

# Exploring Essor's gendered outcomes

## Community listening clubs as an effective instrument for enhancing women's economic empowerment

### Executive summary

---

This learning paper offers a clear, tested example of how clubs d'écoute communautaires (community listening clubs) can be used to effectively increase women's awareness of the business environment and realise broader empowerment outcomes. It demonstrates how the approach Essor, and its partner, Union des Femmes Congolaises dans les Médias (UCOFEM), has taken to sensitise men and women has helped to radically improve their awareness of positive masculinity, female entrepreneurship, and tax classification. This sensitisation approach engages directly with a relatively small number of female and male participants but reaches a much larger number of women and men by supporting the participants to share lessons within their community networks, and through the broadcasting of group discussion across several radio stations. The learning paper also presents key lessons for other development actors within – and beyond – the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) who are looking to emulate the community listening clubs as a strategy to positively impact women at scale.



## Background

---

### Aim of the learning paper

This learning paper aims to provide Business Environment Reform (BER) and Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) practitioners with a clear, tested example of how community listening clubs can be used to effectively increase women's awareness of the business environment and realise broader empowerment outcomes, at scale. It seeks to codify the approach that Essor and its partner, Union des Femmes Congolaises dans les Médias (UCOFEM), have taken to sensitising women on themes including positive masculinity, female entrepreneurship, and tax classification. In addition to sharing the methodology used, this learning paper seeks to understand how this intervention has impacted women's lives, while also estimating the broader influence this may have had on women not directly engaged in the clubs themselves. Finally, this learning paper aims to provide guidance for practitioners both within – and beyond – the DRC who are looking to emulate the community listening clubs' methodology.

### Introducing Essor

The DRC has one of the lowest GDP per capita rates in the world, and scores particularly poorly in the World Bank's Doing Business Index, ranking 182 out of 190 countries<sup>1</sup>. Against this backdrop, the DFID-funded Essor programme is supporting Government reforms aimed at

making the DRC an easier place to do business, which in turn contribute to economic growth and reducing poverty. Essor works across four components: OHADA, Access to Finance, Access to Electricity, and Anti-corruption to address a number of challenges facing businesses and to increase dialogue between government and business on reform initiatives. The programme uses an adaptive approach, enabling DFID to identify and target different entry points to effect change as the business environment evolves.

### Overview of the programme's gender approach

Essor recognises that business environment constraints are rarely gender neutral, and that legislation, regulations, and procedures often discriminate against women either in principle (through their formulation) or in practice (through the way they are enforced). Recognising this, the programme makes specific efforts to ensure its interventions maximise positive impact for women and mitigate any heightened risk of harm. The Anti-corruption component of Essor has been particularly ambitious in its efforts to integrate gender considerations into its interventions, recognising female entrepreneurs' heightened exposure to corrupt practices. This has led the Anti-corruption team to conceptualise a specific intervention designed to increase women's awareness of corrupt practices and enhance their broader empowerment, described in detail below.

## Close-up on the intervention: Essor and UCOFEM's use of community listening clubs to tackle business environment constraints disproportionately affecting women

---

### Identifying a critical business environment constraint & designing a gender-responsive intervention

Corruption is widely acknowledged as being one of the primary constraints to a favourable business environment for MSMEs. While corrupt practices impact all businesses, anecdotally female entrepreneurs are understood to be particularly exposed to corruption. Drivers of women's particular potential vulnerability

include their lower education and literacy levels; weaker understanding of their tax and administrative obligations, their rights and recourse; lack of awareness of how to manage their business; a more marginalised social status and the risk of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) which may renders it difficult for women to negotiate or resist corrupt practices carried out by officials.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.doingbusiness.org/~media/WBG/DoingBusiness/Documents/Profiles/Country/ZAR.pdf>

Recognising that the cost of corruption is anecdotally understood to be borne in particular by female-led MSMEs, Essor chose to develop an intervention specifically designed to enhance women's empowerment and increase women's awareness of the business environment, including of corrupt practices. Although the intervention design originally comprised a broad range of awareness raising and capacity building activities, owing to a shortened implementation period for Anti-corruption activities, the focus ultimately centred solely on using community listening clubs to sensitise female-led MSMEs and male champions within the community.

### Essor's partnership with UCOFEM

UCOFEM is a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) established in 1997 and run by Congolese women working in the media and focused on promoting equal opportunities for women. Working with a range of actors across the media, civil society and government, UCOFEM provides training, awareness raising on key gender-related topics, and advocates for an improved image of women in the media. For more than five years, UCOFEM has promoted community listening clubs as an effective sensitisation tool for increasing women's knowledge and awareness. Recognising UCOFEM's clear expertise in this area, and to drive local ownership, Essor formed a partnership with UCOFEM to pilot the use of community listening clubs to specifically target the business environment constraint identified: women's heightened vulnerability to corrupt practices.

### What is a community listening club?

The community listening club methodology consists of bringing together individuals from within communities to engage in group discussions. The debates centre on themes and are facilitated by an expert in that specific domain who can provide steering in terms of the technical content and clarifications where needed, without overly interrupting the organic flow of the women's dialogue. The objectives are twofold: (1) to enhance participants' understanding of key topics which are critical for enhancing women's empowerment; and (2) to increase the visibility and decision-making influence of women.



In the first meeting of the community listening club, a theme is introduced, and a quiz is undertaken by all members of the group to assess existing levels of understanding. Individuals then discuss their responses and the reasons underpinning these, with the expert intervening to provide information where there is a misunderstanding or knowledge gap. The first meeting of the community listening club is recorded, and the key content is then broadcast on a range of radio programmes. Participants in the community listening clubs are encouraged to listen to the radio broadcasts with members of their peer group; discuss and debate the content presented; take steps to put into practice some of the tips presented; and raise additional questions. One week after the first community listening club, a second meeting is held, regrouping the same participants. The participants start this second meeting by retaking the quiz to assess whether their level of understanding has increased and will then listen to the radio broadcast from the first session together. The group then shares any additional questions that they – or members of their peer group (with whom they listened to the broadcast) – may have, with the expert providing further clarifications.

This sensitisation approach is highly attuned to women's needs and preferences, tapping into women's pre-existing networks to ensure the perceived trustworthiness of the messaging, as well as the use of women-friendly media such as the radio. Through the active participation of their members, community listening clubs thus become citizen groups where men and women share their concerns and needs, obtain otherwise inaccessible information, and undertake joint actions.

### The Essor-UCOFEM Intervention

Between September 2017 and July 2018, Essor and UCOFEM collaborated to use the club d'écoute methodology to sensitise over 302 women and 43 male champions. The community listening clubs were run in several

sites, including Lubumbashi – where 60 women participated, Kasumbalesa – where 50 women were involved, and in Kolwezi – where 37 women took part.

In addition, community listening clubs took place in the communes of Karisimbi and Goma, with each club comprising between 30–35 individuals, the majority of whom were women, with the number of male champions varying from 3 to 9, depending on the theme. Where possible, the men selected were the husbands of female participants. Three sessions (each comprised of two meetings) were run in each location, using demand-driven content. This learning paper will explore the experience of those women and men participating in community listening clubs in the communes of Karisimbi and Goma.

## Assessing outcomes: to what extent have the community listening clubs increased awareness of positive masculinity, female entrepreneurship, and tax classification?

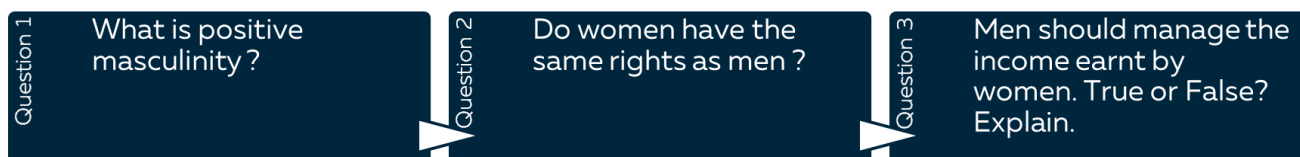
---

### Positive masculinity – Enlisting male champions to promote more equal gender dynamics

Women's low awareness of their rights and obligations within the business environment, alongside socio-cultural norms which perpetuate imbalanced gender power dynamics, mean that female entrepreneurs in the communes of Goma and Karisimbi typically leave the financial management of their businesses to their husbands. Often income earned by women is used by their husbands in ways that do not necessarily benefit the women themselves or the broader family, exacerbating women's poverty despite their continuing efforts to rise out of it. To tackle this constraint to women's economic empowerment, Essor and UCOFEM chose to focus the first community listening clubs on 'positive masculinity', to encourage a more equal distribution of – and influence over – family income and assets.

The responses revealed traditional views of masculinity and gender dynamics. In the communes of Goma and Karisimbi respectively, 57% and 81% of participants considered positive masculinity as being when men are physically strong, with the remaining 43% and 19% considering it as being when men take responsibility for ensuring the wellbeing of their family. 96% of participants in Goma and 95% in Karisimbi believed that men and women do not have the same rights, with participants stating that the "men are always the head of the family, according to the law, the bible and tradition". In Goma, the one individual to state that men and women had the same rights was an unmarried woman, who explained that, for her "a married woman loses her rights to her husband". For the final question, 73% of participants in Goma and 22% in Karisimbi felt that women should physically look after the household budget (in a 'cashier' type role), but under the management of their husbands who ultimately should have the 'last say' on all spending decisions. 27% of participants in Goma and 78% in Karisimbi felt that the man alone should manage household income.

The pre-test comprised three key questions:



Following the pre-test, the experts – both representatives from Congo Men’s Network (COMEN), an organisation committed to supporting men to become champions of gender equality, talked through their understanding of positive masculinity. For them, positive masculinity is “when a man can effectively support his family, not as an autocrat but rather as a genuine partner to his wife. It’s someone who shares decision-making with others [...] and who does not engage in violence. He does not try to cover up feelings of sadness, joy, tenderness...” The experts pointed out that both the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Congolese Constitution stipulate that men and women are equal according to the law. Finally, the experts explained that it should be the individual earning the money who determines how it is used, irrespective of whether the earner is a man or a woman. Key content from the first meetings in both Goma and Karisimbi was then broadcast under a series entitled ‘Muanamke mpiga rushua’ (‘Women and the Fight against Corruption’) across 4 local radio stations, between 3 and 7 times a week depending on the station.

The second meetings started by replaying the radio broadcast. In the commune of Goma, several participants relayed concerns expressed by peers in their community listening clubs that by producing these types of radio programmes, UCOFEM is encouraging women to be obstinate, risking losing their marriage. Others received a more positive response from members of their listening group, with individuals from participants’ own networks asking how to adopt more inclusive and equal practices within the household and how to be good fathers.

The post-test was then run, with an important shift in the participants’ responses. 100% of participants responded with a progressive view on positive masculinity in both locations; 95% and 92% said they considered men and women to have the same rights in Goma and Karisimbi respectively; and all participants in both communes also agreed that the household management should be collegial, with some men in the group explaining that they had started to make changes to ensure joint decision making did occur within their household.

The facilitation of the community listening clubs by COMEN’s male champion was critical to ensuring the success of this club, especially the enlistment of the male participants as champions for more balanced gender dynamics. This helped shift the mindset of the group – and by extension, listeners – away from seeing gender equality as being simply a ‘women’s issue’ towards it being a community interest. While it has not yet been possible to conduct household surveys to assess the end impact on behaviours within the community, UCOFEM has observational and anecdotal evidence of the male champions having adopted more equal approaches to women’s involvement in household and livelihood-related decision making, as well as a commitment to pass on their lessons to other men within their peer group.



**Female entrepreneurship – Reframing women’s perceptions of business**

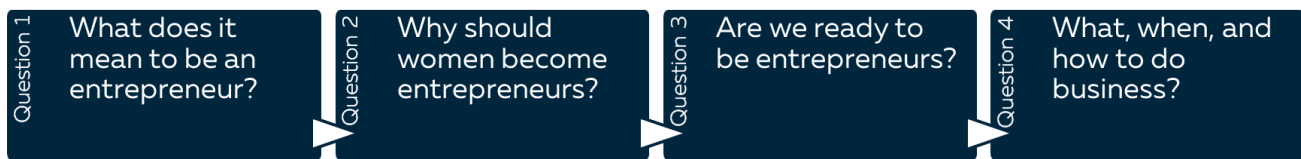
Female entrepreneurship was selected as the second theme by participants of the community listening clubs, who expressed an interest in strengthening their understanding of this topic. The aims of this themed community listening club were to support women to become more autonomous; to overcome their fear of setting up a business; and to encourage women to adopt a ‘savings-focussed’ mindset. The majority of participants were the same as those involved in the first community listening clubs, the only difference being a smaller number of men and an increased number of women, given the difference in topic.

Participants answered the questions more comfortably than those in the previous community listening clubs on positive masculinity, however levels of understanding were still mixed. In the communes of Karisimbi and Goma respectively, 38% and 6% of participants correctly responded that being an entrepreneur was about conceptualising an idea and bringing this to life through the creation of one’s own company. Others showed a more limited understanding of entrepreneurship, seeing it as solely being about selling a product. In Karisimbi, the vast majority of participants believed that women should become entrepreneurs only out of necessity “when their husbands are either unemployed or where their salaries won’t stretch to cover the family’s needs”, with only 19% expressing alternative reasons for why women could become entrepreneurs, such as self-fulfilment or financial autonomy. In Goma, the responses varied, with 77% stating that one would become an entrepreneur to support one’s family, versus 23% who considered it as being about having an occupation / a sense of self-fulfilment. While participants in both Karisimbi and Goma unanimously considered themselves “ready to be entrepreneurs”, they

expressed doubts around their own ability to navigate entrepreneurship given the limited support provided by state institutions and their perceived need to have financial resources to become an entrepreneur.

Following the pre-test, the experts – both representatives from *Gérez Mieux votre Entreprise (GERME)*, a management training initiative developed by the International Labour Organisation – provided clarifications. They explained that women can choose to become entrepreneurs (rather than this always being out of necessity); and that the whole family stands to benefit where women have their own income and economic activity. He stressed that even without money, it is possible to become an entrepreneur, and that the most important thing was conceiving an idea. He also explained how, when, and what participants could do business in, providing an overview of the Four Ps of Marketing. The participants then raised questions specific to their own business activities, which the experts sought to answer. Among others, these included how to change your income-generating activity if it is not working, and how-to better plan for natural disasters which can cause significant losses.

The pre-test comprised four key questions:



The recording of the community listening club was then broadcast across four radio stations at multiple times and days throughout the week, with the participants again asked to listen with their peer groups.

The second meeting began with participants describing how they had adopted the practices shared by the expert to improve the running of their business. Following this, the participants then listened to the radio broadcast, and completed the post-test. As with the community listening club on positive masculinity, the awareness levels of the participants increased significantly since the initial meeting.

In both Karisimbi and Goma, all participants now understood that being an entrepreneur is about conceiving an idea for an income-generating activity and then taking steps to establish this, rather than just selling a good. 87% of participants in Karisimbi and 100% in Goma considered the main motivation for becoming an entrepreneur as being to support the family and for personal wellbeing. They no longer understood female entrepreneurship as only being relevant where men in the household were facing difficulties. As in the pre-test, all participants (in both Karisimbi and Goma) considered themselves "ready to be entrepreneurs" but they now recognised that it is possible to start a business without pre-financing. For the fourth and final question, 81% of participants in Karisimbi now understood that anyone can become an entrepreneur, at any time, and were also aware of key business concepts, such as the 4 Ps of Marketing. 19% still held a more limited view of entrepreneurship, believing that it is only prompted through financial hardship; that starting a business can only be done as a multi-person team; and that entrepreneurship is only possible in times of peace.

The use of practical examples based around the actual experiences of female participants was critical to the significant increases in participants' awareness levels of key topics

associated with female entrepreneurship. While it has not yet been possible to undertake further research to explore the end impact on participants' business practices, even at the second meeting, participants were already sharing ways in which they were better honing the marketing of their products around the Four Ps, as well as adopting other advice to improve the effectiveness and profitability of their income-generating activity.

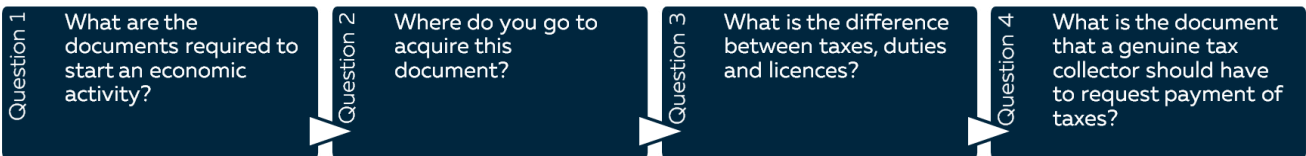
### Tax classification– Supporting women to navigate the fiscal eco-system

The third wave of community listening clubs focused on tax classification and fiscal responsibilities, a topic also selected by participants themselves. The aims of this wave of community listening clubs were to educate female entrepreneurs on: their tax-paying obligations; their business categorisation; and the difference between taxes, duties, and patents and other charges payable to the State, to better equip them to identify, negotiate and report corrupt practices.

The pre-test revealed low levels of awareness of fiscal responsibilities, with only 9% of participants in Karisimbi and 20% in Goma knowing that to start an economic activity, a licence (for small companies) or Trade and Personal Property Credit Register (for large companies) are required, together with the payment of a Company licence. 43% in Karisimbi and 6% in Goma knew that depending on the size of the company, these documents are obtained from the Directorate for Environment; the Directorate for Industry and SMEs; or the General Directorate for Taxation. For the third question, participants were not able to easily differentiate between taxes, duties, and licences, with very few participants in Karisimbi and no-one in Goma able to provide the completely correct answer: that tax is a levy charged on a worker's income / a trader's profit; that duty is a one-off compulsory payment required for all citizens; and that a licence is a document giving permission to start the business. When asked which document a genuine tax collector should possess in order to



The pre-test comprised four key questions:



make demands for the payment of taxes, 34% of participants in Karisimbi were able to correctly respond that (s)he should be equipped with an ‘official mission order’ and a ‘service card’, with no one in Goma able to give a completely correct response. Given the complexity of this theme, the expert provided detailed clarifications for each of the four questions. As with the other community listening clubs, this was then broadcast across four different radio stations, using multiple slots.

The second meeting followed the same formula as the other waves of the community listening clubs, with the radio broadcast replayed to participants, and a second opportunity provided to ask the expert any additional clarifying questions. Areas of enquiry included understanding whether there was a guichet unique where one could pay all taxes, to how to differentiate a small business from a

large business, and whether land-owners are subject to taxation.

The post-test revealed a mixed impact on participants’ knowledge of tax classification. 89% of participants in Karisimbi and 88% in Goma were able to correctly name the documents required to start an economic activity, with 91% of participants in both communes knowing where to go to acquire this document. However, in Karisimbi and in Goma, there was no consensus on the difference between tax, duties, and licences, with each participant expressing their own – differing – idea. Nonetheless, 77% of participants in Karisimbi and 89% in Goma were able to identify a service card and an official mission order as being the necessary proof to distinguish genuine tax collectors from fake agents. The mixed outcomes in terms of knowledge acquired from the community listening groups suggests that, for particularly



complex, technical subjects, a single session may not be sufficient to ensure information 'sticks'.

The most technical of the three 'waves', 'Tax Classification' has also been the most impactful in terms of the net increase in participants' knowledge, when comparing awareness at the start of the intervention to that at the end. This knowledge is crucial for female participants and listeners, who previously would have been unable to identify corrupt practices versus genuine fiscal requirements, heightening women's exposure to harassment and illegitimate payment requests. While a comprehensive impact study has not yet been undertaken, participants in the community listening clubs are already reporting an increased ability to identify corrupt practices and enhance confidence to challenge these. One participant even explained how she now knew to ask a tax collector who came to her kiosk to show his service card, official mission order, and the tax classification. It turned out that the shop was not subject to the intellectual property tax (levied by the Société Nationale des Editeurs, Compositeurs et Auteurs) because it did not use third party copyright material, meaning that the tax collector left disappointed. The participant expressed her gratitude explaining that previously "I used to pay this tax without knowing the reason". Another participant explained that, following the guidance provided in the community listening clubs, she asked a tax collector for his official mission order, at which point he pretended to take a call and fled the shop, clearly being a fake agent.

## Conclusion

---

Essor and UCOFEM have demonstrated how community listening clubs can be used as a powerful strategy to effectively increase women's awareness of the business environment and realise broader empowerment outcomes. In all three of the thematic waves, clear impact has been realised among direct participants, with awareness levels increasing meaningfully for all technical questions covered. Critically, this methodology was equally impactful for technical business-focussed themes (tax classification and female entrepreneurship) and social-normative topics (positive masculinity). While additional research is required to build a more complete picture of the sustainability of change among the direct beneficiary group, anecdotal and observational evidence already points to change 'sticking'. Beyond realising impact for direct beneficiaries, this approach also indirectly influences a secondary beneficiary group of women (and men) listening to the radio broadcasts. This presents a practical and cost-effective method for targeting women at scale, while only needing to engage directly with a much smaller number. Although further research is needed to assess the probable breadth and depth of impact for indirect beneficiaries, the estimated audience figures for the four local radio channels exceed 10,000 listeners, already indicating the impressive potential outreach.

This learning paper has been authored by Sonia Jordan, with substantial technical input from Anna Mayimona Ngemba, Evelyne Luyelo Mabikwa, Cynthia Benoist, and Gaëlle Vandeputte.

# Essor

POUR UN ENVIRONNEMENT PROPICE  
À L'INVESTISSEMENT EN RDC



This learning paper was published through the support of the British people as part of the Essor business environment reform programme.

151231-165030-HE-UK