Mobile banking for women in remote rural areas

This project will bring mobile digital banking to remote areas of Sierra Leone for the first time, driving investment and entrepreneurship that will transform rural women’s income and influence.

Technology and training

Without access to finance, it is impossible for entrepreneurship to flourish. In hard-to-reach areas with no banks, grassroots savings and credit groups have immense potential to transform lives and livelihoods – but they are currently limited to very low-level, cash-based services.

Mobile money platforms likewise have huge potential to drive investment and development in poor communities – but they have not yet reached remote rural areas in Sierra Leone. This project links these two initiatives for the first time, connecting grassroots groups with the technology and training that will enable them to dramatically scale up their services.

By offering a faster, safer way for people to send and receive payments, save money and access bigger loans, this project will bring the transformative power of financial services to the people who need it most, with a particular focus on empowering women.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Full name of project: Women’s Economic Empowerment and Leadership (WEEL)

Location: 40 villages in Kailahun and Pujehun districts, Sierra Leone

Duration: 2 years

Partners: Social Enterprise Development (SEND), Rehabilitation and Development Agency (RADA), Orange Mobile Network, Rokel Commercial Bank, Njala University

Reach: 7,200 direct and 144,000 indirect beneficiaries

Funds Needed: £301,442
Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranked 182 out of 189 countries in the Human Development Index. The remote districts of Kailahun and Pujehun, in the far east and far south respectively, are among the least developed in the country, with few services and limited infrastructure. Women and girls are the poorest of the poor.

Deep-rooted inequalities

Women in Sierra Leone face extreme discrimination, but the landscape is slowly changing. In 2007, wife-beating and forced marriage were both outlawed, and women were allowed to inherit property for the first time. However, in remote rural areas, many women and girls continue to be treated as second-class citizens. Many have little or no say over family or community decisions and are simply expected to do as they are told by their husband or father.

Necessity entrepreneurs

With heavy domestic workloads and childcare responsibilities limiting opportunities for formal paid work, many women become ‘necessity entrepreneurs’ in order to earn an income. More than four in five women in rural Sierra Leone run micro-businesses such as small-scale farms or table-top market stalls. Women’s entrepreneurial efforts have immense potential in lifting families out of poverty and hunger, and in driving local development. But their farms and businesses are held back by a lack of access to finance.

Access to finance

Poor people are generally excluded from mainstream banking services. This is especially true in the countryside, where there are no banks. For women, the problem is compounded by traditional cultural norms which limit their access to money altogether, even within their own families. With few savings and no way to borrow money, entrepreneurs struggle to fund the inputs – seeds, tools, or other supplies – that would enable them to dramatically scale up their services, and to sustain them independently for decades to come. The project will also support these structures to forge links with local government agencies and with networks that work on gender equality.

The potential of mobile banking

Savings and credit unions, where they exist, can provide remote villages with access to basic financial services, but these are currently limited to simple cash boxes, restricting the scale and scope of services available. This stunts business growth and keeps poor women locked out of the formal economy, confining them to tiny, low-value enterprises.

Mobile banking, which is well established in other some African countries, is still in its infancy in Sierra Leone, and is confined to urban areas. Increased mobile phone access means that it is now feasible to trial such services in rural settings, leapfrogging traditional banking and speeding up the process of bringing financial services to the masses. However, new technologies will achieve little if practical and cultural barriers prevent women from taking advantage of them.

Investment builds income; income builds influence

When women are able to invest in their farm or business, and so earn a better income, it can transform their status and build their local networks. This is especially true in the countryside, where women have limited opportunities for formal paid work, and will involve both women and men.

The project will reach 7,200 people directly – mainly women – and will indirectly benefit 144,000 people in these women’s families and communities.

In Their Lifetime is Christian Aid’s seed fund for innovation and learning, enabling us to pilot new ideas and take intelligent risks. Through this fund, we are able to invest in high impact, solutions-focused projects which build towards transformative change.

Innovation: This project trials a way to leapfrog conventional banking technologies and connect private sector partners directly with grassroots women’s groups. This kind of joint working with the private sector is a completely new approach for Christian Aid Sierra Leone.

Impact: The benefits of mobile banking in hard-to-reach areas are well documented across much of Africa. This project brings this transformative impact to rural communities in Sierra Leone for the first time, piloting an approach which increases women’s income and influence in a simple and scalable way.

Learning: The project will capture learning about the potential of savings and credit unions and mobile banking technologies to empower women, with a view to accelerating investment in this approach. This learning will also benefit Christian Aid gender and economic empowerment projects across Africa.

The Project

Access to finance can be transformative for poor women – and hence for whole families and communities. This project will trial a way to bring mobile financial services to women in remote villages. Training and awareness activities will complement the technological model, and build understanding that empowerment for women drives prosperity and progress for all. It will also analyse and document the wider impact that this model can have in empowering women to lift themselves and their families out of poverty, creating exciting longer-term opportunities to scale up this approach.

We will monitor the project’s impact against three key benchmarks:

1) Women in 40 villages have increased access to and control over financial and other resources.
2) Women have increased voice and agency to make and influence decisions at household and community levels.
3) The project generates, captures and shares learning about the impact that this model can have in empowering rural women, in order to drive deeper and wider change.

Specific outputs include:

Mobile money platforms and financial access centres in 40 remote villages

This will include bank accounts for savings and credit unions, mobile phone banking for members via an app that does not require internet coverage, and 40 kiosks, run by local women, offering digital financial services. These innovations will enable faster and safer transactions, and increased range of services and higher rates of interest for savers. Crucially, they will also enable micro-entrepreneurs to access bigger loans to invest in their businesses.

The kiosks will themselves create entrepreneurship opportunities for local women and will also generate income for the savings and credit unions. They will act as demonstration sites, testing a service delivery model specifically designed for villages with poor infrastructure and connectivity.

Stronger savings and credit unions

The project will connect these grassroots groups with private sector partners in the mobile phone and banking sectors, linking them to formal banking services for the first time, and facilitating access to the technology and training that will enable them to dramatically scale up their services, and to sustain them independently for decades to come. The project will also support these structures to forge links with local government agencies and with networks that work on gender equality.

Complementary training, mentoring and awareness activities

Entrepreneurs’ increased access to finance will be complemented by business management training and mentoring aimed specifically at women, to give them the best possible chance of success. Positive masculinity work with men will build awareness of how women’s empowerment benefits everyone, and will address the cultural barriers that hold women back. Mentoring will build women’s capacity and confidence to take a more active role in community decision-making.

Christian Aid partners in Kailahun and Pujehun have previously helped villages establish basic financial self-help groups – savings and loan associations – and have supported these groups to form local networks – savings and credit unions.

This project represents the next step, working with these fledgeling structures to significantly enhance the services they can offer, and supporting them to take their first steps in connecting with formal banking services through a ground-breaking partnership with private sector organisations.

The project will also provide complementary training and mentoring to support women’s entrepreneurship, participation and leadership. This too builds business acumen, leadership and management skills, and will involve both women and men.

The project will work closely with both local and national government agencies and ministries including District Councils and the Ministry of Social Welfare to maximise opportunities for scale up and replication.
## Project budget

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project objectives</th>
<th>Total GBP (£)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benchmark 1:</strong> Women in 40 villages have increased access to and control over financial and other resources (includes infrastructure for mobile money set-up, training and support for credit and savings unions, gender analysis and training to promote positive gender models etc.)</td>
<td>158,392</td>
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<td><strong>Benchmark 2:</strong> Women have increased voice and agency to make and influence decisions at household and community levels (includes training on leadership for women, women's leadership forum and networks, coalition building on women's empowerment, mentorship and support for planning and peer accompaniment etc.)</td>
<td>71,464</td>
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<td><strong>Benchmark 3:</strong> The project generates, captures and shares learning about the impact that this model can have in empowering rural women, in order to drive deeper and wider change (includes community learning forums, action research, production and dissemination of findings and associated advocacy activity at community, district, national and international level etc.)</td>
<td>42,964</td>
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<tr>
<th>Project implementation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Project Lead (100%)</td>
<td>92,810</td>
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<tr>
<td>Project delivery costs (includes in-country and partner project capacity building support including project delivery equipment and digital connectivity, and other non-salary expenditure)</td>
<td>30,348</td>
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<td>Financial monitoring and project administration (includes communications, connectivity, audit, accountability and safeguarding mechanisms at project level etc.)</td>
<td>7,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monitoring and Evaluation (includes baseline, midpoint and endpoint reviews)</td>
<td>20,697</td>
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<th>Global oversight</th>
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<td>ITL Programme Management</td>
<td>50,240</td>
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<tr>
<td>Christian Aid Global Support Costs</td>
<td>34,265</td>
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| TOTAL: | 301,442 |

As per Christian Aid's organisational policy, 15% of the overall budget has been allocated towards Christian Aid's global operational costs: this includes Christian Aid global information and financial systems, global procurement, and support for global governance and strategic operational development.

The Gbatima village savings and loan association uses this cash box to save money and disburse small loans to members. The cash box has padlocks, with each key held by a different person. However, the box and its contents are still vulnerable to theft, especially each time the group meets to hand over cash. The savings group also has limited growth potential and economic benefits are limited to members.

With mobile banking, savings are stored securely and payments sent privately to individuals, with automatic receipts. This makes the whole process much safer, and people's money is protected even if the phone itself is stolen. With greatly enhanced security and processes, mobile banking will allow groups like this to reach more people and offer a wider range of services – including direct access to bank loans for the first time, via an app.

By giving entrepreneurs the chance to access significantly larger loans, this project will dramatically boost local businesses.

To find out more about investing in this project, please contact ITL@christian-aid.org