



TECHNICAL PROGRESS REPORT

PROGRESS REPORT ON HARNESSING GENDER AND SOCIAL EQUALITY FOR RESILIENCE IN AGRI-FOOD SYSTEMS (HER+)



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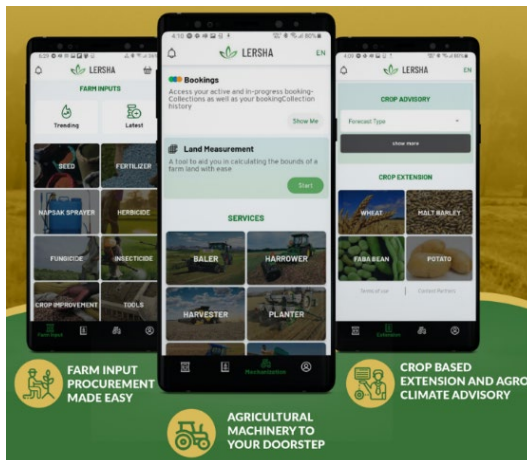
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TITLE OF AGREEMENT	HARNESSING GENDER AND SOCIAL EQUALITY FOR RESILIENCE IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS (HER+)
AGREEMENT NUMBER	C23RPM159
AGREEMENT PARTNER	Green Agro Solutions PLC – LERSHA
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ABSTRACT	The technical report highlights the progress and achievements of the HER+ Initiative, a collaboration between the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, WorldVeg, and SNV, on the Lersha platform by Green Agro Solution PLC. The project aims to contribute to stakeholders' understanding of how women can be equal partners and drivers of climate-smart solutions by 2024 and to develop and test methods and tools for designing and implementing Socio-Technical Innovation Bundles (STIBs). This report provides an update on the project's activities, including how social innovations like farmer registration, active agents, retailer shops, climate advisory services, access to finance, capacity-building initiatives, financial literacy training, extension services, and market linkages were integrated in the project. It discusses the challenges encountered, the lessons learned, and the next steps for the project's success.
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PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS



The HER+ initiative, in partnership with the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, WorldVeg, and SNV, collaborates with the Lersha platform by Green Agro Solution PLC. This partnership aligns its vision with HER+ to support the Veggies for Planet and People (V4P&P) project intervention through integrating social innovations - digital advisory services, input provision, market linkages, and access to finance for over 4,500 vegetable producers in the Wolmera and Ejere Woredas. The focus is on promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development in the West Show Zone of the Oromia region. Key highlights of the project include extensive farmer registration efforts, the engagement of 12 active agents, and the establishment of four retailer shops within the two woredas.

Objectives

The HER+ initiative aims to support the Veggies for Planet and People (V4P&P) project intervention. This support involves co-designing socio-technical innovation bundles, which include digital solutions. The aim is to enhance the livelihoods of smallholder farmers in the Wolmera and Ejere woredas by improving their access to social and technical bundles such as agricultural inputs, knowledge, and financial services. Ultimately, this effort would contribute to increasing the region's agricultural productivity and food security as farmers become more empowered and resilient.

MILESTONES ACHIEVED

Project Launch:

The project officially began on July 1, 2023, with the signing of the funding agreement.

The second phase aimed to lay the groundwork for successful project implementation. The project's scope and objectives were meticulously defined during this phase through extensive discussions.

Stakeholder Engagement:

Key stakeholders, including local partners and relevant authorities, were identified and engaged in the planning process.

Project Scope & field assessment:

The project was geographically focused on the West Showa Zone, specifically in the Wolmera and Ejere woredas, indicating a localized and targeted approach.

The HER+ Initiative involved an in-depth field assessment of various aspects of agriculture in Wolmera and Ejere woredas. The findings revealed the predominant cultivation of a variety of vegetables by women farmers, guided by well-documented cropping calendars and varied productivity. Agricultural practices encompassed soil preparation, seed selection, irrigation, and effective input utilization, as well as livestock management and marketing strategies. The accessibility and affordability of agricultural inputs, extension services, market services, post-harvest technologies, and financial services exhibited variations between the woredas. Despite challenges, women played pivotal roles in different stages of vegetable production. These insights are pivotal for informed decision-making, facilitating targeted interventions to promote agricultural sustainability and gender equity in the region. Notably, farmers with access to SNV assistance showed significant improvements in various aspects of vegetable production compared to others.

Targeted Farmers: The project aimed to register over 5,000 farmers, focusing on women farmers, in the West Showa Zone, specifically in Wolmera and Ejere woredas. This implies a significant outreach effort to include a large portion of the farming community.

Input Procurement: The registered farmers could conveniently procure essential agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides through digital platforms. This can streamline the supply chain, making inputs more accessible and cost-effective.

Lersha Agents Training” was delivered at the Green Agro-Solution (GAS) office from September 25-26, 2023. The training aimed to refresh and enhance the information and skills of the potential Lersha agents in various areas, including agronomy, livestock production, Lersha application practice, and communication, entrepreneurship, marketing, sales, gender, and onboarding steps. The training was conducted for two consecutive days, with 12 potential Lersha agents, of which 4 are women from two woredas and the agricultural office focal from SNV retailers participating. On the second day, representatives from the Woreda agricultural offices and agro-dealers joined the training to encourage the onboarding process. To develop engagement and participation, the training was designed with various group activities, group work, and case studies in combination with PowerPoint slides and brochures. By organizing the agents into groups, we encouraged discussion, collaboration, and sharing of perspectives and experiences.

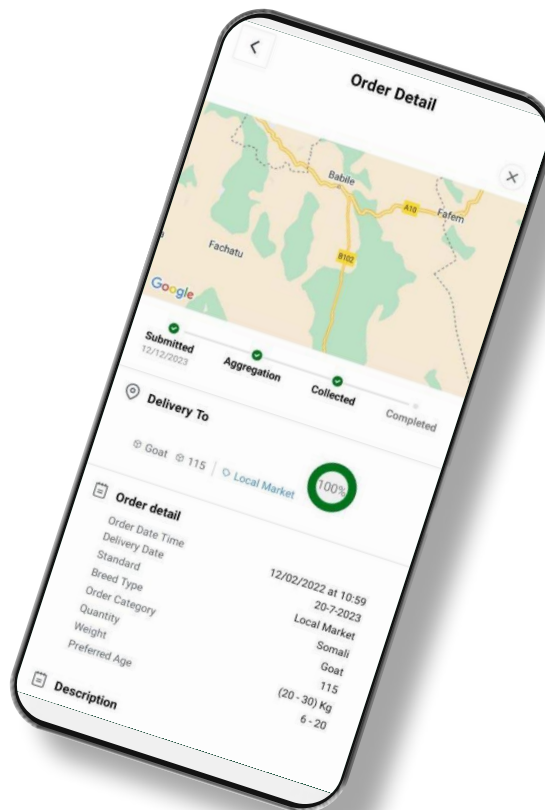


Table 1:- provides a clear overview of the project’s achievements in terms of farmer registration, gender distribution, agent engagement, and retailer shop establishment.

Milestone	Achievement		
Total Farmer Registration	Wolmera	Ejere Woreda	Total
	491	631	1,122
Male Farmers Registered	836		
Female Farmers Registered	286		
Active Agents Engaged	12		
Retailer Shops Established	4 (2 in each woreda)		

As of the implementation and starting date of September 29, 2023, the project has successfully registered 1,122 farmers in both Wolmera and Ejere woredas. Of these, 836 are male farmers, and 286 are female. Additionally, 12 active agents, of which 4 are women, have been engaged to facilitate project activities. The project has also set up four retail shops, with two shops in each of the two woredas.

Update on Issues during the Reporting Period

- **Personnel Changes:** There were no significant personnel changes during this period, ensuring project implementation and management continuity.
- **Financial Resources:** The project maintained stable financial resources, enabling the successful execution of planned activities. There were no major financial constraints or issues.
- **Research Sites:** The project continued to operate at the established research sites in West Showa Zone, Wolmera and Ejere Werdas. These sites provided a conducive environment for farmer engagement and data collection, contributing to the project’s progress.
- **Risks:** The project faced certain challenges related to the adoption of digital tools by farmers and the absence of mechanization services due to the nature of the project area. There are also some challenges related to access to mobile digital wallets, particularly in terms of access to micro-loans and mobile wallet accounts for farmers.

ACTIVITIES AND PLANNED RESULTS EXPECTED

During the reporting period, several key activities were planned and executed within the HER+ Initiative:

Service Categories: The Lersha aimed to offer diverse services to the registered farmers through their digital profiles. These services encompassed various aspects of agriculture and financial support, including:

Lersha Agent Allocation:

Lersha agents were strategically assigned to specific kebeles, ensuring adequate coverage and support for farmers.

Training for Lersha Agent on Extension service:

Compost and Organic Fertilize preparation focusing on women in both Wolmera and Ejere woredas participated in horticultural activities, playing essential roles in various stages of vegetable production. The training will be in collaboration with SNV and WorldVeg coordinators. The aim is to deliver quality extension service to the producers in both woredas.

Table 2:- This table now includes the planned training sessions for Lersha agents on October 26 and October 27, 2023, in Wolmera and Ejere on extension service Compost and Organic Fertilize preparation. The training will be in collaboration with SNV and WorldVeg coordinators.

DATE	SERVICE TYPE	WOREDA	FEMALE	MALE
OCT 26-2023	Compost preparation	Wolmera	20	14
	Organic Fertilizer preparation	Wolmera	20	14
OCT 27- 2023	Compost preparation	Ejere	20	14
	Organic Fertilizer preparation	Ejere	20	14

Climate Advisory Service:

The project continued its Climate Advisory Service with regular communication to farmers through SMS and voice blasts. These advisory services aimed to provide timely weather and agronomic information to support farmers in making informed decisions.

Table 3: Climate Advice service

CLIMATE ADVISORY SERVICE	OCT 15-2023	NOV 15-2023
SMS	2,240	
VOICE BLAST	2,240	

Total SMS Sent :2,240

Total Voice Blast :2,240

Access to Finance and Mobile Digital Wallet:

Major costs and average costs per hectare were assessed. Sources of finances for vegetable producers varied, and criteria for accessing credit services with financial institutions were noted. The strengths and shortcomings of available financial services were identified.

Lersha introduced access to financial services and digital wallets for farmers, offering financial inclusion and convenience. One of the critical aspects of agricultural development is providing financial support to farmers. Farmers could explore financial services through their digital profiles, including credit options, savings accounts, and insurance, thus addressing their financial needs and uncertainties. Also, Lersha aimed to offer flexibility to farmers by allowing them to choose from several **Digital mobile wallet options**, such as CBE, Telebirr, and Dube mobile wallets for conducting financial transactions.

Table 4: - Financial service

FINANCIAL SERVICE	OCT WEEK 1	NOV WEEK 2	NOV WEEK 3
ACCESS TO MICRO-LOAN			
MOBILE WALLET ACCOUNT	2,240		

Competition: Lersha has multiple wallet options that encourage healthy competition among providers, potentially leading to improved services and reduced transaction costs for farmers.

Customization of the Lersha App:

The Lersha app was customized to meet the specific needs of farmers and agents, enhancing the user experience and engagement. The Lersha platform has integrated with local marketplaces to provide farmers with real-time market data, enabling them to choose profitable crops and sell their produce. The platform also features buyer profiles, order management, payment integration, and logistics support. Farmers can receive payments directly through mobile wallets or bank transfers, reducing cash transaction risks. The platform also offers logistics and transportation support to ensure timely delivery of products to buyers.

Capacity-building Activities for Women Farmers:

Various capacity-building activities will be conducted to empower women farmers with knowledge and skills.

These activities included: Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Climate Change Training: Training sessions were organized to educate farmers about good agricultural practices (GAP) and climate change adaptation.

Financial Literacy Training: Farmers received financial literacy training to improve their financial management and decision-making.

Linking Markets:

Efforts were made to establish market linkages for farmers, facilitating access to markets for their agricultural products. While the project has made significant progress in farmer registration and engagement, it plans to continue with capacity-building activities for farmers. This includes training on good agricultural practices (GAP) and climate change adaptation. Financial literacy training will also be provided to empower women farmers with essential financial skills.



MAJOR CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

One of the major challenges encountered during the reporting period was related to access to finance and mobile digital wallets.

CHALLENGES	LEARNING EXPERIENCES
Obtaining Data from Woreda Offices	Improved Data Management: Establish efficient data management systems and build strong relationships with local authorities for data sharing.
Recruitment of Lersha Agents	Enhanced Recruitment Strategies: Develop targeted and effective strategies for identifying and selecting Lersha agents, refine selection criteria, and conduct extensive outreach.
Language Barrier	Using transaction personnel and developing culturally sensitive training materials and approaches, highlighting the importance of inclusivity in project planning and execution.
Limited Resources	Resource Optimization: Find innovative ways to optimize available resources and prioritize activities based on potential impact
Adaptability	Emphasize flexibility in project planning and implementation to overcome unexpected obstacles.
Community Engagement	Build relationships and trust within communities, engaging local stakeholders and involving them in project decisions.

Operational Challenges

- **Weak Mobile Network Infrastructure:** In some project areas, particularly in remote rural locations, mobile network infrastructure was weak. This posed challenges for providing timely advisory services and supporting digital transactions.
- **Lack of Smartphones:** Some Lersha agents faced challenges due to the absence of smartphones. The Lersha platform heavily relies on mobile technology for data collection and communication.
- **Market Price Fluctuations:** The horticultural market experienced fluctuations in produce prices. These fluctuations had an impact on farmers' income and financial planning. The project worked on strategies to help farmers manage these market dynamics and enhance their resilience.
- **Extreme Weather Events:** Unpredictable and extreme weather events, such as droughts or heavy rains, affected crop yields and farm operations in some areas. These events highlighted the importance of climate advisory services and climate-resilient agricultural practices, which the project was actively promoting.
- **Risk of Loan Default:** With the introduction of micro-loans, there was a risk of loan default by some farmers due to various factors, including market uncertainties and external shocks. The project closely monitored loan repayment rates and provided support to farmers facing challenges meeting their financial obligations.

NEXT STEPS TO BE TAKEN

The next steps for the project include addressing the challenges related to access to finance and mobile digital wallets. Additionally, the project will work on further linking farmers to markets to enhance their economic opportunities.

Table 5: Next steps to be taken

1. Capacity-building Training	Continued training and skill development sessions for farmers and Lersha agents will remain a top priority. These training programs will focus on sustainable farming practices, climate-resilient techniques, and financial literacy.
2. Price Shear Event Mitigation	In response to market price fluctuations, the project will implement strategies to mitigate the impact of price shocks on farmers' income. These strategies may include better financial planning, crop diversification, and cooperative marketing initiatives.
3. Model Farmers Engagement	The project will continue to engage model farmers who have successfully adopted improved agricultural practices. They will play a crucial role in demonstrating best practices to fellow farmers and providing guidance.
4. Onboarding more female farmers	The project aims to increase women's participation in agriculture by actively encouraging and onboarding more women farmers. Gender-sensitive initiatives and support will be provided to enhance their engagement.
5. Extension Content Preparation and Dissemination	The development and dissemination of relevant extension materials will ensure that farmers have access to up-to-date agricultural information. This will include content on compost preparation, organic fertilizer use, integrated pest management (IPM), and more.
6. Access to Finance and Mobile Digital Wallet	Enhancements to access to micro-loans and mobile wallet accounts will be made, making financial services more readily available to farmers. This will include addressing any issues related to loan repayment and mobile transactions.
7. Customization of the Lersha App	The Lersha app will be continually customized and updated to enhance its functionality, making it more user-friendly and tailored to the specific needs of the community.
8. LMS (Learning management System)	The project plans to implement an LMS for efficient and scalable training and knowledge sharing among farmers, agents, and other stakeholders.
9. Vegetable Aggregation	Initiatives to support vegetable aggregation will be expanded, facilitating easier access to markets and better price negotiations for farmers.
10. Financial Literacy Trainings	Ongoing financial literacy training will empower farmers to manage their finances effectively and make informed investment decisions.
11. Linking Markets	The project will continue efforts to connect farmers with markets, creating avenues for them to sell their produce at fair prices.

LESSONS LEARNT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PROJECT



Through the implementation of the HER+ Initiative and the valuable experiences gained, several key lessons have been learned, which carry important implications for the project's future direction:

- **Tailored Training is Essential:** The project has recognized the significance of providing tailored training to farmers and Lersha agents. By addressing their unique needs and challenges, the project can ensure more effective knowledge transfer and the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices.
- **Empowering Women Farmers:** The increased focus on onboarding and empowering women farmers has yielded positive results. This approach not only contributes to gender equity but also enhances the overall productivity of the community.
- **Continuous Learning:** The project emphasizes continuous learning through a Learning Management System (LMS) for efficient training and knowledge sharing. This approach can serve as a model for scalable education within the community.
- **Customization of the Lersha App Focusing on the following points**
- **Marketplace Integration:** Integrate the Lersha platform with local and regional marketplaces, allowing farmers to access information about market prices, demand, and potential buyers.

- **Real-Time Market Data:** Provide real-time market data and trends within the app. Farmers can benefit from up-to-date information on commodity prices, enabling them to choose the most profitable crops and timing for selling their produce.
- **Buyer Profiles:** Create profiles of potential buyers and off-takers within the app. The platform feature allows farmers to identify reliable buyers and establish direct connections with them, reducing the need for intermediaries and increasing profit margins.
- **Mitigating Price Shocks:** The project has learned to anticipate better and mitigate the impact of price fluctuations on agricultural income. This includes fostering better financial planning and market diversification.
- **Compost and Organic Fertilizer:** The focus on compost preparation and the use of organic fertilizers has been well-received. These sustainable agricultural practices can enhance soil health and productivity.
- **Supporting Women Farmers:** While our services are accessible to all farmers, we have a particular focus on empowering women farmers. We are dedicated to ensuring that women have equal access to inputs, mechanization, and financial resources, which are essential for their active participation in agriculture and improving their livelihoods.
- **Implications for the project's future** include a continued emphasis on tailored training, increased support for women farmers, technology adaptability, climate resilience, and financial inclusion. Moreover, leveraging the role of model farmers, fostering continuous learning, and mitigating price shocks are integral components of the project's approach. Sustainability is a core theme, with practices such as composting and organic fertilizer use contributing to long-term agricultural productivity. Lastly, strengthening market linkages will ensure that farmers benefit economically from their produce. These lessons and implications will guide the project's evolution and impact in the coming months and years.
- **Gender Inclusivity:** A notable feature of this project was its specific emphasis on women farmers. This reflects a commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment in agriculture, recognizing women's vital role in farming and food production.

COMMENTS AND WAY FORWARD



Lersha Platform expanding market reach, enhancing digital literacy, gathering feedback from Lersha agents, fostering partnerships with Local Shop and Government offices in the two woredas, promoting gender inclusivity, developing a sustainability plan, focusing on climate resilience, strengthening monitoring and evaluation, encouraging Lersha agent, community involvement, and facilitating knowledge sharing are vital considerations to fortify the HER+ project's impact and long-term sustainability.

Community Engagement: The project likely involved extensive community engagement and outreach activities to identify and register these farmers. This could include informational campaigns, registration drives, and possibly training or capacity-building initiatives. The coming weeks will have more of an engagement with VBA members, Lersha agents and the extension support system across the two woredas.

Agricultural Development: Onboarding more of farmers suggests a broader aim of supporting agricultural development in the targeted area, possibly through improved access to resources, services, or financial support. Market linkage and access to finance are the focus down the line.

Acknowledgment

We gratefully acknowledge the pivotal contributions and unwavering collaboration of all funders who supported this research through their contributions to the CGIAR Trust Fund. The collaboration of these esteemed partners, along with their dedicated teams, has been instrumental in advancing the objectives of our project. We extend our deep appreciation to all involved for their relentless commitment to innovative gender and social science research, focused on enhancing climate resilience and promoting women's empowerment within agri-food systems. This acknowledgment underscores the immense importance of partnership and collective vision in driving meaningful change.

Annex:

Annex 1: Training attendance of the Lersha agents and other training participants

Annex 2: Lersha agents training report

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