



# Eastern Produce Malawi

Women's Empowerment Initiative  
Verification Report – 10 August 2021

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## About TRA

TRA is a collective of social performance and human rights experts that supports companies in their efforts to reduce human rights risk and ensure positive relations with local community, NGO, and government stakeholders. We want to see business deliver on its promise to drive respect for human rights and have a net positive impact on society.

Our human rights practice and our social performance practice work in tandem to achieve these goals. While they apply different lenses, we see our human rights and social performance practices as complementary to each other. We have deep experience in working on human rights and social issues at the site-level in Africa (and elsewhere around the world), including in terms of assessment, design and support for OGMs for natural resource companies.

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## Overview

Eastern Produce Malawi (EPM) has committed to make a number of social investments that will support broad objectives related to women’s empowerment (the “Women’s Empowerment Initiative”) over a three-year period from 2021 to 2024.

EPM is also implementing a number of separate but complementary initiatives that are aimed at empowering women and strengthening the protection of their rights, including (a) an initiative for "Future Working Practices" that provides additional safeguards to female workers over a one-year period; and (b) further development of EPM's OGM, pursuant to recommendations that will be made by TRA.

This Verification Report is focused on TRA’s verification of the Women's Empowerment Initiative after the first six months of its initiation.

The following text box indicates the programme under which each initiative is being carried out (and reported on).

<b>Overview of the Women’s Empowerment Initiative</b>
Civic Education Programmes on Gender-Based Violence and Gender Equality
Female Leadership Development Programme
Gender Equality Scholarships (for 3 years)
Construct Boma Victim Support Unit in Mulanje, Thyolo and Mimosa
Relocate Makwasa Primary School
Drill 2-3 Water Bore holes per year (for 3 years)
<b>Overview of the Future Working Practices</b>
Create Women's Safeguarding Supervisor Role (50 people)
Proactive Training for Female Employees
Install CCTV Cameras
Install Personal Attack Alarms

## Methodology

This is the first Verification Report covering the 6-month period from February to August 2021.

The methodology for the review and verification of the Women’s Empowerment Initiative included the following key activities:

- Desktop review of the key documents related to the Women’s Empowerment Initiative. A list of the EPM documents reviewed is provided in Appendix A.
- Fieldwork and stakeholder engagement at the EPM estates, as well as remote interviews with EPM managers and civil society stakeholders prior to and after the fieldwork (together, the “Scoping Phase”). Further information about the stakeholders engaged by the TRA team, as well as the feedback received, is provided below.

The main part of the stakeholder engagement for this report was part of a field mission to EPM estates from June 14<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021. The field mission was conducted by TRA’s local experts, Sarai Chisala-Tempelhoff and Sylvia Namakhwa, with remote support from Lloyd Lipsett and Luc Zandvliet. The field mission included site visits at a number of different estates in Mulanje and Thyolo Districts, document review and engagement with a broad range of internal and external stakeholders.

Stakeholders interviewed included EPM managers and external experts who are developing the Women's Empowerment Initiative, as well as discussion with workers, community members, government and civil society organizations who are focused on women’s rights issues and sustainable development programs.

The following table provides an overview of the stakeholders engaged about the Women’s Empowerment Initiative.<sup>1</sup>

Stakeholders	Sub-categories	# People
EPM Workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Senior leadership</li> <li>• Estate managers and supervisors</li> <li>• Women’s Welfare Committee members</li> <li>• Consultants / experts working on Women’s Empowerment Initiative</li> <li>• Workers and workers’ representatives</li> </ul>	116
Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community representatives</li> <li>• Local government officials</li> <li>• NGOs</li> </ul>	16
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>132</b>

## EPM Management Cooperation and Support

At the outset, TRA acknowledges and appreciates the support received from EPM management and staff during the Scoping Phase. It must be highlighted that the scoping process and field mission took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected Malawi and the EPM estates quite seriously, including fatalities of EPM managers and staff at the estates. In this regard, the cooperation of EPM management and staff was quite exceptional in the circumstances.

During the field mission, managers provided a conducive environment for the interviews with workers and other stakeholders. They encouraged people to speak freely to our local experts. This was important as there is natural reluctance for workers to speak up on sensitive topics such as sexual harassment and human rights.

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<sup>1</sup> During this review period, TRA engaged with workers, community members and other stakeholders about the Women’s Empowerment Initiative, the Future Working Practices and the Operational Grievance Mechanism. All stakeholders were asked questions pertaining to all of these initiatives, but stakeholders necessarily had different levels of expertise and interest in each of the three initiatives.

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EPM's senior management also welcomed discussion about the Women's Empowerment Initiative and had a constructive attitude about potential areas for improvement. In addition, the EPM managers and consultants who are developing and implementing the Women's Empowerment Initiative provided valuable input about their current ideas for strengthening the participatory aspects of and strategic planning for different projects and programmes. Their involvement and buy-in is critical for the success of these initiatives and to link them to broader commitments for ongoing human rights due diligence and sustainable development.

## Limitations

The TRA team acknowledges that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in some limitations to the Scoping Phase, notably in terms of travel restrictions for the international members of our team. In particular, TRA's international team was not able to travel to the EPM estates.

However, we have been able to proceed with the Scoping Phase by using local experts and were very fortunate to find two very qualified and independent experts with significant experience on human rights, gender and women's empowerment, as well as experience in conducting reviews of operational grievance mechanisms for business projects according to international standards.<sup>2</sup>

## Initial Progress on the Women's Empowerment Initiative

The main finding from TRA's review to date is that the Women's Empowerment Initiative has been taken seriously by EPM and the key first steps to implement the projects and programmes that collectively form the Women's Empowerment Initiative have been undertaken.

As is to be expected after only 6 months, most of these projects or programmes that make up the Women's Empowerment Initiative are still in the planning and consultation stages, with the Civic Education Programmes on Gender-Based Violence and Gender Equality and the Leadership Development Programme<sup>3</sup> currently moving into the implementation phase. One of TRA's recommendations for the overall development of the Women's Empowerment Initiative is to continue to develop a strategic and participatory approach, and therefore we do not believe that earlier spending of funds would have been prudent.

With the recruitment and appointment of a Gender and Welfare Manager to support the Women's Empowerment Initiative, along with the ongoing involvement of strong local experts, the overall programme is starting to demonstrate some early indicators of strategic and participatory planning and thinking about an appropriate monitoring and evaluation framework. Furthermore, the feedback and minutes of meetings between EPM and civil society organizations, technical experts and government

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<sup>2</sup> As will be discussed in the forthcoming report about the EPM Operational Grievance Mechanism, and the role of the Independent Monitor, we recommend that the same local experts be considered for involvement in the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the OGM, the Future Working Practices and the Women's Empowerment Initiative.

<sup>3</sup> The Leadership Development Programme has important synergies with the efforts that EPM has made to identify and train suitable female candidates for the Women's Safeguarding Supervisor Role. In other words, identifying and training the candidates for the Women's Safeguarding Supervisor Role provides EPM with an important pool of candidates for further Leadership Development initiatives.

authorities show that all of the specific projects and programmes in the Women’s Empowerment Initiative are moving forward and that stakeholders are being engaged in a participatory manner.

In terms of future implementation of the Women’s Empowerment Initiative, including with respect to the Required Investments, TRA derives confidence from the progress tracking system that EPM has put in place to monitor and report internally on the Women’s Empowerment Initiative, and which includes the spending commitment timelines for the full three-year period between 2021 and 2024.

The interviews during the scoping mission focused on the managers and consultants who have been developing the specific programs that comprise the Women’s Empowerment Initiative. In addition, there was discussion with workers, community members and civil society organizations about needs and opportunities for empowerment and other human rights or sustainable development initiatives.

EPM management provided an overview of the initiatives that are currently in development. From a programmatic perspective, the initiatives appear to be relevant and comprehensive; however, stakeholders perceive the approach to be top-down and urge EPM to adopt a more participatory approach for the Women’s Empowerment Initiative. It is recognized, however, that this top-down approach is in part due to the involvement of litigation.

Furthermore, EPM has created a new management role for Gender and Welfare to support the Women’s Empowerment Initiative internally and to connect these to other human rights initiatives such as the development of the Operational Grievance Mechanism (OGM). The new manager has started in her new role during this reporting period, and will provide the driving force for the timely implementation of the Women’s Empowerment Initiative. EPM has also been working with very competent local gender experts, as well as local civil society organizations, government officials and industry associations in the design and development of the Women’s Empowerment Initiative.

The following table provides an overview of the key projects and programmes for the Women’s Empowerment Initiative and for broader community benefits.

Women’s Empowerment Initiative		
Women’s Empowerment Initiative	Timeline	Status (July 2021)
Civic Education Programme on GBV and Gender Equality	2021-2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local partners (ArtGlo and WOLREC) have been selected for civic education activities with IDH Country Manager advising</li> <li>Project Implementation has commenced; training materials have been developed and initial contract payment made to partners</li> </ul>
Female Leadership Development Programme	2021-2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pool of prospective female leaders has been identified and trained through the related initiative for the Women’s Safeguarding Supervisor Role.<sup>4</sup></li> <li>Additional training needs assessment has started</li> <li>Feedback received from most estates.</li> <li>Potential future AGM currently on FSSC training.</li> </ul>

<sup>4</sup> As explained above in footnote 5, the Female Leadership Development Programme and the Women’s Safeguarding Supervisor Role have important interconnections.

Gender Equality Scholarships (for 3 years)	2021-2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advert posted for scholarship applications closing date 14<sup>th</sup> August.</li> <li>• Scholarships will be promoted within the community and the workforce.</li> <li>• First batch of 3 scholarships to be awarded before academic year begins. One potential recipient already identified.</li> </ul>
Construct Boma Victim Support Unit in Mulanje, Thyolo and Mimosa	2021-2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stakeholder consultations have begun. Building work on first VSU to commence in Q3. Request and concept notes received from Mulanje and Thyolo Police Units.</li> </ul>
Relocate Makwasa Primary School	2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning complete; 2 sites were shortlisted and final site has been selected.</li> <li>• Plans submitted for approval, but EIA process required to be undertaken</li> <li>• Classroom block construction pending EIA</li> <li>• Evaluation of alternatives for community hall location</li> </ul>
Drill 2-3 Water Bore holes per year (for 3 years)	2021-2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 sites have been selected and are currently being surveyed</li> <li>• Stakeholder consultations have taken place</li> </ul>

As can be seen in this table, most of the projects and programmes are at very early stages of implementation, and it is normal that there has not been major spending to date. It is also premature to conduct any detailed review or assessment of these initiatives in terms of outcomes or results. However, from the feedback from our interviews and review of minutes of meetings between EPM and civil society organizations, technical experts and government authorities, all of the specific initiatives in the Women's Empowerment Initiative are moving forward and stakeholders are being engaged in a participatory manner.

## Stakeholder Feedback

Although the purpose of this Verification Report is to look at the Required Investments, it is useful to share some high-level stakeholder feedback in relation to the further development and effectiveness of the Women's Empowerment Initiative.

We anticipate that these are topics that stakeholders will raise again in future verification efforts by TRA or in ongoing consultations with EPM:

- Strengthen the connection of the initiatives and programs to EPM's operations (e.g. scholarships and trainings that support community members getting semi-skilled or skilled jobs on the EPM estates) so that the initiatives can support a stronger company-community relationship as well as empowerment of individual women.
- Address the practical challenges for women to participate in consultations about or implementation of the Women's Empowerment Initiative due to work requirements and family obligations.

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- Integrate men into the consultations about and implementation of the initiatives in order to encourage male champions of gender equality and avoid a potential backlash against these initiatives.
  - Promote the Women’s Empowerment Initiative in the community in order to raise awareness about the topics of gender equality and women and strengthen the participatory approach to the programs and initiatives.

## Conclusions

TRA’s main conclusion in this first Verification Report is that EPM has made good progress towards the planning and implementation of the Women’s Empowerment Initiative and is well-positioned to execute upon the Required Investments for the first year.

It is anticipated that the next Verification Reports in February 2022 (and annually thereafter) will show increased investment values as further projects and initiatives move from the planning stage into implementation.

From the perspective of effectiveness, rights-compatibility and good practices for sustainable development, one of our key messages is that there needs to be a more participatory approach for the implementation of the Women’s Empowerment Initiative. In this regard, there was clear feedback from managers, supervisors, workers and community representatives that they would appreciate more consultation about all the new policies and initiatives that they see being rolled out, including those forming part of the Women's Empowerment Initiative.

Therefore, even though the verification process is focused primarily on the spending aspects of the Required Investments, TRA fully expects to see evidence of continued consultation about the development and implementation of the individual projects and programmes under the Women’s Empowerment Initiative as part of our future verifications. We trust that all parties will carefully balance the need for compliance with the timelines for the Required Investments and the need for stakeholder participation in the development and implementation of specific projects and programmes.

For the last 6 months, one of the main challenges for the participatory development of the Women’s Empowerment Initiative to date has been the impact of COVID-19 on EPM and the local communities in Malawi.<sup>5</sup> The company’s ability to conduct consultation meetings and public awareness events has been limited due to health and safety precautions. For EPM and its partners to continue to engage with stakeholders and to conduct trainings and awareness-raising events related to the Women’s Empowerment Initiative, we do recognise that EPM must proceed with caution given the ongoing COVID-19 situation.

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<sup>5</sup> In this regard, we note that the COVID-19 situation was quite critical in and around the EPM estates, with managers and workers suffering serious illness and fatalities during the reporting period.

