



How did CSO engagement in the formulation and implementation of the Environmental and Social Management Plan (ESMP) safeguard farmers in The Gambia?

Lessons from the Gambia Rice Value Chain Transformation Program (RVCTP)

Introduction

In December 2018, African Development Bank (AfDB) approved a [\\$5.54 million Rice Value Chain Transformation Project](#) (RVCTP) for the Gambia. The project aims to increase agricultural production, increase household income, and enhance food and nutritional security via youth and women empowerment and using a public private partnership model.

By engaging in the project through monitoring implementation in the field and communicating findings to the parties responsible for project implementation, [Open Society Platform the Gambia \(OSPG\)](#) was able to influence the design of project elements and draw attention to contextual risks, resulting in a project that is more transparent, inclusive, and participatory, and has made efforts to avoid and mitigate environmental, social, and human rights risks. This case study shares a description of the monitoring process and lessons learned

for civil society organizations that aim to improve development projects in their communities and hold governments accountable to their commitments to sustainable development for their people.

Project Area Context:

The Gambia is among the poorest countries in the world and is classified as a low-income food deficit country in Sub-Saharan Africa - even though most of the population earns a living from farming. According to the [RVCTP Appraisal Report 2018](#), agriculture accounts for 32% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employs over 70% of the population. Women comprise a little over 50% of the overall labor force, particularly in the cultivation of rice in both upland and lowland areas. Youth comprise 39.8% of the country's population and make up 20% of the agricultural labor force.

The area in which the RVCTP is being implemented faces a number of social and environmental vulnerabilities which contribute to high poverty rates. Gender inequality, youth unemployment, rapidly changing climate, food and nutritional insecurity, child labor, and gender-based violence (GBV), pose potential risks to the project and local communities. These issues are exacerbated by low literacy rates among women and a high number of youth who lack the required skills demanded by the job market. The agriculture value chain in the Gambia is also prone to incidents of child labor and limited participation by persons with disabilities.

Furthermore, many agricultural projects in the region are implemented without adequate protection for and engagement with marginalized groups. The lack of attention to contextual risks and failure to include and engage with marginalized people raises the possibility of risks not being properly identified and mitigated, which can lead to potential harms. The situation is exacerbated by limited information transparency and access, particularly the disclosure of project information and safeguard mechanisms.

Monitoring Implementation of the Integrated Safeguard System (ISS) in the RVCTP: the role of Open Society Platform the Gambia (OSPG):

Process and goals for engagement

Since November 2021, OSPG, with support from the [Bank Information Center \(BIC\)](#), has engaged the RVCTP Project Implementation Unit (PIU) in the Ministry of Agriculture on the Rice Value Chain Transformation Project. Because the government receives funding for the project from the AfDB, the project must adhere to the AfDB's Integrated Safeguards System, which are rules and policies that aim to identify and mitigate risk in order to prevent environmental and social harms from occurring. The ISS serves as an important "foot in the door" for civil society organizations (CSOs) and communities seeking to hold the AfDB and their governments accountable to financing and implementing sustainable and inclusive development projects.

Drawing on best practices from monitoring [The Gambia COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Project](#) (along with its [AF1](#) and [AF2 for the vaccine project](#)) and [The Gambia Essential Health Services Strengthening Project](#) World Bank-funded projects, OSPG reviewed available information on the project through the Ministry and AfDB websites, and then conducted field visits and interviews with project-affected communities, staff of agricultural services at the regional levels, and national consultants who designed RVCTP and prepared the Environmental and Social Management Plan (ESMP).

The objective was to monitor and conduct advocacy at country and international levels - with the Government of The Gambia and the African Development Bank (AfDB) - to promote more effective stakeholder engagement, greater social accountability, and transparency in project implementation, as well as the inclusion of marginalized groups, women, youth, and persons with disabilities in project benefits.

Findings:

Stakeholder engagement: OSPG's monitoring found that stakeholder engagement and participation of the project's beneficiaries was very low during the design of the project. The findings showed that 10 out of 11 communities visited were not consulted during the design stage. Stakeholder engagement throughout the project cycle is important to build community trust and ownership and contributes to sustainable and inclusive development.

Risk mitigation: At the time of OSPG's monitoring, the project had been implemented without an Environmental and Social Management Plan (ESMP)

for two years, which is in violation of the ISS. The purpose of the ESMP is to consider and develop adequate measures and controls that minimize and mitigate the potential environmental and social risks and impacts identified during the project's implementation. Furthermore, the OSPG found that the Terms of Reference (ToRs) for the ESMP did not include risks related to GBV, sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, and abuse (SEA/H), child sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment (child SEA/H), child labor, as well as the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the rice value chain. The communities identified these as risks that needed to be addressed for better project implementation and outcomes whilst protecting vulnerable groups in the communities.

Inadequate access to project information: Another finding was limited disclosure and access to project information. AfDB, RVCTP and the Ministry of Agriculture websites had little or no information about the project. Inadequate access to project information hinders democratic accountability and community participation which impacts the sustainability of development.

Child labor: Child labor is common in the project area mainly because of household poverty, limited access to quality education, inadequate labor-saving technologies, and traditional attitudes towards children's participation in agriculture. Although no child labor was tied to the activities financed by this project, the communities revealed that children from Guinea Bissau were hired as migrant workers during rice harvesting time. Because of the significant risks of child labor, the Government of the Gambia and AfDB should channel resources into increasing labor-saving technologies on farmlands that can reduce child labor in the agriculture sector. At project monitoring time in November 2021, the project lacked measures to address child labor.

Inclusion of persons with disabilities: Monitoring revealed that there were no specific measures taken to include persons with disabilities in the RVCTP. There is still a need to initiate measures that facilitate the participation of persons with disabilities in the rice value chain as well as people who are exposed to the devastating effects of poverty and food insecurity.

Grievance Redress Mechanism: As of November 2021, there was no Grievance Redress Mechanism (GRM) system in place since the project's inception in 2019. The absence of a GRM exacerbates limited information flow and hinders reporting cases such as GBV, child SEA, child labor, and the misuse of project

resources (which is a recurring issue according to community members). Additionally, community members alluded to abuse/thefts of project resources from previous projects but were unable to report them.

Inadequate capacity and knowledge to implement the Safeguards and National Laws: Monitoring also revealed that project staff, implementing partners, and project beneficiaries have limited or no knowledge of AfDB Integrated Safeguard System (ISS) and national laws and safeguards that apply to the project. Moreover, it is unclear who to hold accountable for violating the safeguards and national laws. Limited or no knowledge of AfDB Integrated Safeguard System (ISS) and national laws could harm both the beneficiaries and the environment if risks are not properly identified or mitigated.

Environmental impact: OSPG found pollution of ground and surface water by the agro-chemicals, such as chemical fertilizer productivity enhancement, which have the potential to affect the quality of both surface and ground waters, as well as human health and the life of the aquatic organisms. The methane gas emission from the paddy fields contributes to poor air quality. The project beneficiaries use light farm machinery utilizing fossil fuel, which contributes to Greenhouse Gas emissions and further contributes to destabilization/loosening of the soil structure. The outcome of these changes is increased soil erosion, siltation, and sedimentation in the rice fields and in clogged canals, waterways, among others. However, all of the environmental risks and mitigation measures were identified in the ESMP.

Outcomes/Achievements of OSPG engagement:

OSPG documented the findings of their monitoring visits and field interviews, and shared this information with the PIU and AfDB, sharing their concerns and recommendations. A primary concern raised by OSPG was that the project had failed to identify significant social risks in the ESMP TOR, and that the ESMP had never been finalized. Following continued advocacy on the project's social impacts, OSPG was invited by the PIU to provide technical support to the RVCTP team in drafting the ESMP. During this process, OSPG successfully advocated for the inclusion of social issues, such as GBV, child SEA/H, and child labor in the ESMP Terms of Reference (TORs) and in the final

[ESMP](#), and establishing a project GRM.

Furthermore, as a result of OSPG advocacy, Regional Agriculture Directorates of Central River Region North/South and Upper River Region, who were not consulted during the ESMP drafting, were later consulted and their views were incorporated. The involvement of CSOs and stakeholders in the design of the ESMP with the inclusion of their feedback in the final document contributed to a more inclusive ESMP that better captures and addresses risks in the project context, which in turn facilitated a more efficient approval process by the Gambia National Environmental Agency (NEA). ***“OSPG’s contribution has significantly improved the ESMP, contributed to the document approval by the Bank without major critical feedback regarding the quality of the report. It is also a laudable achievement for the PIU of an agricultural project of the government to popularize RVCTP ESMP and also to push for its full implementation”*** (Social Development Officer, RVCTP).

To strengthen and institutionalize compliance with ISS in the ESMP implementation, between July 19th and 24th, OSGP and the NEA trained project staff and 225 Farmer Field School (FFS) facilitators on the AfDB ISS policy regarding social risks, including child labor, GBV, child SEA/H, and the role and functionality of the GRM. As a result of OSPG’s successful training and continuous engagement with the FFS, the FFS came up with their own solution to address the scarcity of farm labor through collectively organizing and providing labor to farms in need, thus gradually eliminating child labor. A scholar, who teaches children Islamic religion in Wassu village and hires them as labor to make ends meet, was sensitized through the ESMP/ISS training on laws and acts that prohibit child labor.

The ESMP and ISS training popularized the importance of community engagement in project implementation and, as a result, the FFS-trained facilitators are in turn training other FFSs and communities. This will greatly contribute to community ownership of the project and improve community engagement and participation in the project’s implementation.

OSPG, RVCTP field staff, and Implementing Partners held public sensitizations of the ESMP via Community Radios and FFS WhatsApp platforms. The Regional Listening Groups participated in a weekly live-radio-phone-in program on the ISS, ESMP, and smart agricultural production. This contributed to more awareness of project benefits, knowledge and compliance to ISS, and the role communities can play

in the ESMP/project implementation. ***“We never knew that there was such an instrument (ISS Mechanism) aiming to improve accountability and transparency in implementing AfDB-funded projects. We appreciated sharing the ISS Mechanism which has improved our knowledge and reduced staff and community exposure to risks of violating the RVCTP project agreement”*** (RVCTP staff anonymous).

As a result of OSPG’s advocacy and community sensitization activities, a functional GRM was established in Wassu village in the Central River Region. RVCTP beneficiary groups in Wassu village in partnership with project field staff and Regional Directorates initiated a Grievance Mechanism and reporting platforms within the five FFS structures in the community. OSPG is advocating to see this model replicated throughout the project area and in other projects as well.

OSPG advocacy contributed to RVCTP improving information disclosure and access, for example, publishing the ESMP on the Ministry of Agriculture’s website and developing project documentaries in partnership with Gambia Radio and Television Services. All of these initiatives are geared towards the full operationalization of the project communication strategy that facilitates information disclosure and access. These initiatives have contributed to improved stakeholder engagement, accountability, and transparency, as well as reducing child labor in the rice fields in three main rice production regions in the Gambia.

Opportunities Beyond RVCTP:

AfDB and the Government of the Gambia can draw on the lessons from this project and the experience of engaging with civil society in project implementation to institutionalize and broaden the role of CSOs in ISS/project implementation and monitoring to improve effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability in AfDB-funded projects.

At the country level, the engagement of CSOs in the drafting and implementation of the ESMP serves as a positive model or experience for the Central Project Coordination Unit (CPCU) at the Ministry of Agriculture and improves stakeholder engagement in order for the benefits of the numerous agricultural development projects to be maximized for the beneficiaries. OSPG has already begun engaging

with the CPCU to apply the lessons from the RVCTP to other projects in the rice sector. Furthermore, the initiative adds value to Gambia's Government Policy Reform commitment towards good governance, in particular, accountability, transparency, and information discourse and access policy.

At the RVCTP level, recommendations made to the recently concluded project's Mid-Term Review (MTR) and the ESMP will contribute to achieving the project's objectives by 2023, if properly implemented.

Lessons learned:

Continuous engagement with government agencies builds enduring partnerships. CSOs and Government agencies share a similar vision, however, building working relationships for a positive change depends on an engagement approach by CSOs' that mobilizes and secures enduring partnership. For example, OSPG used stakeholder engagement and dialogue rather than a confrontational style and this helped OSPG secure institutional and/or individual buy-in from government agencies, who always felt suspicious working with CSOs on any project.

CSO project monitoring data and facts secure easy buy-in from partners. Evidence-based advocacy engagement means using data and facts as a strategy that mobilizes and secures buy-in from partners who feel suspicious and resistant to change. For example, OSPG provided evidence of limited public participation in the project design, limited access to information and disclosure of vital project information (in terms of the ESMP and annual report, among others), and exclusion of GBV, child SEA/H, and child labor in the ESMP Terms of Reference (ToR). These gaps constituted a violation of AfDB operational standards. However, pointing out all of this using documented evidence convinced the RVCTP staff and consultants, who then took immediate actions to address issues in the ESMP and implementation activities.

Achieving positive change through a strong coalition. Building broad constituencies of stakeholders to address a common problem results in a positive change of behavior that reverses the fear and resistance to change through learning and sharing.

For example, securing buy-in from partners such as RVCTP staff, agricultural staff, and farmers on the idea of monitoring the ISS implementation in the project also helped to identify key shortcomings. Together, different groups impacted by the project's design and implementation came up with concrete steps to resolve the majority of the issues/problems identified.

Social audit enhances appetite for accountability and transparency. In response to CSO and community recommendations, the project implementation unit, with support from OSPG and the RVCTP team, established the first GRM for the project. This demonstrates that CSOs and community partnership drove public education and awareness on the ISS and increased the appetite for accountability and transparency among the communities, particularly in the rural areas where access to information remains a challenge. As a result, the GRM for the community of Wassu in the RVCTP project area will benefit over 125 FFS participants.

Conclusion:

The positive changes in the project resulting from OSPG and community members' engagement with the project team show the impact that civil society can have by raising their concerns and sharing their perspectives. OSPG encourages other CSOs to draw from the lessons of their engagement in the RVCTP project and to participate in development projects that impact their communities to push them to be more inclusive and responsive to local contexts. OSPG and partners also urge the Government of the Gambia and the AfDB to strengthen working relationships with CSOs during project design and implementation. OSPG's involvement in this project resulted in positive outcomes for RVCTP beneficiaries, as well as support to the PIU in identifying and responding to social impacts. This is a case that demonstrates the positive changes which can result from constructive and informed civil society engagement on development projects. Both the Government of the Gambia and the AfDB should continuously engage CSOs during project implementation for sustainable development.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON THE ISSUES RAISED IN THIS REPORT, PLEASE CONTACT OPEN SOCIETY PLATFORM OF THE GAMBIA AT:

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