The Harnessing Social Networks study is a collaborative effort led by the Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, conducted as operational research within the Catholic Relief Services (CRS)-led multisectoral Budikadidi program in the Kasai-Oriental Province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The study delves into the ways in which Budikadidi activities have interacted with local social networks through two case-study villages. This brief is one of four briefs and describes how Budikadidi’s strategy of working almost exclusively through self-selecting groups might exclude or support the people deemed by the community to be the most vulnerable—those unable to fully care for themselves without the assistance of others.

All but a handful of Budikadidi activities are implemented through self-forming groups, each with different activities and membership criteria. Savings and Internal Lending Communities (SILC groups) provide basic access to savings and loans, and membership requires the financial means to pay the minimal regular savings contributions. Producers Organizations (OPs) bring producers together for increased production or higher profits, and membership requires the physical strength and time to work on communal production activities. Radio Clubs (Clubes d’Écoute) bring together young adults (up to about 30 years old) for discussions on social and gender issues, and to conduct environmental sanitation activities in their communities.

This study focused intensely on two very different villages within the same province that were purposively selected to be as different as possible. A survey sought to include all resident adults in a comprehensive survey to map out the village social networks. The survey included 377 people in Village 1 and 220 people in Village 2. In each village, at least one adult from about 95% of households participated in the interviews. Interviews of individuals were supplemented by 10 focus group discussions to provide additional insight in order to better interpret the social network analysis. The village authorities considered 14 people in Village 1 and 37 people in Village 2 to be especially vulnerable. The people deemed most vulnerable by the village leaders are usually elderly widows who are not living with grown children and who have few resources of their own, but also
includes a few people with other limitations. These people work as much as they are able to provide for their own needs, but also depend on others for periodic support.

Village 1 was unruly, heavily impacted by recent conflict, and had a weak governance system though the Community Action Committee (CAC) was quite active. Village 2 was smaller, calmer, more isolated, less affected by conflict, and had more effective local governance. Budikadidi began activities in the two villages at around the same time, but suspended activities in Village 2 for eight months due to a nearby security incident.

In a portion of the villages Budikadidi supports, the program has organized specially adapted OPs for the most vulnerable and provided them with agricultural inputs, lessons, and a joint income-generating activity. Village 2 had one of these special OPs; Village 1 did not.

The analysis for this brief used a list of people the village authorities had assembled. Although they were likely influenced by criteria frequently used by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the authorities said they were the people least able to support themselves. Although nearly all on the list were elderly widows, not all elderly widows in the village were on the list. Those with large asset-holdings or who lived with adult children were not included. A small number of men and one handicapped young person were included. Unfortunately, young single mothers with multiple children were not considered for the list as the villagers considered them capable of working.

**Participation in Budikadidi activities**

In Village 1, those the village authorities deemed most vulnerable were less likely than the rest of the population to participate in Budikadidi groups in general (see Table 1, noting the smaller p-value which indicates the difference is less likely to be due to chance). In Village 2, on the other hand, vulnerable people were just as likely as the rest of the population to participate in any Budikadidi group. This trend toward higher relative participation among vulnerable people in Village 2 than Village 1 is seen in both OPs and SILCs.

| Table 1. Participation levels of vulnerable and non-vulnerable individuals in Budikadidi groups |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Village 1                                  | % of all vulnerable individuals who are in the groups | % of all non-vulnerable individuals who are in the groups | p value† |
| Any Budikadidi group                       | 42.9                                      | 65.3             | 0.078  |
| Budikadidi OPs                            | 7.1                                       | 21.5             | 0.220  |
| Budikadidi SILCs                          | 21.4                                      | 41.3             | 0.111  |
| Village 2                                  | % of all vulnerable individuals who are in the groups | % of all non-vulnerable individuals who are in the groups | p value† |
| Any Budikadidi group                       | 48.6                                      | 49.8             | 0.953  |
| Budikadidi OPs                            | 24.3                                      | 16.4             | 0.249  |
| Budikadidi SILCs                          | 21.6                                      | 27.3             | 0.473  |

† If a p value is less than 0.100, the difference between the vulnerable and non-vulnerable people is unlikely to be due to chance, i.e., a p-value less than 0.1 indicates there is likely a true difference between vulnerable and non-vulnerable in the whole population, but a p-value bigger than 0.1 means there might not be a real difference in the whole population.

Membership in any Budikadidi group requires a regular commitment of time, resources, or effort. Benefits, however, may be sporadic. Those benefits may include receiving loans or part of the annual distribution of capital in SILC groups, or a share of the harvest in OPs. To be able to participate in a group person must have surplus time, resources, or effort to invest in the group, as well as confidence that other members will contribute at about the same level. These commitments and expectations pose obstacles for the poorest and
weakest people, even when the group is specifically organized for their limitations. But being a member of a group also provides unique benefits beyond the stated goals or official outputs of the group. The rest of this brief will discuss some of the barriers vulnerable people face in participating in Budikadidi groups, as well as the special benefits they derive from membership.

Activities must be adapted to needs and capacities to remove obstacles to participation

Elderly widows comprised 96% of the village lists of the most vulnerable residents. A few men and one handicapped person were also included. Not all widows in the village were on the list, as many were not considered vulnerable. A few people on the list were unable to work, but most had small fields of their own that they continued to cultivate, though the elderly admitted that they did not have the strength to cultivate large fields like they did when they were younger. Most depended to some degree on periodic support from others.

Each interviewee was asked to list the five people who were most important in each of six different types of interaction: giving advice (influencing), receiving advice, giving resources, receiving resources, collaborating, and talking with (social interaction). The study counted the number of times people were cited by others for each of these types of interaction. In both villages, the vulnerable individuals had interaction levels (the number of times they were cited by others) somewhat similar to the rest of the population, but they were less likely to seek advice and less likely to collaborate than other members of the village.

“Collaboration” was defined as working together toward a common goal, usually with an expectation that everyone will contribute and benefit about equally. In the villages, collaboration might include working in each other’s fields, caring for each other’s children, or sharing food when someone is lacking. Because the vulnerable people cannot physically do as much as others and have fewer resources, other people may not ask them to collaborate as often. Some of the vulnerable women said they could not join the normal OPs because the OPs required more contribution in labor than they could do.

Participation in SILC groups was difficult for the vulnerable women because so little cash comes through their hands. Discussions with the SILC group committees revealed that the poorest households could not wait the many months of a normal SILC cycle to get the benefit from the little cash they would be able to collect. The SILC activities also tended to foster individual enterprises, which are less attractive for elderly widows who prefer joint, collaborative activities in which the labor and cost (and risk) can be spread out among multiple people.

The OPs that were designed specifically for the vulnerable widows had activities and expectations suited to their needs and abilities. The agricultural plots were smaller in recognition of their lack of stamina. Income activities were joint activities that did not require significant resources or strength to maintain or expand those activities. For example, one special OP received a palm oil press. The women pressed their own palm nuts for oil, increasing the income they received from selling just the nuts. With the profits, they purchased a bicycle and paid a boy to collect palm nuts from neighboring villages, further increasing their profits. They were considering other joint investments like rabbit rearing. Unlike more active households with stronger members, these vulnerable women preferred to keep the enterprises as joint enterprises rather than each woman starting her own enterprise as tends to be the case with members of SILC groups.

“"The Field Agent said only those who attended the first meetings could join the group. Others wanted to join but their fields were farther away, and they couldn’t return to the village in time for the meetings.”

Vulnerable Producers Organization member

Some barriers to participation in the mainstream Budikadidi activities are obvious, like those listed above. The special OPs, where they exist, help tremendously in removing these barriers, but other obstacles to participation remain invisible to outsiders unless we actively look for them. For example, more than 20 women
were invited to participate in the vulnerable individuals’ OP in Village 2, but only 9 of them regularly attended the initial training meetings. Therefore, when it came time to formalize the group, the Budikadidi agent and the CAC said only those who had been regularly attending the training meetings could participate in the activities. During a focus group discussion, the members of the OP (those who had attended the trainings) said this was fair. But when asked why the others were not interested enough to attend the training, the women explained that the others had wanted to attend the trainings, but their fields were farther away so they could not get back to the village in time for the meetings. If the meetings had been scheduled to meet the needs of these women rather than the facilitator, it is possible that twice as many would have benefited from the activity.

The special OP meets twice a week for various trainings, activity planning, and administrative matters. In addition, the OP meets three days a week to work on the Budikadidi income-generating activity that is the core activity for the group. The study team observed that Budikadidi often conducts cross-sector promotional activities not directly related to the purpose of groups (e.g., cooking demonstrations or water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) messages) because the program sees all groups as avenues to reach the population with a message related to a general program objective. These messages usually require additional meetings or extend the time of regular meetings, and the group members feel obliged to attend regardless of the group’s interest. Each additional training or organizational meeting that Budikadidi adds increases the cost of membership, and fewer of the most vulnerable feel they can continue to participate. Even those who felt the trainings and meetings were worthwhile said they are time-consuming, making it difficult for some women to join.

Weak networks in combination with competition lead to lower participation by vulnerable individuals

This study used the interactions people reported to create a map of which people were interacting with whom and how. This map is called a “social network.” Somewhat standard procedures have recently been developed to analyze these networks to identify patterns of interactions and identify key people in the networks or those who have few connections (“marginalized” people). The social network analysis for the two study villages shows that participation rates, especially among the vulnerable, are influenced by whether or not they have direct personal connections to the leaders of a group.

In Village 1, participants explained that the formation of the groups was not structured, and competition was high because the villagers thought the number of participants was limited and that they would receive goods distributed through the groups. Dynamic individuals identified by Budikadidi staff were encouraged to form their own groups. It does not appear the village Chief was involved.

In Village 2, the villagers also thought the number of participants was limited, but the formation of the groups was much more structured and transparent. The village Chief called a town meeting, and through consensus they formed the initial groups during that meeting.

In Village 1, people had to depend on their own networks and influence to compete for with others for access to the groups and activities, facing strong competition from others. The people most connected to the group leaders were able to get into the initial groups based on their relationships with the group leaders. The data showed that participation in Village 1 groups is strongly associated with links to Budikadidi group committee members and to multiple types of network links, such as social interactions, influence, and resources. The people on the vulnerable list had a fourth as many links with the committee members as the rest of the village. Without the same strong relationships with these leaders, it is likely they were simply unable to compete for the limited membership positions.

In Village 2, where the groups were more thoughtfully formed, people did not need to depend as much on their own networks or links with the group leaders. The vulnerable widows interacted with other committee
members just as often as the rest of the village did, and they were almost as likely to hold a position on a committee. No type of network interaction in Village 2 was associated with group membership except links to people most often named as “influential”—people who might have been able to manipulate the town meeting in their favor.

The different strategies of these villages reflected the strength of the leadership and the cohesion of the villages, resulting in much higher participation of the most vulnerable where governance was strongest. In general, where competition is high and governance is weak, people will turn to their networks. Very often, as in Village 1, the most vulnerable people do not have strong networks and find themselves excluded.

In villages with weak governance, high competition, and no activities adapted to the needs and capacities of the most vulnerable, the program struggled to reach the most vulnerable in the population. The special OPs addressed many, but not all, of these barriers. In the case-study village where governance was stronger and adapted programming was offered, Budikadidi benefited the very vulnerable people at the same or higher rate than the rest of the population.

Group membership provides additional non-programmatic benefits to the most vulnerable people

The creation of a formal group of vulnerable people gives the members a supportive network of people who understand their struggles intimately and who are willing to help in times of need—and whose help does not further shame and stigmatize them. In addition to simply improving their quality of life, the network these groups provide has significantly increased the resilience of these vulnerable people to regular shortfalls and common shocks. Some of the non-programmatic benefits include:

- The grouping of the vulnerable women resulted in far more spontaneous ongoing collaborations than any other type of group interviewed;
- The women reported that they regularly share resources, labor, advice, and encouragement;
- The increased shared work and formalization of the group has engendered a greater sense of trust and mutual support among the women.

One woman explained that by working together several days a week, the members of the group had “become friends.” She said that now if she does not have enough to eat, she can be honest and tell them, knowing the others will empathize and she will receive help without shame. In this way, she does not “have to go without anymore.”

Most of the spontaneous collaborations in this small group of nine women in the Village 2 vulnerable OP aim to ensure that all of the members at all times are getting their basic needs met. For example, on Fridays some members will visit other members who are ill to encourage them. If they see the person is lacking anything, they will try to meet that need from their resources within the group or their networks. Previously, if they were ill, they might not have had anyone to help them.

“Now that we are often together in the group, we have become friends. I can be honest and say when I don’t have enough to eat. I don’t have to go without anymore.”

Vulnerable OP member

Summary

The most vulnerable people in a community are often those who most need the support of programs like Budikadidi and whose lives will change the most with that support. But their needs and their ability to participate are often very different than those of the general population. They face unique barriers to participating, and when the number of people who can participate is limited, they cannot easily compete with others in the community - and the program struggles to reach them. When program activities are adapted, they...
participate at levels as high or higher than the rest of the population and benefit in more ways than the rest of the village.

The special OPs formed exclusively for the vulnerable members in a village provide them with a new, unique social support network that has significant, sustained impact far beyond the Budikadidi program activities. The groups spontaneously mobilize their own resources to meet each other’s needs without waiting for the help of wealthier members of the community, the authorities, or NGOs. These resourceful women are an example that should be shown to other groups of what can be accomplished when group members trust and support each other.

And yet, even with these very focused groups, the significant amount of time required for (and timing of) organizational meetings and auxiliary trainings poses an obstacle to entry and continued participation.

In tracking the many, many formal indicators on activities organized by Budikadidi, we may be missing the opportunity to document cases of spontaneous collaborations that may, in fact, have as much positive impact as the organized activities.

The special OPs provide successful examples of programming adapted for the needs of a specific sector of the population, a lesson that could be replicated for other at-risk sub-populations, such as single mothers and landless male youths.

---

**Barriers to reaching the most vulnerable population**

Analysis suggests participation of especially vulnerable people in Budikadidi groups may be low for the following reasons:

1) The activities do not address their needs;

2) The activities are not adapted to their limited capacity;

3) Vulnerable people do not have the personal connections to the committee members to help them to compete for the limited number of memberships available in the groups;

4) The meetings take too much of their time;

5) The meetings are held during the facilitator’s workday when the women need to be at work in their fields.

---

1 See the Interim Report for a more detailed description of the villages, the study methods, and the statistical results underlying the findings in this brief. Only the most necessary statistical results are presented in this brief to increase its readability and hopefully its usefulness. For a copy of this report, please contact the author at merry.fitzpatrick@tufts.edu.