



Climate & Development
Knowledge Network



INSIDE STORY

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Key messages

- *In a pastoralist context highly exposed to climate hazards, the Village Economic and Social Association (VESA) approach, as implemented by Agri Service Ethiopia, is emerging as a gender-equitable and socially inclusive pathway to strengthen climate resilience.*
- *The most visible shifts are observed among women VESA group members, including those from female-headed households, who gained greater access to savings, loans, livelihood support, training and group leadership.*
- *These shifts were driven not only by improved access to finance but also by efforts to connect economic opportunities with women's leadership, participation in household decision-making, climate resilience planning, and broader community dialogue on gender norms and shared responsibilities.*
- *Engaging men and community leaders was equally important, helping to create an enabling environment for more inclusive household decision-making and greater acceptance of women's economic and public roles.*
- *VESAs can contribute to more equitable and inclusive climate resilience when they are intentionally designed as broader social and institutional platforms, rather than functioning solely as savings and lending groups.*

Transformative pathways for inclusive and climate-resilient futures in Ethiopia's South Omo pastoral communities

In the Dasenech woreda, a district in the South Omo Zone of Ethiopia, climate shocks are increasingly reshaping livelihoods and gender roles. The wider East Africa region is experiencing erratic rainfall, resulting in recurrent cycles of drought and flooding^{1,2}. Dasenech is highly exposed to these hazards. Livelihoods in the area are predominantly pastoral. As rainfall patterns become more erratic, grazing conditions more variable, and environmental change intensifies, there are significant implications for both livelihoods and the social fabric of communities.

These climate risks intersect with entrenched gender inequality. Dasenech woreda has a strongly patriarchal social structure where women often face significant barriers to participating in public life. Their influence over decisions relating to livelihoods, asset ownership, natural resource management, and mobility has traditionally been limited. Women also have less access to markets, financial services, and climate information, while shouldering a disproportionate share of domestic and caregiving responsibilities. During periods of climate-related stress, these inequalities are often further intensified. Because adaptive capacity is shaped by access to resources, knowledge, and decision-making, gender equality is a fundamental component of effective climate adaptation rather than a separate development objective.

When it comes to existing adaptation strategies, communities have long relied on local knowledge, experience, and social networks to respond to climate variability. These strategies include diversifying livelihoods, seasonal movement for livelihood and resource access, and traditional weather forecasting to anticipate, cope with and respond to changing climatic conditions. However, increasing climate variability and repeated shocks mean that many of these strategies are no longer sufficient on their own, highlighting the need for adaptation approaches that strengthen both adaptive capacity and the gender-equitable social conditions that enable all community members to participate in, benefit from, and shape adaptation responses.

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Against this backdrop of climate stress and gender inequality, Agri Service Ethiopia implemented the Village Economic and Social Association (VESA) approach through the project “Building climate-resilient food systems for women and groups facing exclusion in Dasenech Woreda, South Omo Zone, Ethiopia,” with support from Christian Aid. The VESA approach seeks to strengthen livelihoods while advancing gender equity and social inclusion (GESI) by building social capital, supporting collective action, and expanding opportunities for participation and economic empowerment.

The Inside story examines the extent to which the VESA approach contributes to gender-equitable and socially inclusive climate resilience by shifting the norms, behaviours, and power relations that underpin inequality, while strengthening agency, participation, and more inclusive adaptation outcomes over time³. It draws on a field visit, interviews with VESA group participants, and a review of project documentation. An accompanying documentary offers a visual exploration of the experiences and perspectives that inform the findings presented [here](#).

The approach

What are VESA groups?

VESAs are mixed gender community-based savings and livelihood groups established to strengthen household economic resilience, social cohesion, and financial inclusion, particularly among those vulnerable to climate hazards. Members organise themselves into groups based on a combination of factors, including trust in existing relationships, neighbourhood proximity, and shared socio-economic interests. Each VESA group typically consists of 20–30 members and operates under agreed-upon group by-laws and leadership structures selected by the members.

The groups meet regularly, often weekly. During meetings, each member contributes a fixed amount toward savings, typically ranging from 10–50 ETB (USD 0.31 - 0.063) per week, depending on the group’s agreement and members’ financial capacity. The savings are pooled into a common fund, which is then used to provide small loans to members for income-generating activities, emergency needs, petty trade, agricultural inputs, or other household priorities.

Project objectives

In addition to savings and internal lending, VESA groups serve as platforms for capacity strengthening, peer learning, community support, and training.

The training covers topics such as financial literacy, business skills, climate-smart livelihoods, savings management, and social issues such as gender equality, conflict resolution, and resilience-building. Through various activities and discussions, the groups promote mutual accountability and social solidarity among members. At the end of a savings cycle, accumulated savings and any profit generated from loan interest are shared among members according to their contribution levels. Accordingly, VESA groups are more than savings and credit groups. This broader design is central to understanding the approach’s transformative potential for GESI.



Gurbash Daka Erika, Kabusiya VESA cashier. Credit: Urban Film Production

The project had three objectives:

- To enhance climate resilience and livelihoods for rural households, particularly women and other groups facing exclusion.
- To strengthen early warning and action systems for reducing climate-induced loss and damage.
- To promote inclusive climate policy through locally led coalitions.

Results framework: pathways of change

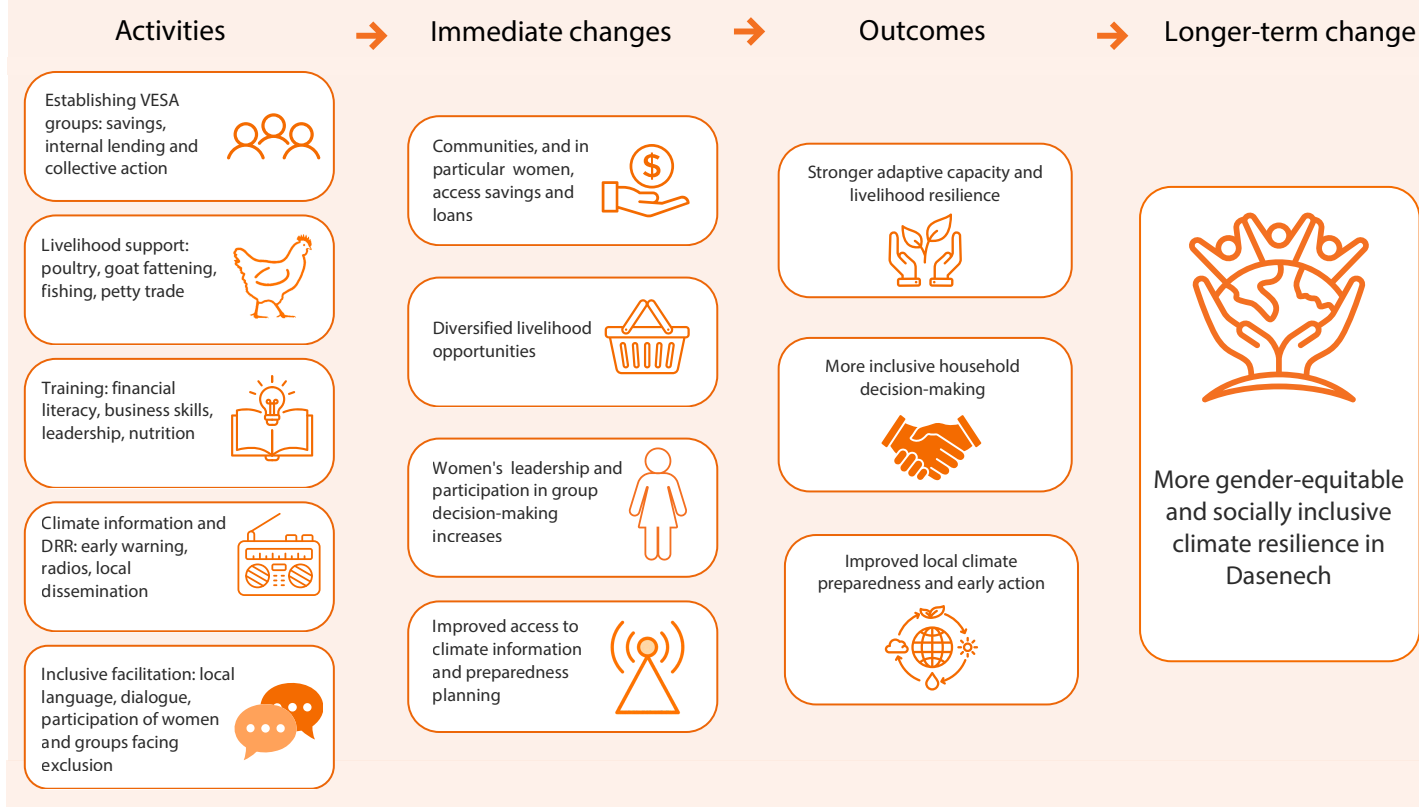


Figure 1: Results framework for Agri Service Ethiopias project, “Building climate-resilient food systems for women and groups facing exclusion in Dasenech Woreda, South Omo Zone, Ethiopia”.



A woman carrying fuelwood. Credit: Urban Film Production

Participants and reach

The project was carried out with 16 mixed-gender VESA groups over 28 months. The groups represented 400 people across six kebeles (the smallest administrative units in Ethiopia): Delegnmur, Delerele, Hado, Kariwo, Langay and Heriker. The intervention is estimated to have indirectly reached around 3,500 additional people through household and community spillover effects.

Of the 400 VESA group members, 53% (210 participants) were women and many were from female-headed households. This indicates strong inclusion of households that are often characterised by economic vulnerability and limited asset ownership, although further disaggregation (e.g. age, marital status, disability) was not systematically captured. In addition, not only were most participants female, but women also held more than 50% of the leadership positions. The approach sought to increase women’s access to finance and strengthen their role in collective decision-making and local economic life.

Facilitation and implementation mechanisms

The project was operationalised through facilitation approaches that created safe spaces for dialogue and collective learning. Active participation by women and other groups facing exclusion was encouraged through the use of local languages, participatory group discussions, practical demonstrations, and meeting arrangements that accommodated participants' time and mobility constraints. VESA members also shared knowledge with one another and with neighbours and relatives, extending learning beyond formal training sessions.

In addition, VESA groups are linked with broader community resilience and climate adaptation activities, enabling members to collectively identify risks, access information, test adaptive practices, and strengthen social support networks. This intentional integration of economic, social, and empowerment objectives helped move the approach beyond participation alone toward more transformative changes in agency and inclusion.

Indicator	Baseline: January 2023	Endline: June 2025
Average household income	1,000 birr/month (USD 6)	4,000 birr/month (USD 25)
Households with savings	None	450-1,500 birr/month (USD 3-9)
Womens leadership	Limited participation in leadership due to cultural barriers.	Over 50% of positions in VESA groups held by women

Table 1. Baseline-to-endline comparison of indicators for income, household savings, and women's leadership.



Men herding livestock. Credit: Kaleb Worku, CDKN

Livelihood and economic support

As mentioned, the VESA groups are also used as platforms for practical livelihood support (see table 2 below), as well as for training in nutrition, leadership, financial literacy, business management, and food preparation. The livelihood activities were intended to diversify household income sources and reduce reliance on any single climate-sensitive livelihood. While activities such as goat fattening and poultry production can still be affected by climate-related pressures, they broaden the range of income and food sources available to households and help spread risk.

The selected livelihood activities were designed to be accessible to women and manageable at the household level, while contributing to improved household nutrition, income diversification, and women's economic empowerment. Women-led enterprises also received solar lighting units to support off-grid enterprises.



*A group member from Delegnmur Kebele feeding her chickens.
Credit: Kaleb Worku, CDKN.*

Activity		Support provided	Reach and participant breakdown
Poultry support (Year 1)		350-day-old chicks distributed	Members: 70 women
Poultry support (year 2)		750 chicks, plus feed, poultry housing and training	Members: 75 women
Goat fattening		Revolving goat fattening scheme	48 members: 34 women and 14 men
Fishing		Training in fishing and related business skills	75 members: 46 women and 29 men

Table 2. Summary of VESA-linked livelihood support provided through the project

Climate information and DRR systems

The approach connected VESA groups to climate information and disaster risk reduction (DRR) planning processes, enabling them to consider early action in response to climate hazards. The project also established community-based DRR committees. These committees were linked to woreda-level stakeholders, the National Meteorology Agency and local radio dissemination channels. The DRR committees are community-based, composed of selected community members and local stakeholders, including community leaders, women

and youth representatives, elders, and relevant kebele-level sector representatives. While there were no formally established quotas or targets, the project encouraged women's participation in the committees to strengthen GESI considerations within community-based disaster risk management structures. Women were intentionally included for their important roles in household preparedness, community information sharing, and resilience-building activities.

Solar-powered radios were provided to participants as part of the project support package, and weekly broadcasts in the Dasenech language increased access to climate information. Early warning messages were then discussed through VESA group meetings and related local structures. The project also sought to combine scientific forecasts with Indigenous Knowledge so that climate information could be interpreted and acted on in locally meaningful ways.



A community elder leading a discussion. Credit: Kaleb Worku, CDKN.

Results and outcomes

The results suggest that the approach contributed to three types of change: practical shifts in livelihoods and adaptive capacity; relational shifts in agency, confidence and household decision-making; and structural shifts in access to institutions, information and local planning.

Enhanced adaptation and livelihood resilience

The results reflect livelihood improvements, as the project helped households diversify to spread risk and increase the resilience of climate-sensitive livelihood systems. Through VESA groups, members accessed savings, loans, training, and revolving funds that supported activities such as poultry production, goat fattening, petty trade, and fishing. This did not eliminate climate risk but broadened the ways households could generate food and income.

This is significant in a context where drought, flooding and waterlogging have repeatedly undermined livestock, agriculture and access to grazing land.

Project reports indicate that members collectively saved ETB 245,090 (USD 1,546) through the groups. This is significant in a low-income pastoralist context, where members initially saved as little as ETB 5–10 (USD 0.031– 0.063) at a time. 43 members, including 37 female-headed households, accessed loans totalling ETB 138,990 (USD 877) for their businesses. Each VESA group collectively decided on loan recipients, business investments, and savings schedules, while technical staff from Agri Service Ethiopia provided facilitation and support.

Out of a total of 400 VESA members, 145 women were engaged in poultry production and earned ETB 750–900 (USD 4.73– 5.67) per week from egg sales. A revolving goat-fattening scheme, in which initial support was repaid and then passed on to new participants, supported 48 initial beneficiaries, including 34 women, who collectively earned a profit of ETB 90,215 (USD 569). The initial capital was then repaid and re-loaned to 36 new members. These figures are important because they show that the VESA approach was used to develop practical economic options rather than remaining only a formal group structure.

The project documents also provide evidence of household-level gains. One woman in Delegnemur Kebele explained that after being displaced by flooding, she now sells eggs, fishes with her family, fattens goats and saves to support her household. Another described how she used revolving fund support to acquire goats, started trading wheat flour and combined this with fishing and savings. These examples suggest that diversification of livelihoods translates into concrete adaptation strategies at the household level.

At the same time, there are clear limits to the project's impacts. Climate change continues to affect the viability of livestock-based livelihoods. Drought-related shortages of grazing land and drinking water persist. Floods have displaced households, destroyed agricultural land, and interrupted schooling. One interviewee noted that before the flood, her children attended school, but after the displacement, they could no longer attend because their school was destroyed. This highlights that while diversification improved adaptive capacity, it could not eliminate exposure to climate hazards or the multitude of intersecting challenges that shape daily life.

Changes in women's agency and decision-making

The strongest evidence of GESI-transformative change lies in the shifts reported in women's economic roles, confidence and participation in decision-making spaces. The project intentionally prioritised women's access to loans, training and leadership roles within VESA groups; as mentioned, women held more than 50% of leadership positions.

As described above, training in leadership, financial literacy, business skills, and gender equality was complemented by discussions with male community members and leaders. While external facilitators introduced structured training and supported dialogue, emerging changes in attitudes also appeared to be reinforced through peer learning within VESA groups and the visible economic contributions of women members. VESA groups created regular, trusted spaces where women and men could engage in dialogue, learn collectively, and reflect on changing roles. Women's increasing economic contributions also made their roles more visible within households and communities, helping to legitimise their participation in decision-making.

These interventions were often associated with changes in household and community dynamics. Some women interviewed in Delegnemur described how diversifying their income-generating activities meant they could participate more equally within the household.

One of the women stated that before the VESA group, "our responsibilities were confined to household chores and caring for our children while our husbands went far to find grazing land for cattle", but after joining the group, they learned to save and received training on climate hazards. She also described men and women participating equally in VESA group discussions and household decisions being more shared than before.

A male participant similarly reported that he previously made decisions alone but now consults his wife. He also noted that women now participate in discussions that previously involved only men. A community elder described a broader shift in awareness, stating that community members had come to understand the importance of including women in problem-solving, sharing household chores, and allowing women to go to markets more freely.

These shifts are particularly significant given the baseline conditions (see table 1).



A VESA group holding a discussion. Credit: Urban Film Production

Before the intervention, women were reported to eat after men, face restrictions on going to the market, and have limited say over household assets and major decisions. During periods of severe drought-related stress, project documentation indicates that some households arranged marriages for underage daughters with men who had greater resources. Against these baseline conditions, changes in women's freedom of movement, market participation, control over income and leadership roles represent more than simple livelihood gains. They point to gradual changes in the local distribution of power, responsibility and value. Observable early- to mid-stage shifts emerged within 1–3 years, particularly where economic participation and group solidarity reinforced behavioural change. Even so, the evidence suggests that these shifts remain partial.

One woman stated clearly that although decisions are now made together, she still cannot sell assets independently. This is an important qualification. It indicates that changes in women's agency are real, but uneven.



Dasenech women talking while they work on their small-scale farm. Credit: Urban Film Production

The project appears to have opened space for more equal participation, but deeper norms around control of major assets have not necessarily changed at the same pace. This underscores the importance of sustained dialogue, collaboration, and long-term commitment to advancing GESI transformation.

There are no silver bullets for dismantling deeply entrenched exclusionary social structures. However, the case demonstrates that change is possible when safe and intentional spaces for communication are created, where women's voices are heard and valued. Ultimately, this is not only about improving outcomes for women but about strengthening the resilience and wellbeing of entire communities as they adapt to climate change and resource constraints.

Improved climate preparedness and local action

The project also strengthened local climate preparedness by addressing access to climate information as a dimension of inequality. It established DRR committees and linked them to government structures, climate information providers, and local radio stations that shared climate information. Climate and early warning information was shared through locally appropriate channels, including VESAs, local meetings, and group discussions, so that it reached not only community leaders but also women, youth, and other groups who are often excluded from formal information systems.

Information was shared in local languages and discussed collectively, enabling community members to interpret forecasts, assess risks and identify practical response measures relevant to their livelihoods and local context. The provision of solar-powered radios, alongside improved access to early warning information, helped make climate information more accessible, relevant and actionable at the community level.

Project reports indicate that women participated actively in these processes and emerged as leaders within VESA-linked DRR committees and climate advocacy platforms. Early warning of climate hazards was disseminated through VESA discussions, and members were taught how to prepare for these hazards. One example cited in the project report is that communities relocated two weeks before a recent flood without waiting for government enforcement. While this is only one indicator, it suggests that early warning was not only disseminated but also acted upon.

Scale, reach and wider influence

The available evidence also suggests that some effects extended beyond the 400 direct participants. A female VESA group member from Delegnmur Kebele stated, "People who are not part of the VESAs come to us for help." This points to a wider ripple effect, in which VESA members became local sources of advice and assistance for other community members.

Lessons learned

This section highlights key lessons on both the strengths and limitations of the VESA approach.

The findings suggest that meaningful progress towards GESI was supported when VESA groups functioned as broader social and institutional platforms, rather than only as savings and lending groups. At the same time, the case shows that social transformation is gradual, uneven and shaped by persistent structural inequalities and recurrent climate shocks.

Enabling factors

One important enabling factor was the use of local collective structures that people trusted and could engage with regularly. VESAs provided repeated opportunities for learning, saving, borrowing, discussing, and planning. This supported both practical uptake and gradual norm change.

Another enabling factor was the effort to connect scientific climate information with Indigenous Knowledge and local dissemination systems, including radio in the Dasenech language. This made climate information easier to interpret and more relevant to daily planning.

Transformational dynamics

Beyond these enabling conditions, the project also appears to have benefited from simultaneously integrating women's economic empowerment with public participation. Women were not only supported to start or strengthen small enterprises; they were also supported to take up leadership roles, access training and become more visible in community processes. This matters because climate resilience is not only about households' ability to prepare for, recover from, and adapt to climate-related shocks. It is also about who has access to information, whose voices are heard, who takes part in decisions, and whose priorities shape local adaptation.

Gaps and unanswered questions

The evidence points to positive shifts in women's agency, but it says less about unpaid care burdens, workload trade-offs, or whether women felt fully safe and accepted in newly expanded market roles. These are important issues in any approach to assessing whether change is genuinely transformative and sustainable. Future documentation would be strengthened by tracking not only women's new economic opportunities, but also the social costs, tensions or constraints that may accompany them. This is especially relevant in a context where women continue to carry extensive domestic responsibilities.



VESA group members updating their financial records during a meeting. Credit: Urban Film Production

Limits of transformation

This points to a broader caution that transformative change should be presented carefully. The available evidence supports claims of important progress in women's participation, leadership and household influence. It does not support a claim that patriarchal norms have been fully overturned. Some women still lack independent control over major assets, and the wider context remains one of severe climate stress, weak infrastructure and displacement.

Sustainability

Finally, the case suggests that sustainability is more likely when economic mechanisms, local institutions, and government linkages are developed together. The revolving fund system, group savings culture, DRR committees, local dissemination channels, and collaboration with government offices all provide a basis for continued support beyond the project. However, future scale-up will depend on sustained support, functioning local institutions, and the ability to respond to ongoing shocks.



Dasenech woman sitting in gathering. Credit: Urban Film Production

Recommendations for different actor groups to enhance the transformative potential of VESAs:

Community leaders

- Support VESA groups as spaces for inclusive planning, decision-making and discussion of restrictive social norms.
- Encourage men's participation in discussions on shared household responsibilities, women's mobility and women's roles in community problem-solving.
- Help protect the legitimacy of women's public and economic participation as these roles continue to evolve.



A Dasenech woman working in the fields. Credit: Urban Film Production

Government officials, planners and policymakers

- Invest in locally led climate resilience systems that integrate livelihood diversification, climate information, early warning and social inclusion.
- Strengthen climate information dissemination through locally appropriate channels, including local languages and accessible formats.
- Ensure meaningful participation of women and groups facing exclusion in DRR committees and local planning structures, beyond token representation.
- Support coordination between local institutions, sector offices and community-led groups to improve coherence and reduce duplication of adaptation efforts.
- Strengthen links between community-level systems and government structures to improve sustainability and long-term institutional support.

Practitioners

- Use group-based finance as one part of a wider transformation strategy.
- Combine savings and loans with leadership support, business training, climate information, local institution-building and work on gender norms.
- Examine more closely how women balance new livelihood roles with unpaid care work.
- Assess whether there are unresolved barriers related to safety, market access or control over major assets.

Endnotes

1. Dupar, M. and McNamara, L. (2022) The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report: Impacts, adaptation options and investment areas for a climate-resilient East Africa. Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN) and the African Climate and Development Initiative (ACDI).
2. World Bank Group (2020) Climate Risk Country Profile: Ethiopia. Washington, DC: World Bank Group
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Agri Service Ethiopia

Agri Service Ethiopia (ASE) is an indigenous, non-governmental, not-for-profit organisation established in 1969. Working across rural Ethiopia, ASE partners with communities, government and development organisations to strengthen food security, build community capacity, and promote sustainable, market-oriented livelihoods through participatory and locally led development approaches.

Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN)

The Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN) is a global Southern-led programme founded in 2010. The programme is managed by SouthSouthNorth, and implemented in partnership with Fundación Futuro Latinoamericano and ICLEI South Asia. CDKN works to improve the wellbeing of the most climate-affected people in the Global South, especially marginalised groups, through transformative climate-resilient action. We work in partnership with the public, civil society and private sectors to mobilise knowledge, leadership and capacity in the Global South from local to global levels.



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