

Case Study - Economic and Social Change: The Experiences of Women Producers from the Skills for Handicraft Christmas Decoration Work-stream, Malampa Handicraft Centre

Introduction

The Skills for Handicraft program, under the Vanuatu Skills Partnership, has a number of different work streams operating in four provinces in Vanuatu. Work streams are groups of clients who receive targeted skills development training to assist them in the design, development, production and sale of handicrafts.

The work streams provide clients with a professional development pathway that will contribute to clients making progress and gains in certain **intermediate outcomes** in the Partnership Program Logic.

- Start new businesses or self-employment
- Improve their business and create employment
- Access new or improved employment
- Improved market access in target value chains

During July to September 2017 the Vanuatu Skills Partnership worked with women producers from the Malampa Handicraft Centre (MHC) to deliver a series of workshops on design, quality production and manufacturing of Christmas Decorations. This work stream was selected because of the marketing opportunity targeting international and expatriate sales that had been identified that gave the opportunity for the producers to earn a high level of income over a short period of time of only 3 to 4 months. **The immediate results were very positive:**

- ✓ 4000 + items sold
- ✓ 1.2 million Vatu+ income generated across the whole value chain
- ✓ 500,000 Vatu+ combined income generated for 12 women producers in a 2 to 3 month period
- ✓ 100,000 Vatu earned by the top individual producer
- ✓ 18% of the total income earned by one producer who is a woman with disability

In May 2018, the Skills for Handicraft team decided to meet with some of the producers who had participated in this activity. This was 6 months after the final sales had been made and 10 months since they had participated in the first skills development activity. We wanted to understand from the women’s perspective what changes had occurred for them since taking part in this work stream, and in particular to hear more about their current situation now, 6 months after they had earned income from what was a very successful and profitable but short term seasonal market.

Methodology

The **monitoring question** for this enquiry is: “What are the economic and social changes taking place for Skills Centre clients participating in skills development in target productive sectors supported by the Partnership?”

Collection

The Most Significant Change (MSC) story¹ approach was used to collect information about the experiences of five women producers, one of whom is a woman with disability. Each of the women

¹ https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/most_significant_change

shared their story with the provincial Skills Centre Staff, who are both women, and one is an Australian Volunteer working with Malampa Handicraft Centre.

The staff explained the purpose and process of story collection to each of the women – namely that they wanted to hear each woman’s personal story about participating in the Christmas decoration work stream. The staff used a simple guidance note that explained the MSC process. They were encouraged to actively listen and prompt the story-teller, but they were not to influence the content that was shared. The staff were encouraged to explore about both positive and negative changes that had occurred. They were also asked to sensitively and in a culturally located way explore whether the women, since participating in the activities, had experienced heightened risks or any incidents relating to personal safety and wellbeing. This was determined to be an important area to explore, given the high prevalence of different forms of violence against women and girls in the Pacific region, and the relationship, (that may be positive or negative), between increased economic empowerment and gender-based violence².

Each of the women gave permission for their stories to be shared and none required that it be shared anonymously. However, for the purposes of this report specific quotes taken from the stories are not attributed to individuals, and the name used in the Most Significant story that is shared has been changed.

Review and Learning

An advisor in the Skills for Handicraft program discussed the stories with two staff – (one local and one international and both women) from the Partnership’s Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) team. This helped to identify key themes emerging from the stories, and has helped structure this report.

In addition, 4 ni –Vanuatu staff from the Partnership (2 men and 2 women) from the MEL team, the Coordinator of the Skills for Handicraft program, and the Operations Manager participated in a short analysis and learning process that the MEL Advisor facilitated. Each of the stories was read out and the staff then discussed the most important issues and themes raised in the story. They also identified recurring themes and any specific issues that may have implications for the Partnership’s implementation and program management in the future.

At the end of the discussions, the staff selected one story as the “Most Significant” story. The story is shared at the end of this case study.

Participation

Motivation to join

All of the women producers were keen to accept the invitation to participate in the work stream activities. The key driver was the opportunity to earn more money. Most of the women were keen to learn new skills and to learn how to make new products.

Some women noted that to have most impact only those who are really motivated and active should be selected. In their experience the most active women had been not always been selected. They are concerned when this happens that is a waste of opportunity as other women with potential are excluded, as well as it being a waste of money.

² <https://pacificwomen.org/our-work/focus-areas/ending-violence-against-women/>

Enablers

All of the women identified someone who had encouraged or supported them to attend, which had made it easier for them to participate and concentrate on the activities. The enabler was generally a family member (husband, mother, sister, parents in-law, or children) who had encouraged them to join, and for most of the women the family members had also provided important practical support, in particular helping look after their children so the women could concentrate on the work.

None of the women identified any specific barriers that they had overcome to join the work stream, although some mention getting “permission” to go to the training from their husband.

“I had just had a baby and TVET had a babysitter who would look after my baby while I participated. So my husband agreed and encouraged me to come. My mother-in-law also agreed to help”.

One of the women who was the mother of a young baby said that providing childcare at the workshops, a practice advocated by the Partnership, had made it possible for her to participate.

Economic Gains

Income:

All of the women reported an increase in their income due to participating in this work stream. As was expected the women who produced high quality items generated large income from sales made in a short time period immediately before Christmas.

“I am very glad I earned more money with the Christmas decorations than with Copra --- and more than baskets as there are not always orders.”

A few women spoke about the income level not being retained at that initial high level, however in all of the stories there is evidence and examples that the women have continued to earn more income than they had prior to participating in the training. Many gave examples that they now earn more income because of the improved techniques and designs they had learned helps them to produce a higher quality and greater variety of baskets. Their products now more easily sell through the MHC and for more money than they did prior to the training.

“I bought cocoa, dried it and sold it in Lakatoro to help my community as the transport is expensive and I work hard to help my families. The distance you need to go to process the beans is far, and I was able to help.”

“From Christmas decorations we earn a lot of money. I did not earn as much from other handicrafts I had made (last year). Now I am more active with putting my products at the MHC this year.”

“I learned a lot about quality, and now my other products are much better quality and they sell faster.”

“I make baskets that are different. I look at other designs and create something different to them. Now Copra price has gone down handicraft is better money.”



Other examples were shared about ways in which the women had diversified their income sources. This was by investing some of the income from the Christmas decoration sales to contribute to other family and community based enterprises

Productivity

The Christmas decorations require less raw materials, which helped increase productivity.

“Christmas decorations are different because baskets use a lot of Pandanus. But with the decorations you use little. I can make a lot more Christmas decorations for the same cost of one basket.”



Because of the high income earned, other family members – children, parents and husbands - started to contribute to the production of the Christmas decorations, and now continue to help with the basket weaving.

Many of the women now earn money from their weaving, and because of this are no longer reliant on other forms of enterprise. Weaving is also preferred by many of the women and their families as it is a physically easier, less time consuming and the whole process from preparing raw materials to production can be done close to home. This is very important for women who generally take responsibility for more of the unpaid domestic and child care responsibilities in the home.

“I am teaching my 17 year old daughter to weave so she can help. I taught my husband to weave to help make the products so we can earn more.”

“--- now my kids know how to process Pandanus and like the work.”

“I like weaving because it is easy work. Copra is hard. You have to leave the island to work with Copra but with weaving you can stay and weave.”

Assets

Many examples were shared in the stories about the different ways the women spent the additional income they had earned. Most have purchased household items – new bed mattress, solar light, chainsaw; others have paid off some of their debts to the micro-finance provider; and a few have deposited savings. Others were very pleased that had paid their children’s school fees.

“I was able to buy a solar light that is a nice one that is bright. When I was in Lakatoro getting my money I saw that they were having a sale on solar lights so I went and collected my income and bought a light. Now I can weave at night”.

Many of the women have helped their families and friends. This was often in return for the help that they had received when busy at the training and making products.

“Yes I earned lots of money. I was able to buy a chainsaw for myself so I can use it to cut firewood. I was able to buy a double mattress. I shared with the family in Pinalum and in Walaand gave them money and food as they had helped look after the kids.”

Individual Change

Participating and succeeding in the work stream has strengthened the women's strong commitment to and motivation for their business, and their positive outlook on life. Some women expressed feelings of pride and happiness since they are now contributing more to the household's income.

"Because I am more creative I am more active now."

"I am proud of our work because every payday we can go to Lakatoro to get our money."

"---- I was able to make a good income and help out a lot with the income of. I was really glad and happy. That is a small thing but the income is a lot more than other things. I am proud of my work."



Social Changes

Family

Overall the family members have been supportive and encouraging, and many have started to learn the skills and help in the production. All of the women shared examples of positive changes in their relationships with their family members.

"After the Christmas decorations everyone saw the income was good. So, when an order comes everyone comes together to help me. They help cook Pandanus and prepare them. They also help cook and do my other housework."

The stories show a clear and positive relationship between improvement in women's economic empowerment and a shift in domestic and childcare responsibilities. Many of their husbands, and the children and parents, are now helping more in the household.

One women also gave an example of her now having more of a say in decisions made about the family, business and household. She attributed this positive shift to more collaborative decision-making to her now contributing more to the family and household income.

"Now we (my husband and I) discuss things together to work out what we work on and how we spend our money. We work together."

Only one of the women shared a negative experience. Although her husband appears to see the benefit of her work and the financial contribution she is making to the household, in contrast, her parents-in-law, particularly the father-in-law, are actively taking steps against her business.

"--- I planted some Pandanous and my family have pulled them out. I planted them again but they have pulled them out again. So now I plant them ay my mum's place in Wala. I have won money, and made a successful business, and this makes them jealous. I put Borao in the river and they remove them, but I go back and put it back again. It's the man (her father-in-law) that is the worst. When he is jealous I just give him money so he does not spoil my work. This year is better. My mother-in-law is OK. My man (husband) is happy that I earn money because he can see that the income has helped him. Last year I bought him a speaker and he was happy."

Relationships with Other Women

The women shared very positive experiences of meeting and working together with other women producers during the skills development activities. It is clear that being part of a like-minded and committed group of women was very positive and motivating and helped learning. The camaraderie helped the women to gain confidence, and there are many examples shared in the stories illustrating how the women in the group helped and supported each other.



“Sometimes I was not able to catch things and other times I was able to catch things, so sometimes I helped others and other times I got help.”

“I met lots of new women from other villages. It was good because when I did not know how to do something the women helped me. In my village I have lots of old women, but when I went to the workshop I met women of my own age who also weave.”

One producer, who is a person with disability, valued the friendships she had made during the training, and was pleased she had been able to help other members of the group.

“I made some new friends. In my place I do not get a chance to meet new people, but at the workshop I got to meet lots of women who also weave, and we could share ideas and learn. The trainer would teach us something but some women were a bit slow to pick up the new design, so I helped the women to catch up”.

Some of the women in the community who had not participated in the training but were interested in weaving were invited to work with the successful producers. But, they could not produce items of a sufficiently high quality. Because of this one of the producers who had completed the training had experienced other women in the community trying to undermine her and the other successful women’s reputation. This seemed to be motivated by jealousy about the income that she now earned.

One of the Skills for Handicraft coaches provided advice and support to try and help manage this situation.

“Everyone could see we would go to Lakatoro and come back and earn lots of money. They said that they want to go and to learn something new. So we told them we will share our skill, but it is important that they have to make good quality (products). --- If they did not make good quality it will spoil our reputation. --- we checked their quality a lot to make sure they were OK. That way they were not able to spread rumors about others not being allowed to learn new designs and (make) money. After that there were no more jealousies. Mary Anne (a coach) helped us with that. She did some awareness as well to take care of the rubbish thinking of the women in the community ---”.

Conclusions

Outcomes

There is strong evidence that positive economic and social changes have occurred for women who participated in the Christmas decoration work stream.

Overall, all of the women are now earning a higher income than they had prior to competing the work stream. The reason for this is that they now apply the new knowledge and skills gained to design and produce higher quality products for sale through the MHC.

Following participation in the skills development activities, all of the women report positive social and personal changes. The driver for this is the increase in the women's earning power. This has influenced a shift in expectations of family members about the roles and responsibilities of the women in the home, and for many there is greater sharing between the women and other family members including their husband of domestic and child care responsibilities.

Some negative changes have occurred. These mainly relate to relationships with other women in the community who have not been part of the activities. In one case this has also extended to unpleasant and destructive behaviour by one of the women producer's family members. The ni-Vanuatu staff who reviewed and discussed the stories were concerned that the woman in this story may be at risk of other types of violence within the family home. For this reason the staff selected it as being the **most significant** of the five stories that were reviewed.

The information from these stories provides evidence that the work stream has supported progress contributing achievement of the **intermediate outcomes**:

- ***Clients improve their business and create employment*** all of the women have expanded their enterprises and most were now employing family members in their enterprises
- ***Improved market access to target value chains*** occurred in the international market for the Christmas decorations and for the improved quality and new designs of baskets in the domestic tourist market accessed by the MHC

There is indication of progress being towards the long term program outcomes:

- *The status of women and people with disability is enhanced*
- *Clients have increased income*
- *Target value chains have improved productivity*

The MSC Process:

This is the first time that the MSC story collection and analysis has been used in the Partnership. The provincial level staff who collected the stories found the process useful and interesting and it was relatively easy to collect the stories.

The staff found the process of sharing and discussing the stories interesting and informative. It is an easy and quick way to help understand more about the different types of changes (planned and unexpected) that the program contributes to. The information in the stories, and the lessons learned from the analysis are very rich and will inform and influence the practice of the Partnership going forward.

Jennifer's³ Story

Before the workshop

I sold vegetables at the Market and sold some handicrafts. The amount of money I earned was small, and not really enough to support the family. It depended on the day.

In July 2017 I heard about the Christmas decorations training from the MHC. My Father-in-law, Mother-in-law and husband encouraged me to go and said they would look after the kids.

I wanted to go because I did not do anything other than work in the gardens. I wanted to join the MHC to make something but I only weaved mats. When I was little I did not know anything. I wanted to learn something new.

I knew that the workshops were good and you can learn some good things. I knew it would be a good opportunity. When I was chosen I was very happy because the Christmas decorations were so good.

During the training

I learnt designs for Christmas decorations: bells, broom star, mat star etc. I learnt quality, because I did not know about quality before. But once I joined the workshop I learnt about quality - the Pandanus must be white and not have black marks on it, it must be dry. I also made Burao and learnt how to process it so that it comes white good. This is a new thing I learnt. I also learnt some new skills about making everything the same size and follow instructions. This is a new thing that everything must be the same size.

I met lots of new women from other villages. It was good because when I did not know how to do something the women helped me. In my village I have lots of old women. There are no young women, but when I went to the workshop I met women my own age who also weave. I helped others to learn who were a bit slower. I am a fast learner so was able to help others.

After the training

In my village I wanted to teach some other women the skills but they are old and not interested. I went to Wala mainland to teach the women there to make the products and also process Pandanus and Borao. They were happy to learn and help.

I also had extra income from the Christmas decorations. I earned lots of money. I was able to buy a chainsaw for myself so I can use to cut firewood. I was able to buy a double mattress, I shared with my family in Pinalum and the family in Wala. I gave them money and food as they helped looked after the kids.

I bought cocoa, dried it and sold it in Lakatoro to help my community as the transport is expensive and work hard to help the families. The distance to process the beans is long and I was able to help. Now the community see that I help them a lot. Not just with money but with helping them earn another income.

³ As noted previously the name has been changed

The changes for me now

My husband in is in New Zealand so my income for the family really helps. I don't have to go to another family to ask for help. With the money I earn I can support my own family. I have savings in VANWODS. I don't have any debt.

This year I can make other things that are quality. This year I have attended the flasem basket training and a boroa processing workshop.

I feel good. My life is not the same, the market is not good because of the cyclone but I can continue to weave and I can earn big money and it's much easier than the market. I am proud, because I like the work. I like to weave and I learn something new.

Some in the village are jealous. I have planted some Pandanus and my family have pulled them out, I planted them again but they have pulled them out again. So now I planted them at my mum's place in Wala. I have made a lot of money and made a successful business and this makes them jealous. I put Boroa in the river and they remove them, but I go back and put it back again. I still help them - it does not bother me. They don't understand so I am still happy to help them and buy the cocoa. I still give my family and them money. I don't get cross because I have to live with them and they are old so I must respect them.

It's the man who is the worst. When he is jealous I just give him money so he does not spoil my work. This year is better. My mother-in-law is ok. My husband is happy that I earn money because he can see that the income has helped him. Last year I bought him a speaker and he was happy.

Looking to the future

I am glad when I see a new opportunity and want to join it because I can see there are good opportunities.

I want to say thank you to MHC and TVET for letting me learn. I did not have to spend any money to come to the workshops and it really helped. I am really glad. I still try and encourage women to join; they say 'I don't have Pandanus' but I encourage them to plant Pandanus and register. Now they have interest but they are lazy and don't want to work hard. I said I was happy to help so they can go to workshops but they don't want to.

