Livelihoods and Gender Equality Learning Paper

Linking Gender Equality, Food Security and Livelihoods: Learning from Integrated Programming in Sierra Leone.

Context

Gender inequality affects whether improvements in agricultural production translate into better nutrition, food security and household wellbeing. Women make substantial contributions to farming, care, nutrition and income generation, but may have less influence over land, productive resources, income and household decisions. Unequal care and domestic workloads can also restrict their participation in agricultural training, savings groups and community decision-making.

Programme assessments in Sierra Leone identified persistent inequalities in household and community life. In the Yoti-Yoti baseline, 60% of women reported being consulted in household decisions, while 43% of respondents believed that men should make the final decision. The assessment also identified harmful attitudes concerning women's status and violence against women. These findings underline the need for livelihoods programmes to consider not only what households produce, but also who makes decisions, controls resources and carries unpaid work.

Concern's livelihoods programmes in Sierra Leone have therefore combined climate-smart and nutrition-sensitive agriculture with Farmer Field Schools (FFS), Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) and community dialogue approaches. FFS provide a practical entry point because it brings women and men together regularly to test agricultural practices, discuss production challenges and how the practices answer these challenges and reflect on household decisions linked to land, labour, food and income.

Across the programmes reviewed, the central learning is that technical agricultural support and gender equality work are mutually reinforcing. Improving production expands the resources available to households, while more inclusive household practices can influence whether those resources support food, health, nutrition, savings and resilience.

Key learning for donors and partners

FFS and other established livelihoods platforms can provide practical entry points for gender-transformative work. Their regular, participatory format makes it possible to connect farming and income with discussions about labour, care and control over resources. Future investment should support integrated programming, skilled facilitation and complementary community dialogue so that agricultural gains contribute more equitably to nutrition, wellbeing and resilience.

Overview

This learning paper examines Concern Worldwide Sierra Leone's experience of integrating FFS with gender-transformative and equality-sensitive approaches across livelihoods, nutrition and resilience programming. Drawing on learning from Linking Agriculture, Nutrition and Natural Resource Management (LANN), Nutrition Smart Community and Yoti-Yoti, it focuses on how practical farming spaces can support wider household and community change.

The paper draws on evaluations, annual reports, monitoring data, FFS documentation, gender analyses and participant testimonies to identify what worked, what changed, what challenges remained and what future programmes can learn. Its central message is that improvements in production, income and nutrition are more likely to contribute to lasting household wellbeing when programmes also address workload sharing, control over resources, social norms and intersecting barriers faced by women, young people, older people and persons with disabilities.

Overview of Farmer Field Schools

Concern uses FFS as practical learning spaces where farmers test ideas, observe field results and learn from one another. Their value in this paper is not only technical, but also social: FFS creates regular spaces where women and men can discuss farming decisions, access to resources, labour sharing and the use of food and income.

This makes FFS a useful entry point for integrating gender equality into livelihoods programming. As groups discuss land preparation, crop choices, training, inputs and harvests, facilitators can also explore who participates, who undertakes different tasks, who controls resources and who influences household decisions.

The Approach

Concern's approach integrates gender equality into practical livelihoods, nutrition and resilience activities rather than treating it as a separate awareness-raising component. FFS, VSLAs, Community Conversations and Living Peace groups provide regular spaces where women and men can connect farming, savings and nutrition with discussions about labour, care, income and control over resources.

The approach applies Concern's Equality Continuum by considering how gender intersects with age, disability, poverty, location and climate vulnerability. This shapes how activities are designed, facilitated and monitored so that participation is meaningful, safe and accessible, and so that programmes can address the barriers that limit women's agency, inclusive leadership and equitable access to productive resources.

In practice, livelihoods support builds production, income and resilience, while gender-transformative work addresses the household and community dynamics that influence how those gains are used. Linking these elements helps keep gender equality grounded in practical choices that participants already face in farming, food, savings and family wellbeing.

Partnerships with government ministries, district authorities, Food and Nutrition Security networks, local partners, community leaders and community-based groups support technical quality, alignment with national priorities and local ownership. These relationships help embed gender, climate and nutrition messages in systems that can continue beyond individual project cycles.

Integration of gender equality

Building on this integrated approach, gender equality is embedded into FFS activities rather than treated as a separate topic. As farmers discuss land preparation, crop selection, seed management, pests, harvesting and climate-smart practices, facilitators also raise household issues behind farming decisions, including task sharing, access to resources, control over crop income, and decisions on food, savings and investments. This makes gender equality practical and directly linked to farming, nutrition and family wellbeing.

This integration is important because equality-sensitive programming is not only about participation numbers, but it also requires attention to meaningful access, voice, safety, dignity and influence. In FFS, this means considering training times and locations, communication formats, facilitation methods, childcare and workload pressures, and whether women and other marginalised participants could participate without increased risk or backlash.

Discussions focus on gender issues that shape daily household life and livelihoods. Women and men reflect on farming roles, unpaid care work, women's access to land, seeds, tools, training and extension support, and women's influence over crop choices, harvests, sales, savings and spending. Men's involvement in nutrition, childcare and household work is also discussed. Grounding these issues in real farming situations makes gender dialogue easier to understand, less confrontational and more useful for families.

FFS also reinforces wider gender work through Living Peace groups, Community Conversations, VSLAs and household dialogue. Discussions on planting, harvesting and crop sales create natural openings to talk about shared labour, childcare, food preparation and dietary diversity. Repeating these messages across different programme spaces helps connect gender equality to practical actions that households can apply in daily life. Over time, this wider exposure can support gradual shifts in social norms by making new practices more visible, familiar and socially acceptable.

Target groups and participation

The target group approach is consistent with Concern's focus on people living in extreme poverty and those facing intersecting barriers to rights, services, livelihoods and decision-making. It recognises that women and girls are not a homogeneous group and that age, disability, marital status, livelihood role, location and poverty status can shape how people experience food insecurity, climate risk and exclusion from agricultural support.

The integrated approach engages women, men, households and wider communities because change in livelihoods, nutrition and gender equality depends on more than individual knowledge. Women are central because of their roles in production, nutrition, childcare, savings and food management. Men are also included because they often influence decisions on land, income, crop sales, spending, labour and community leadership.

Joint participation helps turn learning into household change. When women alone receive training, limited decision-making power, land access, income control or unpaid care expectations can restrict what they apply. When men participate too, they are more likely to see the benefits of shared decisions, women's involvement in farming and savings, improved nutrition and balanced responsibilities. This helps reduce resistance, strengthen dialogue between spouses and make gender equality part of a shared household and community agenda.

Facilitation and implementation

Implementation quality depends heavily on facilitation. Facilitators create safe, participatory spaces where farmers can connect production challenges with sensitive issues such as workload sharing, resource control, communication, masculinity and violence prevention.

Facilitators played three main roles. They guided technical learning by helping farmers observe demonstration plots, compare practices, and apply climate-smart and nutrition-sensitive techniques. They linked these lessons to household wellbeing by encouraging discussion on farming decisions, food and income use, labour sharing and cooperation between women and men. They also connected FFS, VSLAs, Community Conversations and Living Peace groups so that messages on production, savings, nutrition and gender equality reinforced one another.

Equality work can create resistance if poorly handled and therefore facilitation also needs to follow a do-no-harm approach. This means grounding discussions in lived experience, avoiding blame, engaging men and community leaders constructively, and linking sensitive topics to shared household goals such as food security, children's wellbeing, reduced conflict and improved resilience. It also requires attention to protection risks and clear boundaries around GBV, safeguarding and referral information.

Concern's investment in facilitator capacity is therefore essential. Training support, including working with Sonke Gender Justice -a non-profit organization that advocates for gender equality, human rights, and the prevention of gender-based violence- strengthens understanding of gender-transformative approaches and provides tools for reflective dialogue. Community animators, lead farmers and trained facilitators become trusted change agents who

can translate messages into local language, adapt discussions to community realities, and reinforce behaviour change over time.

Impact

The following results show how the combined model of FFS, VSLAs, community dialogue and skilled facilitation contributed to change across four linked areas: agricultural practice, women's participation, household decision-making, and food security and nutrition. These results reflect the wider integrated model, not FFS alone.

Agricultural practices and crop diversification: FFS participants adopted improved and climate-smart farming practices, including System of Rice Intensification (SRI), proper spacing, composting, integrated pest management, mulching, improved seed varieties and zero burning. Monitoring data showed crop diversification increased from 2.8 products per household at baseline to 4.76 by Year 2, exceeding the 3.36 target. Demonstration plots also recorded rice yields about 80% higher than non-FFS plots, although the source and methodology should be confirmed before publication.

Women's participation and leadership: Under LANN, women's participation in meetings increased from 84.1% to 98.1%, leadership roles increased from 34.6% to 67.6%, and active participation in decision-making increased from 67.5% to 84.9%. By the end of LANN-NSC, 96.2% of women reported being able to influence community-level decisions. These figures suggest stronger participation and reported influence, while qualitative evidence is still needed to understand changes in voice, agency and control over resources.

Household relationships and decision-making: Under LANN-NSC, joint household decision-making increased from 12% at baseline to 60.7% at endline, and 60% of households reported making decisions jointly on healthcare, purchases and income use. Living Peace groups also reported greater acceptance of men's involvement in childcare and domestic work. These findings indicate progress in household cooperation, although self-reported changes should be interpreted with care.

Income, food security and nutrition: Programme monitoring reported improvements in income, food consumption and dietary diversity. Ninety-one percent (91%) of households reported increased income, mainly linked to improved farming practices and VSLA participation. Women's minimum dietary diversity rose from 35% to 96.5%, child dietary diversity reached 92%, exclusive breastfeeding increased to 91.3%, and 95.9% of households achieved acceptable food consumption scores.

Community-level influence and norm change: Programme evidence also points to wider influence beyond direct participants. Non-participating farmers adopted improved practices after observing demonstration plots, while new VSLAs formed independently after communities saw the benefits of existing groups. Women became more active in leadership structures, and discussions on gender roles, labour sharing and household decision-making became more accepted in community spaces.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that integrated livelihoods platforms can support both technical and social change when agricultural learning is combined with savings, nutrition, facilitation and repeated dialogue on household roles and decisions.

Evidence table

Area of impact	Evidence	What this shows	Source / information needed
Agricultural productivity	Rice yields are around 80% higher[1] on demonstration plots.	FFS supports adoption of improved practices.	FFS data from LANN and Yoti Yoti in Port Loko and Tonkolili 2022-2025
Household decision-making	Joint decision-making increases from 43% to 87%'	Gender dialogue influences household power dynamics.	Yoti Yoti annual survey 2025
Women's leadership	Women in leadership rises from 34.6% to 67.6%.	Women gain influence in community platforms.	Yoti Yoti annual survey 2025
Nutrition	Women's minimum dietary diversity rises from 35% to 96.5%.	Production and household decision-making gains support nutrition.	Yoti Yoti baseline in 2023 and annual survey in 2025

Testimonials

"In the business skills training we learned to keep the business money separate so we can keep track of our profits. On Friday we were able to harvest and go to sell in the market, before we could only buy now we have enough to eat and to sell." **Agnes Sesay, VSLA money counter and volunteer animator.**

"Before joining the Yoti Yoti programme, I struggled to support my family through casual farm work. The programme taught me about saving, nutrition and food groups, and I used a VSLA loan to start a small business selling cosmetics and jewellery. I have since bought a plot of land, where I hope to build a house and sell it so I can create a more stable future for my family. My partner, Unisa, and I also took part in the Living Peace, which helped us learn how to communicate and strengthened our relationship. The village water pump has made a real difference too, helping to reduce illness in our community." **Isha Turay, mother of two boys.**

"My farm plot is on a rehabilitated swamp near my home in Magborkorr. As well as being part of the Farmer Field school I am also Secretary of the local VSLA." **Assanatu Konteh.**

"The VSLA was like someone pulled us from drowning. We are ***self-reliant*** *now. We don't ask other places for help and we're happy. We have less stress, we eat well and we are happy".* **Living peace couple Mohamed Alhaji Issa Kamara and wife Emma Bangura in Port Loko district.**



Animator and VSLA money counter Agnes Sesay in Mathonkara in Tonkolili district. Photo: Concern Worldwide.



Assanatu Konteh at her farm plot on a rehabilitated swamp near her home in Magborkorr, Sierra Leone. Assanatu is also Secretary of the local VSLA. Photo: Kieran McConville/Concern Worldwide.



Romankeneh Living peace couple Mohamed Alhaji Issa Kamara and wife Emma Bangura in Port Loko district. Photo: Concern Worldwide.

Challenges

While the evidence points to promising changes, several challenges affected implementation and show where future programmes need stronger planning and sustained support. Deep-rooted gender norms continued to influence land ownership, control over income, access to productive resources and expectations about women's and men's roles. While programmes supported improvements in women's participation and household decision-making, more structural changes around assets, authority and social expectations require sustained engagement. Continued conversations through FFS, Community Conversations and Living Peace sessions helped create repeated opportunities to discuss these issues, build trust and reinforce messages over time.

Resistance also emerged when women and men adopted roles that challenged expectations. Men who supported childcare, domestic work or joint decision-making could face ridicule, while women's increased confidence was sometimes seen as challenging household authority. This underlines the need to work with the wider community, not only individual participants. Living Peace sessions, household dialogue and facilitated community meetings can help reduce resistance by involving spouses, community leaders and other influential actors in discussion of shared household goals, reduced conflict and family wellbeing.

Operational constraints, including seed procurement delays, variable seed viability, poor seed storage and handling by community members, and seasonal timing, reduced opportunities for full-cycle FFS learning. These issues weakened demonstration, comparison and follow-up, particularly where activities were not fully aligned with the crop calendar or where seed quality declined before planting. Future programmes should plan procurement and distribution around seasonal calendars, strengthen guidance on seed storage and handling, build in contingency time, and ensure follow-up support so that farmers can complete the full learning cycle from planting to harvest and post-harvest decision-making.

The integrated model also placed high demands on facilitators, who needed to combine agricultural guidance with careful discussion of power, violence, resource control and household relationships. This reinforces the need for mentoring, refresher support and monitoring that captures both technical progress and social change. Where access to land or productive resources was a barrier, facilitated meetings with landowners and local leaders were also important for opening dialogue, clarifying concerns and supporting more equitable access arrangements.

Key learning and implications for future programmes

Design livelihoods and gender equality work together. Agricultural gains are more likely to improve nutrition, wellbeing and resilience when programmes also address household communication, workload sharing, control over resources and women's influence. Gender analysis, safeguarding and transformative dialogue should be built into livelihoods programming from the design stage.

Use FFS as an entry point, not the only gender intervention. FFS offers a practical space to discuss farming, labour, income and household decisions, but deeper change requires complementary platforms such as VSLAs, Living Peace groups, Community Conversations and household dialogue.

Engage men while keeping women's rights and agency central. Household change is stronger when women and men are engaged together, but men's engagement should reinforce, not replace, women's empowerment. Programmes should continue tracking women's voice, safety, leadership, resource access and control over income.

Invest in facilitation, local capacity and safeguarding. Safe and effective gender dialogue depends on skilled facilitators, lead farmers, community animators and partners. Budgets should include training, mentoring, refresher support, adapted materials, referral information and protection mainstreaming.

Allow time and monitor deeper change. Changes in attitudes, household relationships, workload sharing and norms take time. Programmes should use realistic change pathways and combine quantitative indicators with qualitative evidence, participatory monitoring, outcome harvesting and contribution analysis.

Apply an intersectional climate and equality lens. Gender, age, disability, poverty, location and climate vulnerability shape who can access training, land, inputs, information and decision-making. An analysis of these factors within programme assessments should guide targeting, facilitation, accessibility, safeguarding, monitoring and budgets throughout the project cycle.

Value for Money (VfM) and sustainability

These lessons also have implications for value for money and sustainability. The integrated approach has potential value for money advantages because it uses existing community platforms for technical learning, savings, nutrition, climate adaptation, dialogue and behaviour change. In line with Concern Sierra Leone's VfM guidance, value should be assessed through economy, efficiency, effectiveness, equity and sustainability, rather than cost per beneficiary alone.

Equity-adjusted VfM is particularly relevant. Reaching women, persons with disabilities, remote households or groups facing high vulnerability may increase delivery costs but can generate greater social value by enabling people who would otherwise be excluded to benefit meaningfully. Reasonable accommodation, adapted communication, accessible training locations, adjusted session times, partner capacity strengthening, safe facilitation and additional monitoring are therefore core parts of programme quality and value, rather than optional additions.

Conclusion

Concern's experience in Sierra Leone suggests that FFS can provide a practical platform for integrating gender equality into livelihoods, nutrition and resilience programming. The evidence shows that technical improvements in farming are more likely to contribute to household wellbeing when they are accompanied by changes in decision-making, workload sharing, access to resources and control over income. Learning from LANN, Nutrition Smart Community and Yoti-Yoti also demonstrates that FFS are most effective when combined with complementary approaches such as Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs), Living Peace groups, Community Conversations and household dialogue, creating multiple opportunities for reflection, behaviour change and collective action.

The findings further highlight that skilled facilitation is central to success. Facilitators helped participants connect agricultural learning with discussions on household relationships, resource control, nutrition and shared responsibilities, making gender equality practical and relevant to everyday life. Evidence also suggests that benefits extended beyond direct participants, with neighbouring farmers adopting improved practices, new savings groups emerging independently and discussions on gender roles becoming more accepted within communities.

The central lesson is that better yields matter, but they do not automatically lead to improved nutrition, savings or resilience if decisions, labour and resources remain unequal. Future programmes should therefore design livelihoods and gender equality work together, invest in skilled facilitation, engage women and men, and allow enough time to support changes in household practice and social norms.