



BRIDGING PEOPLES

**Baseline Assessment of the
Sustainable Agriculture & Women's
Empowerment (SAWE) Project**

Submitted to:

MARY MACKILLOP
today

1. Executive Summary

Background and Context

The Sustainable Agriculture and Women’s Empowerment (SAWE) Project is a multi-sectoral livelihoods initiative implemented by Mary MacKillop Today (MMT). It builds on a decade of community engagement in the Railaco Posto of Ermera Municipality, transitioning from the previous crop-focused Vanilla “Beans of Hope” project into a comprehensive livelihood diversification program. The SAWE project expands into four new *suku* (villages) within Posto Railaco: Fatukero, Tokoluli, Lihu, and Matata.

The primary objective of SAWE is to improve the livelihoods of rural households through inclusive, community-managed multi-sectoral cooperatives. To avoid repeating past project limitations, this baseline study was designed to map economic conditions, establish a monitoring framework, and outline risk-mitigation measures across the four new target *suku*.

The baseline study applied a participatory, strengths-based, and inclusive approach. A Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) lens was integrated into all research stages. Data collection involved a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, encompassing:

- A gap and data analysis of MMT’s raw contextual data.
- 72 household-level surveys to profile socio-economic status.
- 4 focus group discussions (FGDs) with community members incorporating seasonal calendars and crop listing.
- 1 FGD with MMT staff presenting community-level data and co-designing a stakeholder consultation workshop.
- 1 internal participatory analysis workshop with the MMT field team.
- 1 Municipal stakeholder consultation workshop in Gleno, Ermera
- 5 semi-structured interviews (SSIs) with other key stakeholders.

Key Findings

- **Socio-Economic Profiles and Poverty:** The surveyed households average slightly more than 6 household members. Economic vulnerability is high; 65% of households fall under the national poverty line, and 61% fall under the international extreme poverty line (\$2.15 USD/day). *Suku* Matata stands out as the most economically disadvantaged (with 90% earning less than \$50 USD/household member), while *Suku* Lihu is comparatively better off. Income analysis shows a clear gender income gap. A significant number of women have no earnings due to their unpaid care work responsibilities. Among farmers, male farmers averaged \$187 USD/month versus \$81 USD for female farmers. While many children help their parents in working the

fields, only 3% of school-aged children are out of school due to households relying on them for economic contribution.

- **Livelihood Systems:** Rural livelihoods are dominated by subsistence agriculture and informal trade, heavily dependent on coffee as the primary cash crop. Men carry out heavier harvesting/clearing labour, while women tend to manage processing and drying. Given limited local employment options, labour migration (e.g., to Australia, South Korea, and the UK) is becoming an increasingly popular pathway for young men.
- **Savings and Loans:** Community members are very interested in Savings and Loans groups to access affordable credit and improve money management, preferring community-led options over high-interest microfinance entities. Generally speaking, there is a higher exposure of women than men to Savings and Loans groups.
- **Agricultural Production and Market Obstacles:** Beyond coffee and vanilla, households cultivate diverse horticultural crops (e.g., maize, cabbage, tomatoes, and rambutan). However, collective selling is almost non-existent, and trade occurs individually. Farmers encounter significant structural barriers: severe transport costs, weak buyer relationships, and vulnerability to wet-season landslides that cut off transport.
- **Climate and Environmental Vulnerability:** Agricultural output is heavily constrained by climate risks including seasonal water scarcity, degraded natural springs, soil erosion from deforestation, periodic fires, and pest infestations.

Strategic Recommendations

1. **Utilize Savings & Loans Groups as a Project Entry Point:** Recognising their popularity (particularly among women) use these groups early in the project to cultivate trust, build financial literacy, and introduce cooperative principles. Ensure transparent guidelines and establish safeguards to shield the poorest households from risk of over-indebtedness.
2. **Invest in Cooperative Governance and Accountability:** Build strong systems supporting good cooperative governance, financial transparency, and clear accountability mechanisms, monitor closely and respond using adaptive management principles. Socialise these regulations and systems regularly among the membership, ensuring all members are aware of their rights and responsibilities.
3. **Promote Market-Driven Livelihood Diversification:** Promote integrated farming, and ensure livelihood activities supported under this project are guided by market demand rather than production alone by conducting basic market assessments before backing specific value-add ventures such as food processing. Only provide technical vanilla training to farmers who are able meet strict environmental and technical suitability criteria, and can wait 3-5 years before bringing to market.
4. **Strengthen Market Linkages Early in Project Implementation:** Facilitate relationships between farmer groups and institutional buyers and strengthen cooperative members' understanding of the use and value of intermediaries for improved market access. Leverage the cooperative model to form collective bargaining power, aggregate produce, and decrease transport expenses.

- 5. Strengthen Inclusive Participation and Leadership:** Support women to access higher-value livelihood activities to address the gender income gap, and promote leadership of women, young people and people with disabilities as cooperative office-bearers to strengthen succession planning. Collaborate closely with Disabled Persons Organizations (DPOs) to audit physical accessibility and support MMT & cooperatives in developing a practical disability inclusion strategy.
- 6. Integrate Climate and other Risk Mitigation into Livelihood Planning:** Promote drought-resilient crops and climate-resilient farming systems, including local production of organic pesticides/fertilizers and localized terracing/water-saving techniques. Work with MAPFF to anticipate climate and/or pest attack pressures via tracking of seasonal calendars, and draw on local knowledge to mitigate risks and respond to climate pressures.
- 7. Establish Strong Monitoring, Learning, and Adaptive Management Systems:** Support adaptive management by continuing to refine localized seasonal calendars to support evidence-based planning, establish routine community feedback loops, and track clear, long-term inclusion outcomes for women and persons with disabilities.