virus Disease awareness through village based women associations,
- Improve access to food and commodities through conditional cash transfers,
- Increase food and seed production during the dry season in lowlands,
- Improve agro-processing at community level to facilitate rapid added value for producers,
- Encourage poultry and small livestock (guinea pigs to be considered) production to limit risk of bush meat consume and maintain animal protein intake, especially for children
- Promote the establishment of a contingency fund within the VSLA groups to improve financial and livelihood resilience respectively for the group and members.

## **2.0 Introduction**

Women play a pivotal role in the Liberian economy in both the formal and informal sectors. The Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS) in the Core Welfare Indicator Questionnaires (CWIQ, 2007) Report indicated that 54% of the farm labor force (formal and informal) comprises women with approximately 31% of all households headed by women. Moreover, conditioned by culture and social norms women are saddled with the tasks of childcare and all household responsibilities. Illiteracy amongst women (aged 15-49) was reported to be at 60% as compared to (30%) for men. Consequently, women have been marginalized in many aspects of economic life and faced numerous challenges, directly and indirectly, limiting their capacity to access finance and to actively engage in productive economic ventures.

With the aim of reversing the debased state of women, the Government of Liberia accorded empowerment of women very high priority in its first post conflict Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS I 2008 – 2011). The target group for Government's interventions was rural women working in agriculture and the informal sectors. Moreover, the overriding objective was to increase rural women access to credit and at the same time build their capacities: literacy, numeracy and business skills.

In 2009, six (6) Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) groups comprising 144 women were piloted by the government and partners (CARE and ZOA) to complement other existing microfinance (semiformal) arrangements. During this initial phase, the pilots were established in Bamballa Town, Grand Cape Mount County (Western Liberia) and Greenville, Seebah, Mauriville, Pleebo and Harper (Southern Eastern Liberia). The selection of those pilot sites was premised on the high level of vulnerability and food insecurity situation in those regions.

Encouraged by the positive outcomes of the pilots within those communities, the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, and implementing partners (CARE and ZOA) furthered the promotion and training of rural women in the VSLA methodology nationwide. As a consequence thereof, VSLAs mushroomed throughout Liberia at all levels of the political divide (village, district and county levels). At present, VSLA are established and functional in all fifteen (15) political sub-divisions of Liberia. On January 25, 2014, an Apex VSLA office was established and launched in Margibi County with the leadership of seventy (70) VSLAs District Chairladies electing the Apex leadership.

In the report, “Reducing the Financial Services Gap for Women in Rural Liberia using Village Savings and Loans Associations”, the authors, Mabel Ngog-Takona and Emily Stanger (Gender Consultants) highlighted a number of positive impacts (outcomes) of the VSLA pilot projects in rural Liberia. According to the authors, the participants spoke positively of self-selecting process in forming the VSLA groups, the element of “trust” within the group and all members knew each other as friends or acquaintances through “harmonious living”. In large part, the VSLAs promoted bonds of solidarity amongst the membership and enhanced social cohesion within the groups.

The operations of the pilot projects were not without challenges however. The most common challenges encountered included a lack of adequate capacity to link up with formal financial institutions, which would enable them borrow to augment the size of loanable funds. More challenging was the relative small size of loans made available to members.

Village Savings and Loans Associations were adversely affected during the EVD outbreak and subsequent spread of EVD as economic activities of members were curtailed creating general loss of normal incomes. As a consequence, members were unable to continue share-based savings contributions which led to member’s inability to service their loans to their respective VSLAs rendering them illiquid and putting them at risk of bankruptcy, thereby jeopardizing their capacity to serve their members.

The closure of all weekly market facilities and restrictions on inter-county and country trade/transport movement further exacerbated the decline in individual and household economic activities countrywide. The impacts associated with these disruptions significantly decreased personal, household and business cash availability, increased prices of imported food/commodity, creating glut and spoilage of unsold vegetables, consequently depressed prices of local food crops offered for sale at community daily markets. The curtailment of economic activities and subsequent loss of incomes progressively eroded the capital base of most all community VSLAs, the major source of working capital, loans and savings for female farmers, female vendors and particularly, market women.

## **2.1 Objectives of the Assessment**

The overall objective of the study is to assess the impact of the EVD on the financial health and service delivery capacity of VSLAs and the corresponding impacts on food security situation of members. The specific objectives are:

- Assess the current financial (cash) position of the VSLAs;
- Assess the current capacity of VSLAs to provide services: loans, savings, social fund, etc. during the EVD epidemic;
- Household food/income security situation;
- Level of economic activity; and
- Member's participation level and frequency at VSLA activities.

## **2.2 Expected Result of the Assessment**

- Financial status of VSLAs during EVD crisis assessed;
- Scope and level of VSLA services identified and assessed; and
- Intervention to improve the VSLA activities during and after EVD assessed.

## **2.3 Justification**

The loss of incomes is a key determinant of food insecurity (access) in rural communities where alternative economic options are limited. Prior to the outbreak of the EVD, VSLA members generated income from activities such as vegetable farming, poultry production, animal feed production, soap making, cloth weaving, etc. Incomes from these productive activities were used to improve their livelihood. Available report reviewed shows that income generating activities of VSLA members and corresponding benefits contributed to increasing the power of the members allowing them address basic economic needs of their families. More women are now sending their kids to school, constructing better houses and supporting family businesses. At the personal level, financial independence through the VSLAs allowed more women to avoid sexual exploitation - a common and serious human rights issue in Liberia.

## **2.4 Methodology**

The assessment was both quantitative and qualitative methods. The data was collected through participatory tools and techniques. This included but not limited to in-depth interview, proportional pilling, priority ranking, focus group discussion with members and leaders of community VSLA groups, partners, key government ministries and agencies, and other stakeholders. To ensure beneficiaries interviewed for

the assessment were representative of the appropriate target, the assessment report clearly indicated number of interviewees and proportional representation relative to gender, age and position (social and economic). The sample was spread across sixty three (63) VSLA communities that were badly affected by the EVD and those that were not badly affected in the four counties; Lofa County (20); Bong County (11); Montserrado County (17); and Margibi County (15), respectively.

## **2.5 Constraints and limitations of the evaluation**

The time allocated for this impact assessment is inadequate. The initial time-frame given was 14 days which the consultant argued was too short for the four county assessments. With the reduction in the initial time frame set from two weeks; the tasks set in the original TOR, could not be followed. Disaggregated data on loans disbursed to clients was not readily available at the National Apex VSLA office as the office is still in the process of developing the national database. The Micro Credit Unit of the Central Bank of Liberia fortunately provided only aggregate data for 2013 operation period.

## **3.0 Discussion Results of the Evaluation – Field Visit**

On January 25, 2014, Chairladies of 70 VSLAs converged on Margibi County from County and District level and elected a National President to steer the affairs of the national Apex body. Notably, the office of the national President commenced operation during the EVD crisis. As a consequence of the crisis situation, the principle tasks have been the registration and certification of Districts, Counties and Village associations. Reportedly, only 104 District and village level VS&LAs established have been formally registered and certificated with the national APEX office. On the question of the relatively low number of registered and certified VS&LAs, the National Chairlady attributed it to the restrictions imposed by government on public gatherings and the difficulties experienced by VSLA members in raising funds due to lack of income generating activities to cover household needs and funds to contribute for their registration and certification obligations.

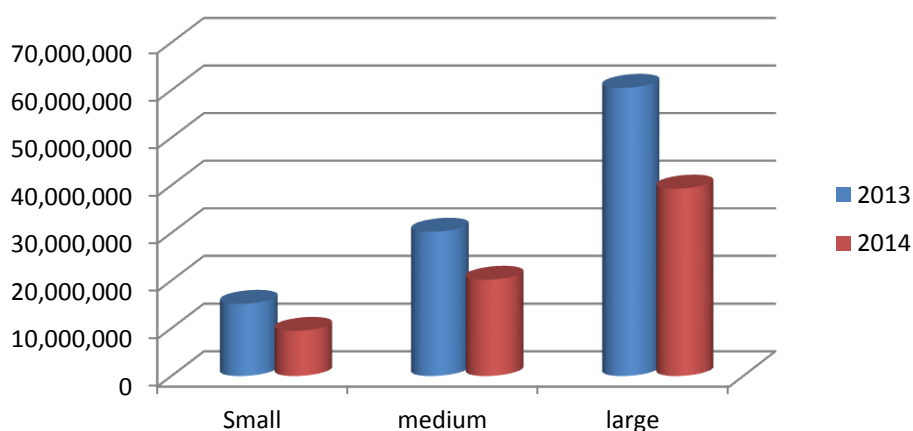
The National President however indicated that her office was in possession of registration applications for approximately 5000 VSLA establishments nationwide (Counties, Districts, and Village level associations). On the question of the sustainability, she indicated that the one means of ensuring sustainability is through the Apex body. A National Apex organization, she argued is a legal entity, registered and owned by VSLA members countrywide. Therefore, the Apex body exists to represent the interest of VSLA members at the village, district and county levels, and is governed by an annual general meeting of all members from every corner of the country (Annex – VSLA by Laws and Constitutions).

The field survey commenced simultaneously in Lofa, Bong, Montserrado, and Margibi counties on 22, October 2014. It is estimated that 320 VSLAs are operating within the four counties. Of the total, 63 VSLAs were interviewed in the targeted counties during the eight days period of the survey: Lofa (20), Bong (11), Margibi (15) and (17) in Montserrado respectively (see Appendix III for the listing of the VSLAs interviewed).

As a general rule, all VSLAs collect share contributions during the startup of each cycle for at least the first quarter (January – March) prior to the commencement of disbursement of loans. This strategy allows for the accumulation of resources for disbursement to a relatively large number of members and to provide loans in amounts large enough to support meaning ventures (investments) by recipient members. The last quarter of each cycle (September – December) is usually dedicated to repayments of loans, fines and other financial obligations to the organization in preparation for the end of cycle payout.

In 2013 the total cumulative share value (member share purchased) of the 63 VSLAs amounted to L\$105,840,000. Of this amount, VSLAs who single share value is L\$100 per share (they are considered as small), purchasing a maximum 5 shares per week generated L\$15,120,000. VSLAs who single share value is L\$200 per share (they are considered as medium), purchasing a maximum 5 shares per week generated L\$30,240,000, and VSLAs who single share value is L\$400 per share (they are considered as large), purchasing a maximum 5 shares per week generated L\$60,480,000.

**Figure 3.1: Chart showing decline in VS&LAs share value in 2014**



Complementing the VSLAs own share contributions, as at December 31, 2013, the Micro Finance Unit of the Central Bank of Liberia disbursed finance to 553 VSLAs. Disbursements for that period amounted to LD\$141,373,120 with selected VSLAs receiving an approximate amount of L\$200,000 per VS&LA.

It was evident from the discussion with the Director of the Micro Credit Unit of the Central Bank that disbursements of loans to VSLAs and other micro finance institutions for 2014 were suspended in large part due to outbreak and spread of the EVD. Moreover, the Director indicated that the Unit was in possession of 600 additional applications which were received during the last quarter of 2013 that were pending future considerations.

**Table 3.1: Central Bank Loan disbursed 2013**

Category of Institutions	# of Institutions	% Share	Amount Disbursed	% share
Village savings & loans	553	72.4%	LD\$ 141,237,120	38.2%
Credit Unions	200	26.2%	LD\$ 177,165,000	48.4%
Microfinance Institutions	11	01.4%	LD\$ 48,700,000	13.4%
<b>Total Disbursed</b>	<b>764</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>LD\$ 367,102,120</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

From **Table 3.1** above, the Central Bank of Liberia support to non-traditional finance institutions favored VSALs with 553 VSLA organizations receiving funding which represented 72.4% share of the 764 associations assisted in 2013. Corresponding to the high number of VSLAs receiving funding, 38% of total funds disbursed (LD\$367, 102, 000) went to VSLAs with the remaining 48% and 13% going to Credit Unions and Microfinance Institutions respectively.

### **3.1 Cumulative share value 2014**

From the survey results of the 63 VSLAs interviewed in four counties, it was evident that the EVD crisis adversely impacted their financial position (erosion of the capital base), disrupted the service delivery (share contributions, loans disbursement, etc.) activities. As indicated above, the cumulative share value of the 63 VSLAs for the period January – September 2013 amounted to

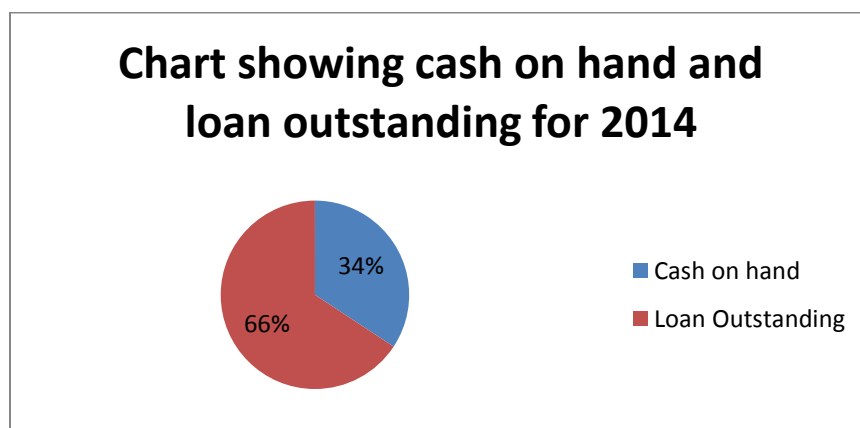


LD\$105,840,000. For the same period in 2014, cumulative share value for the same 63 VSLA surveyed amounted to only LD\$68,922,000. This amount represented a (34%) drop in the total contributions (share value purchased).

On July 30, 2014, Government announced the closure of schools and ordered the quarantining of the worst-affected communities, using troops to enforce it. In addition to the closure of schools, the Government promulgated orders restricting large gatherings (weekly markets) and restricting movement of people between counties.

Those restrictions led to increased absenteeism from VSLA regular meetings and activities, increased the decline in member share contributions, reduced fund utilization (a higher loan utilization implies an increase in profit margin for the group) and placed the loan portfolios at risk. In response to the downward trend in VSLA activities, the National Apex body in September took an administrative decision to suspend all VSLAs activities as of September 2014. This suspension on VSLAs activities meant, share purchases were discontinued, loan repayment suspended, hence all loan disbursed became inactive loans. Moreover, the likelihood of annual payout now hangs in the balance as loan recovery during the last quarter of 2014, the major activity of all VSLAs has been suspended. The value of loan outstanding as percent of is 65.8% of the total value of shares collected for the 2014 cycle.

**Figure 3.2: Cash on hand and loan outstanding**



With the suspension of VS&LA activities in September, cash on hand which represented unspent loans were used to cover personal household medical and consumption expenses as that was the only financial resources available to many members during the peak of the crisis.

### **3.2 EVD impact on Household**

To assess the impact of EVD on VSLAs members' household budget, members were asked about changes in the expenditure pattern of their household budget situations before and during the EVD outbreak. Members reported that a major reason they joined the VS&LAs was the need for access to capital through loans throughout the year. The priori concern for needing access to financial was overwhelmingly for enterprise-related purposes and farming. Other priorities within the household budget indicated were payment of school fees and related costs, medical expense household asset accumulation; all of which were financed from occasional VSLAs loans as well as from the end-of-cycle payouts. The outbreak of EVD drastically altered the expenditure pattern of all VSLA household members surveyed. Most members reported that expenditure on food and medical were accorded more priority beginning July in response to the EVD spread and Government's restrictions on large gatherings and inter county movement of people. Farming activities (weeding, fence mending, working in kun-kun meetings etc.) were also halted as families stayed in close proximity of their homes and in solidarity with other VSLA group members, bonded and supported each other. With normal business (trading) activities suspended, prices of imported foods and pharmaceuticals from Monrovia spiraled upward as a result of shortages resulting from restriction on movement of goods and people. Household incomes, especially in rural communities surveyed dropped as business activities stagnated.

### **3.3 EVD impact on clients**

The EVD provoked panic, fear throughout Liberia especially in rural farming communities that were entry points. The non- understanding of the causes and vectors of the epidemics by farmers and the increased deaths of family, friends and business associates in their communities led many VSLA members to impose self-reclusion and abandonment of planted fields. In late July, the official restrictions imposed on transport movement and farm closure further exacerbated individuals and

household mobility accelerating loss of income generating economic activities. Absenteeism, the number of members attending and participating in meetings progressively dwindled to around 10 out of 30 persons weekly. By mid-August, the National Apex office reported that attendance fell further and the frequency of meetings was rather irregular. In effect, no VSLA was receiving shares contributions from members; loan repayments were not forthcoming from members; as such, no new loans could be provided to members. In early September, the National Apex office instituted the official suspension of all VS&LA activities for the operating period 2014. The end of cycle ceremonies including annual payout for the year 2014 is now plagued with uncertainty.

Notwithstanding the difficulties experienced by VSLAs throughout 2014, the crisis seemed to have reinforced member's solidarity and enhanced social cohesion within the groups and amongst the network at large. A general feeling expressed by all members interviewed was that the simple act of saving collectively promoted group harmony and fostered solidarity amongst VSLA membership. For example, one member explained that six (6) members of her family died from the EVD and the group made an exceptional contribution that helped her (morally, financially, and psychologically) during the period of extreme grief and loss. Interestingly, more than 50% of members reported that their capacity to contribute to household finances tended to encourage consultations between spouses and promoted the feeling of equality within the home.

## **4.0 Conclusion**

VSLAs from the pilot stages in 2006 demonstrated the capacity to positively impact the social, economic and financial status of its members; women. On the products side, member reported that the VSLA methodology allowed them to make deposits (share purchases) regularly, allowing them to accumulate greater savings over time. Moreover, most members saw loans disbursed by their VSLA groups as a source of funds for productive purpose (farm labor, farm inputs and general farm/nonfarm businesses) and for other immediate needs such as sickness or daily household expenses. Most members appreciated that the terms of the loans taken from the VSLA group were transparent and the interest rate (10%) and other terms were decided on a consensual basis. A key point to note is the issue of fund utilization. By definition, fund utilization is the measure of the use of loanable funds by the group. In principle, the higher loan utilization implies an increase in the profit margin of the group. Based on this principle, all VSLA members are required to borrow at least once during every cycle. It is therefore evident that profit is a key motivation for promoting solidarity within all VSLAs as is the understanding of cash management. Beyond the financial scope of VSLAs outreach, there is an equally important dimension to the groups' importance which relates to the psycho-socio support given to group members who were personally impacted by the loss of family member and to members who successfully recovered from the EVD virus. In this regard, the VSLA network of Liberia demonstrated resilience and has remained focused as the National Apex office consolidates its control nationwide keeping the hopes and aspirations of Liberian women alive "from zero to hero".

## 4.1 Recommendation

In many respects VSLAs have demonstrated resilience during the period of the EVD crisis as each group has remained relevant in their respective communities. The temporary loss of income generating activities and subsequent loss of income did not break their spirit and will to succeed. FAO Liberia should therefore capitalize on this opportunity and provide support that will be mutually reinforcing. The following interventions are therefore recommended:

- a rapid impact Ebola Virus Disease awareness through village based women associations,
- Improve access to food and commodities through conditional cash transfers,
- Revitalization of savings and loans schemes of women associations,
- Increase food and seed production during the dry season in lowlands,
- Improve agro-processing at community level to facilitate added value for producers, and
- Encourage poultry and small livestock production to limit risk of bush meat consumption.

A key implementation modality would be signing financial agreements for continue EVD awareness and food and seed production. Also the agreement should provide for training in management and financial management skills. Income generated through the financial agreement (cash transfer) will be used to cover urgent basic needs (including food) and also invested to revitalize their savings and loans schemes.

Table 4.1: Stakeholders Impact maps

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes
People who recovered from Ebola Virus	Psycho-social support Counseling to people who recovered from – EVD;	No. of psycho-social training meetings for VS&LA members organized and held. No. of psycho-social counselors trained No. of community anti stigma meetings organized and held.	Greater sense of belonging in community and social life
VS&LA Groups adversely impacted by EVD	Survey of prospective VS&LA cash grants recipients	No. of VS&LAs (Groups) recipients supported.	Better income generating prospects to resume share purchasing; recapitalization of VS&LAs cash position

## **5.0 References**

Mabel Ngoe-Takona and Emily Stanger (Gender Consultants)

“Reducing the Financial Services Gap for Women in Rural Liberia using Village Savings and Loans Associations”

## 6.0

## Appendices

### 6.1 Appendix I:

County	Village Savings and Loans Associations	Microfinance Institutions	Credit Unions	Total
Bassa	31	1	6	38
Bomi	29	0	2	31
Bong	78	0	4	82
Cape Mount	37	0	4	41
Gbarpolu	47	0	2	49
Grand Gedeh	14	0	35	49
Grand Kru	12	0	7	19
Lofa	38	0	10	48
Margibi	14	1	6	21
Montserrado	127	9	54	189
Maryland	25	0	6	31
Nimba	34	0	14	48
River Gee	12	0	40	52
Rivercess	22	0	6	28
Sinoe	33	0	4	37
Total	553	11	200	764

### 6.2 Appendix II:

### Members of the Rapid Assessment Teams

Name	County
Mr. Langley Norwood	Margibi and Montserrado
Mr. Emmanuel Johnson Nimbuen	Lofa
Mr. Isaac J. Stevenson	Bong

### 6.3 Appendix III: List of VSLA interviewed Lofa County

No.	Name of VSLAs	District	County	Contact Person	Mode of Starting
1	Togetherness	Foya	Lofa	Mary Ndimin	UNDP Women Program
2	Hand Together	Foya	Lofa	Tuwor Fokoe	UNDP Women Program
3	WOFPD	Kolahun	Lofa	Anna Soriba	FED Intervention
4	Kahenjale	Kolahun	Lofa	Mama Kenneh	FED Intervention
5	VODWOPED	Voinjama	Lofa	Sonnie M.Deddeh	Self-Initiative
6	LOWAGPD	Voinjama	Lofa	Korpo Ballah	Self-initiative
7	No Problem	Voinjama	Lofa	Bedee Kulie	Edu-Care project
8	United Rural Women for Peace and Development	Voinjama	Lofa	Kruba G. Mulbah	Self-initiative
9	God Gives	Voinjama	Lofa	Kebbeh K. Karboi	Self-initiative
10	Zeela	Voinjama	Lofa	Jennice Kullie	FED intervention
11	United	Zorzor	Lofa	Masie Beyan	Self-initiative
12	United Women	Zorzor	Lofa	Yamah Sumo	Self-Help Initiative
13	Sankorolowon	Salayea	Lofa	Masu Mulbah	UNDP WOMEN Training
14	Peaceful Women	Salayea	Lofa	Korto G. Farmoyan	UNDP WOMEN Training

### List of VSLA interviewed Bong County

No.	Name of VSLAs	District	County	Contact Person	Mode of Starting
1	Kukatunu VSLA	Sanoyea	Bong	Esther Binda	Self-Initiative
2	Bong County Women Saving Loan Association	Jorquellah	Bong	Mary Lartah	FED Intervention
3	Cohado VSLA	Salala	Bong	Makpeh Scott	UNDP Women Program
4	Gbongama VSLA	Salala	Bong	Fanta Lepolu	UNDP Women Program
5	WelekermaVSLA	Kokoya	Bong	Sarah T. Sumo	UNDP Women Program
6	Leela VSLA	Fuamah	Bong	Fanta Siafia	Self-Initiative
7	Welekama	Fuamah	Bong	Victory Togbayoung	Self-Initiative
8	Welekama	Zota	Bong	Karquellah Kollie	UNDP Women Program
9	Rural Women VSLA	Salala	Bong	Tumu Allen	FED Intervention
10	Welekamah	Kpanta	Bong	Gamai Kpakila	FED Intervention
11	Lekpelay VSLA	Suakoko	Bong	Esther Peters	FED Intervention



### List of VSLA interviewed Montserrado County

<b>No.</b>	<b>Name of VSLAs</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>County</b>	<b>Contact Person</b>	<b>Mode of Starting</b>
1	Gbokolleh Women Success	#1	Montserrado	Fatu Sheriff	Self-Initiative
2	Dorcas Women	#6	Montserrado	Rebecca Walker	Self-Initiative
3	ONAALILA	#5	Montserrado	Siatta V. Sherman	Self-Initiative
4	Sisters of Hope	#9	Montserrado	Kruba Nwainokpor	Self-Initiative
5	Rock Crusher Women	#6	Montserrado	Margaret S. Lyonkpoh	UNDP Women Training
6	THT	#2	Montserrado	Fatu Paye	UNDP Women Training
7	Clara Town Association	#14	Montserrado	Theresa Saylee	FED Workshop
8	Productive Women	#7	Montserrado	Evelyn Biah	UNDP Women Training
9	Action Women	#4	Montserrado	Sara Joe Adekoya	FED Workshop
10	Vakala	#10	Montserrado	Naomi A.C. Kiazulu	CARE Workshop
11	Potential Women VSLA	#13	Montserrado	Berniece Davis	CARE Workshop
12	Zion Tree VSLA	#4	Montserrado	Tracy T. Walker	FED Workshop
13	Women of Wonders	#16	Montserrado	Danetta W. Martin	CARE Workshop
14	Ladies Community Savings	#6	Montserrado	Esther Rufus	UNDP Women Training
15	War Against Poverty VSLA	#8	Montserrado	Paschal Lawalah	CARE Workshop
16	Borqulla Women Empowerment	#1	Montserrado	Meita Sheriff	CARE Workshop

### List of VSLA interviewed MarGibi County

No.	Name of VSLAs	District	County	Contact Person	Mode of Starting
1	Light House Women VSLA	Unification Market	Margibi	Victoria Hage	CARE Workshop
2	Light House Women VSLA	Unification Market	Margibi	Fatu Tarpee	CARE Workshop
3	Kakata Women	Kakata	Margibi	Tracy T. Walker	FED Workshop
4	Gibi Rural Women	Gibi	Margibi	Yatta Flomo	Self-Initiative
5	DuSide Rural Women	Duside	Margibi	Lorpo Kolleh	Self-Initiative
6	Compound # 1 Farmers Group	Drazon	Margibi	John Dehkula	Self-Initiative
7	Compound # 2 Rural Women	Drazon	Margibi	Kubah Weh	UNDP Training
8	Firestone Rural Women	Harbel	Margibi	Alice Bondo	UNDP Training
9	Money in the Bush	#5 Kakata	Margibi	Musu Tarpeh	UNDP Training
10	Rising Star	#4 Kakata	Margibi	Tuah Kollie	UNDP Training
11	Go Get It Women	#3 Kakata	Margibi	Kabbeh Flomo	CARE Workshop
12	Wololah VSLA	#3 Kakata	Margibi	Korto Sumo	UNDP Training
13	Togetherness Women	Cotton Tree	Margibi	Nancy Foday	Self-Initiative
14	Dynamic Women Group	Firestone	Margibi	Marie Flomo	FED Workshop
15	Special Women Association	Firestone	Margibi	Musu Ben	Self-Initiative

## 6.4 Focus Group Discussion Guide

### IMPACT OF THE EBOLA VIRUS DISEASE ON AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SECURITY

#### Rapid Needs Assessment Questionnaires

#### Key informant Women Village Savings and Loan Associations – Susu

- 
1. Name of enumerator \_\_\_\_\_
  2. Date of assessment \_\_\_\_\_ 3. County \_\_\_\_\_ 4. District \_\_\_\_\_
  5. Community \_\_\_\_\_
  6. Name of VSLA: \_\_\_\_\_
  7. Name of informant \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Sex: \_\_\_\_\_
  9. Position \_\_\_\_\_
- 

#### CLIENT INFORMATION

10. How long have you been a member of your VSLA organization? \_\_\_\_\_
10. On average, how many members regularly attended meetings? \_\_\_\_\_
11. How often/frequently are meetings held?
  - Weekly In house
  - Monthly
  - Other
12. How did you become a member? Explain \_\_\_\_\_
13. Purpose of becoming a member. Explain \_\_\_\_\_

#### SAVINGS

1. Since joining the VSLA Organization, do you save in any other form?
  - In house
  - Bank Account
  - Do not save in another form; only with the VSLA
  - Others, specify \_\_\_\_\_
2. On average, how many shares do you purchase (savings); weekly, monthly. -----
3. What is the value of each share? -----
4. How many shares do you own? -----
5. Did you receive payout following the previous cycle? Yes: \_\_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_\_
6. What was the amount of the payout? -----
7. Please rank your three most important uses of payout.
  1. Food
  2. Paid off debt
  3. Family celebration/ceremony
  4. Medical expense
  5. Household asset
  6. Emergency
  7. Productive investment; business venture, specify: \_\_\_\_\_
  8. Other, specify: \_\_\_\_\_

## LOANS

- 1) Did you have access to loans before joining the VSLA? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_
- 2) If yes, explain the type of access: \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) Did you take loan just prior to EVD epidemic from the VSLA? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_
- 4) If yes, how many loans? \_\_\_\_\_ How much was the loan? \_\_\_\_\_
- 5) Did you take loan during this EVD crisis? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
- 6) If yes, how many loans? \_\_\_\_\_ How much was the loan? \_\_\_\_\_
- 7) What type of challenges do you face for paying back the loan you took/got just before the EVD? \_\_\_\_\_
- 8) Please rank your three most important uses of payout.
  1. Food
  2. Paid off debt
  3. Family celebration/ceremony
  4. Medical expense
  5. Household asset
  6. Emergency
  7. Productive investment; business venture, specify: \_\_\_\_\_
  8. Other, specify: \_\_\_\_\_

## HOUSEHOLD DIET

1. Did household diet improved since joining the VSLA? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_
2. Number of meal per day prior to the outbreak of EVD epidemic? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is the status of the household diet since the outbreak of the EVD epidemic?
  - a. Improved
  - b. Worsened
  - c. Stay the same
  - d. I don't know
4. Frequency of satisfying food needs (access) since EVD
  - a. Always
  - b. Often
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Never
5. What do you consume during this EVD period?
  - a. Meat
  - b. Fish
  - c. Others, specify \_\_\_\_\_
6. Number of time you consumed meat products since the EVD
  - a. Never
  - b. one time
  - c. two times
  - d. All the times

## FINANCIAL INFORMATION OF VSLAS

1. How long has your VSLA Organization been operating?
  - a. Less than a year
  - b. 1 – 2 years
  - c. More than 2 years
  - d. Specify\_\_\_\_\_
2. How did you start the VSLA?
  - a. Your own contributions
  - b. support from a project
  - c. Specify\_\_\_\_\_
3. What is the main challenge your group is facing in terms of management, membership, sustainability, etc.?
4. On average, how many members regularly attended meetings? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Number of members in your VSLA organization -----
6. Number of members attending an average meeting (review register)\_\_\_\_\_
7. Number of members attending an average VSLAs activities\_\_\_\_\_
8. Has the scope and level of members participations change due to the EVD epidemic?  
No\_\_\_\_ Yes\_\_\_\_
9. Dropouts since start of cycle/EVD epidemic:\_\_\_\_\_
10. Number of dropouts\_\_\_\_\_
11. VSLA organization cumulative value of savings/shares:\_\_\_\_\_
12. Number of active loans:\_\_\_\_\_ Amount: \_\_\_\_\_
13. Number of inactive loans:\_\_\_\_\_ Amount: \_\_\_\_\_
14. Number of loans outstanding:\_\_\_\_\_ Amount: \_\_\_\_\_
15. Cash on hand and at bank (Specify each):\_\_\_\_\_
16. Cash in social fund:\_\_\_\_\_
17. Is the VSLA still lending out money? No\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_
18. Are members allowed to withdraw from their savings:\_\_\_\_\_
19. What is the current cash position of the VSLA:\_\_\_\_\_
20. Do members feel that loan repayment should be more flexible, especially in terms of amount and the length of loan term during crisis period (EVD)? No\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_
21. Do you believe you will be able to continue to provide same service after EVD epidemic?  
Explain
22. In your own words, what is the impact of the EVD on capacity of the VSLA? Explain
  - a. Capacity of members to pay back
  - b. Capacity of the group to recapitalize
  - c. What are your recommendation to assist the VSLA, in relation with the impact of the EVD
  - d. What role your group and its members could play for the EVD awareness campaign, for the orphans, female headed households in your community?

Final question: You are the bread winner in the household. Has the EVD epidemic changed your status? Does your husband still look up to you?

**Thank You!**