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IMPACT OF BORROWING LITERACY ON THE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF VSLA MEMBERS IN SELECTED GROUPS IN KILOMBERO DISTRICT, TANZANIA.

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ABSTRACT :

This study assessed the impact of borrowing literacy on the economic empowerment of Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) members in selected groups in Kilombero District, Tanzania. A mixed research approach using a descriptive cross-sectional design was adopted. Quantitative data were collected from 226 VSLA members using structured questionnaires administered through KoboToolbox, while qualitative data were collected from four VSLA facilitators through Key Informant Interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 through descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings showed that borrowing literacy had a positive and significant relationship with economic empowerment among VSLA members. Members with better borrowing knowledge demonstrated better understanding of loan conditions, responsible borrowing, repayment obligations and productive use of borrowed funds. The findings further showed that borrowing literacy contributed to improved income management, business activities and the ability of members to use borrowed funds productively. The study concludes that borrowing literacy contributes to the economic empowerment of VSLA members in selected groups in Kilombero District. The study recommends that VSLA facilitators and organisations supporting VSLA programmes should strengthen practical borrowing literacy training, with emphasis on loan assessment, responsible borrowing, repayment planning and productive utilisation of borrowed funds.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Borrowing literacy refers to the knowledge and skills that enable individuals to make informed decisions about loans, understand borrowing costs and repayment conditions, assess their ability to repay and use borrowed funds productively. Borrowing knowledge is important for responsible credit use and economic well-being. Lusardi and Mitchell (2014) explain that financial knowledge supports informed financial decisions, while Lusardi and Scheresberg (2013) found that financially literate individuals were less likely to use high-cost borrowing. In rural communities, borrowing literacy is particularly important because credit is often used to support small businesses and other income-generating activities.

In Tanzania, Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) provide members with opportunities to save and access loans within community-based groups. Evidence from Tanzania shows that VSLA participation contributes to income-generating activities and household welfare (Ksoll et al., 2016), while Pamuk et al. (2022) found that social and institutional arrangements influence access to loans and loan repayment in rural savings and loan associations. However, limited attention has been given to how borrowing literacy specifically affects the economic empowerment of VSLA members, particularly in Kilombero District. This study therefore assessed the impact of borrowing literacy on the economic empowerment of VSLA members in selected groups in Kilombero District, Tanzania.

Statement of the Problem

Ideally, VSLA members with adequate borrowing literacy should understand loan conditions, assess their ability to repay, control borrowing costs, manage debt and use borrowed funds for productive economic activities. These skills should help members make informed borrowing decisions, avoid excessive debt and use credit to improve income, business activities and accumulation of productive assets. In Tanzania, community-based financial groups have increasingly provided opportunities for low-income households to access savings and credit, making appropriate borrowing knowledge important for achieving economic benefits from these financial services. Redson and Magali (2022) found that financial literacy influenced participation in VICOBA activities in Karagwe District, while Magwana (2023) reported a significant relationship between financial literacy and microcredit access among rural households in Tanzania.

However, the current situation indicates that financial literacy does not receive equal attention across all areas of financial decision-making. Magali (2023) found that Tanzanian microfinance studies have examined financial literacy in relation to different financial outcomes, but important financial literacy variables remain insufficiently covered. This situation is important for VSLA members because access to loans alone does not show whether members understand how much to borrow, the cost of borrowing, repayment requirements, debt management and productive use of borrowed funds. When these borrowing skills are inadequate, members face difficulties in making appropriate credit decisions and converting borrowed funds into sustainable economic benefits.

The problem is that limited empirical evidence specifically explains how borrowing literacy affects the economic empowerment of VSLA members in Tanzania, particularly in Kilombero District. Much of the existing evidence combines borrowing with the broader concept of financial literacy or focuses

on access to credit, participation in savings groups and loan repayment rather than examining borrowing literacy as a distinct factor. This gap limits understanding of whether members' knowledge and skills in loan assessment, borrowing costs, repayment planning, debt management and productive loan utilisation contribute to their economic empowerment. The lack of such evidence also makes it difficult for VSLA facilitators and local development actors to identify the borrowing skills that require greater attention in financial literacy programmes.

The consequence of this knowledge gap is that VSLA programmes can provide access to loans without clear evidence on whether members possess the borrowing skills required to translate credit into improved economic outcomes. Inadequate borrowing decisions can contribute to poor use of borrowed funds, repayment difficulties, limited business growth and weak improvement in members' income and asset ownership. This study therefore assessed the impact of borrowing literacy on the economic empowerment of VSLA members in selected groups in Kilombero District, Tanzania.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Literature Review

The study is guided by Human Capital Theory and Empowerment Theory. Human Capital Theory, developed by Schultz (1961) and further advanced by Becker (1964), views knowledge and skills as forms of capital that improve individual productivity and economic outcomes. In this study, borrowing literacy is treated as a financial skill that enables VSLA members to assess borrowing needs, understand loan conditions, manage repayment and use borrowed funds productively. Empowerment Theory, developed by Rappaport (1981) and further explained by Zimmerman (1995), focuses on individuals' ability to gain control over resources, decisions and opportunities affecting their lives. The theory is relevant because borrowing literacy gives VSLA members knowledge needed to make independent borrowing decisions and exercise greater control over financial resources. The two theories together explain how acquiring borrowing knowledge and skills can improve the ability of VSLA members to use credit productively and strengthen their economic empowerment.

Empirical literature review

Access to borrowing provides an important source of capital for household and business activities, but the economic benefits of credit depend on borrowers' ability to understand loan conditions, assess borrowing costs, plan repayment and use borrowed funds productively. Recent evidence by Deyshappriya, Fernando and Jeewanthi (2024) from 975 rural households in Sri Lanka found that higher financial literacy significantly increased the probability of loan repayment, showing the importance of financial knowledge in responsible credit management. In Tanzania, Mwombeki and Magwana (2023), using FinScope household data, found a significant relationship between financial literacy and microcredit decisions among rural households and recommended financial literacy programmes to improve understanding and proper use of borrowed funds. Evidence from Malawi by Brailovskaya, Dupas and Robinson (2024) further showed that many digital borrowers had limited knowledge of loan terms and experienced late repayment, although a short financial literacy intervention improved knowledge without improving timely repayment. These findings show that knowledge about borrowing is important, but financial knowledge alone does not always translate directly into improved borrowing outcomes. Recent evidence on VSLAs in Tanzania also shows that savings groups provide members with access to loans that support household needs and investments in businesses and farms (Financial Sector Deepening Trust, 2024), while Mtelevu et al. (2025) found that VSLA and agricultural cooperative participation was associated with increased household income among members in rural Tanzania. However, existing studies have mainly examined financial literacy as a broad construct, access to credit, loan repayment, or the general contribution of VSLAs to livelihoods, with limited attention to borrowing literacy as a specific dimension of financial literacy and its impact on economic empowerment among VSLA members. Evidence specific to selected VSLA groups in Kilombero District is also limited. This study addresses this gap by examining the impact of borrowing literacy on the economic empowerment of VSLA members in selected groups in Kilombero District, Tanzania.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a mixed research approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative approach enabled the collection of numerical data on borrowing literacy and economic empowerment among Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) members, while the qualitative approach provided detailed views from VSLA facilitators on borrowing practices and members' economic activities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A cross-sectional research design was used to assess the impact of borrowing literacy on the economic empowerment of VSLA members at one point in time. The mixed approach provided both measurable evidence from VSLA members and detailed explanations from facilitators regarding borrowing literacy and its contribution to economic empowerment.

Area of the Study

This study was conducted in Kilombero District, Morogoro Region, Tanzania. The study focused on selected VSLA groups supported by the Strengthening and Empowering Communities (STEP) programme in Mang'ula A, Mang'ula, Mwaya, Sanje and Mkula wards. The area is predominantly rural, with livelihoods largely based on smallholder farming, livestock keeping, fishing, petty trading and other small-scale economic activities. The area was selected because VSLA members obtain savings and loans and participate in financial literacy activities, providing a suitable setting for assessing the impact of borrowing literacy on economic empowerment.

Population and Sampling

Population

A population refers to the entire group of people or units with characteristics relevant to a particular study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The target population for this study consisted of 518 active VSLA members from 19 selected VSLA groups supported by STEP in the study area. The members had participated in VSLA activities for at least one year and had experience with savings and borrowing activities (STEP, 2024). The study also included four VSLA facilitators who were involved in financial literacy training and programme implementation. These participants were included because of their direct knowledge of borrowing practices, financial literacy activities and members' economic activities.

Sampling

Sampling is the process of selecting a smaller group from a larger population for participation in a study (Saunders et al., 2019). This study employed stratified random sampling to select 226 VSLA members from the population of 518 members. The members were grouped according to the selected VSLA groups and respondents were proportionally allocated to each group based on its membership size. Simple random sampling was then used to select members within each group, giving eligible members an equal opportunity to participate. The sample size was determined using Yamane's formula at a 5% margin of error. Purposive sampling was used to select four VSLA facilitators because of their direct involvement in financial literacy training and VSLA activities. Therefore, the study involved a total of 230 participants, comprising 226 VSLA members and four key informants.

Data Collection Instruments

A questionnaire is a structured instrument used to collect information from respondents through prepared questions (Saunders et al., 2019). In this study, structured questionnaires were administered electronically using Kobo Toolbox to 226 VSLA members to collect quantitative data on borrowing literacy and economic empowerment. The questionnaire focused on members' knowledge and practices related to loan assessment, borrowing costs, repayment planning, debt management and productive use of borrowed funds. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four VSLA facilitators to obtain detailed information on borrowing practices, financial literacy training and members' economic activities. The use of interviews complemented questionnaire responses by providing detailed explanations of borrowing literacy among VSLA members (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were checked, coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 27. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations, were used to summarise borrowing literacy and economic empowerment. Pearson correlation analysis was used to establish the relationship between borrowing literacy and economic empowerment, while multiple regression analysis was used to assess the impact of borrowing literacy on economic empowerment. Qualitative data from the four key informants were analysed using thematic analysis. Interview responses were coded and grouped into themes related to borrowing knowledge, loan management, repayment practices and economic empowerment. The qualitative results were used to complement and explain the quantitative results.

Ethical Considerations

The study observed ethical principles to protect the rights, privacy and welfare of participants. Ethical clearance and an introductory letter were obtained from the University of Iringa, while permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant authorities in Kilombero District. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of codes instead of participants' names. All information collected was kept securely and used only for academic purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the results and discussion on the impact of borrowing literacy on the economic empowerment of VSLA members in selected groups in Kilombero District. The analysis focuses on confidence in loan repayment, understanding of borrowing conditions, expansion of income-generating activities and productive use of borrowed funds.

Table 1: Borrowing Literacy on Economic empowerment

Borrowing Literacy Statement	SD n (%)	D n (%)	N n (%)	A n (%)	SA n (%)	Mean	Std. Deviation
I am confident in repaying loans according to agreed terms	11 (4.9)	24 (10.6)	18 (8.0)	108 (47.8)	65 (28.8)	3.8496	1.1013
Borrowing knowledge has helped me expand income-generating activities	10 (4.4)	25 (11.1)	4 (1.8)	129 (57.1)	58 (25.7)	3.885	1.052
I understand the conditions for borrowing loans from VSLA groups	1 (0.4)	7 (3.1)	48 (21.2)	52 (23.0)	118 (52.2)	4.2389	0.9203
Financial literacy training has improved my ability to use loans productively	3 (1.3)	14 (6.2)	63 (27.9)	34 (15.0)	112 (49.6)	4.0531	1.0695

Source: Field data (2026)

The findings presented in Table 1 demonstrate that borrowing literacy has positively contributed to the economic empowerment among VSLA members in Kilombero District. The overall mean score for borrowing literacy was 4.01, indicating that respondents generally agreed that they possessed adequate knowledge and skills related to borrowing practices. The standard deviations ranging from 0.92 to 1.10 suggest a relatively consistent level of responses among participants.

Regarding confidence in loan repayment, the findings show that the majority of the respondents, 173 (76.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were confident in repaying loans according to the agreed terms (Mean = 3.85, SD = 1.10). Only 35 (15.5%) disagreed or strongly disagreed while 18 (8.0%) remained neutral. This implies that participation in VSLA activities and exposure to financial literacy training have improved members' understanding and confidence in managing loan obligations responsibly.

Concerning the impact of borrowing knowledge to expanding income-generating activities, the results indicate that 187 respondents (82.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that borrowing knowledge had helped them expand their economic activities (Mean = 3.89, SD = 1.05). This suggests that improved

borrowing skills enable VSLA members to access and utilize loans for productive purposes, including agriculture, small businesses and other livelihood activities thereby contributing to increased household income and economic stability.

The findings further reveal that respondents had a good understanding of VSLA borrowing conditions. A total of 170 respondents (75.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the conditions for borrowing loans from VSLA groups (Mean = 4.24, SD = 0.92). This was the highest-rated borrowing literacy indicator, suggesting that VSLA members have developed adequate knowledge of loan requirements, repayment arrangements and borrowing procedures. However, the 48 respondents (21.2%) who remained neutral indicate the need for continued guidance to ensure that all members fully understand borrowing terms and responsibilities.

Regarding the impact of financial literacy training on productive loan use, the results show that 146 respondents (64.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that training had improved their ability to use loans productively (Mean = 4.05, SD = 1.07). However, 63 respondents (27.9%) were neutral, suggesting that some members may require additional practical support in applying borrowing knowledge to investment and income-generating activities.

These findings are consistent with Cole (2016) who argued that financial literacy enhances individuals' ability to make informed financial decisions including effective borrowing and debt management. Similarly, Redson and Magali (2022) found that financial literacy influences borrowing, loan repayment, savings, and deposits among members of savings and credit groups in Tanzania. The findings also support previous studies on VSLA interventions which demonstrate that savings and lending groups improve access to credit and encourage investment in productive activities.

In general, the findings confirm that borrowing literacy is an important component influencing economic empowerment among VSLA members in Kilombero District. Improved knowledge of borrowing practices enables members to access credit responsibly, manage repayment obligations, invest in productive activities and enhance their financial stability. Therefore, continuous financial literacy training focusing on loan management, repayment planning and productive credit utilization is essential for maximizing the economic benefits derived from VSLA participation.

During the interviews, Facilitators reported that VSLA members increasingly use borrowed funds to support income-generating activities such as agriculture, livestock keeping and small businesses. This has enabled members to increase their income sources and improve their household economic conditions.

During the interviews, one of the Facilitator explained:

“Most members understand the loan conditions within the VSLA groups and are able to repay their loans on time. They use the borrowed funds to support income-generating activities while continuing to maintain their shares as savings. This shows that members are becoming more responsible in managing loans and are able to balance borrowing for productive activities with regular saving. The practice also helps members meet their financial needs while maintaining their financial participation in the VSLA group”. (Facilitator 1, 20 July 2026, 9:06:47 a.m.).

Another Facilitator had the following to say:

“VSLA members borrow frequently throughout the savings cycle and loans are mainly used for economic activities such as agriculture, livestock keeping and other income-generating activities. Also, the availability of VSLA loans has enabled members to access financial resources that support livelihood improvement.” (Facilitator 2, 23 July 2026, 2:42:15 p.m.).

Another key informant stated:

“Members are trained to borrow for productive purposes rather than for unnecessary consumption. Financial literacy education focuses on helping members understand loan utilization and repayment responsibilities. This training enables members to make better decisions about how much to borrow, how to use borrowed funds and how to repay loans within the agreed period.” (Facilitator 4, 24 July 2026, 12:29:09 p.m.).

Facilitator 4 identified some challenges related to borrowing behavior and explained that some Members still take loans without considering interest rates and sometimes borrow without clear investment plans leading to the use of loans for needs beyond their income capacity.

Based on facilitator responses, the findings demonstrate that borrowing literacy has improved members' financial decision-making, increased access to productive credit and supported income-generating activities. However, continued education is required to ensure that members evaluate loan costs and develop clear investment plans.

These findings are supported by Karlan *et al.*, (2017) who found that savings groups combined with financial education improve credit management and productive investment among low-income households. Similarly, Ledgerwood (2019) highlights that savings groups strengthen financial discipline by promoting responsible borrowing and repayment practices.

Pearson's Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between borrowing literacy and economic empowerment among VSLA members. The analysis was based on 226 respondents. The results are presented in Table 4.8.

Table 2: Correlation between Borrowing Literacy and Economic Empowerment

Variable	Pearson Correlation (r)	95% Interval	Confidence	Sig. (p-value)	Interpretation
Borrowing Literacy	0.517	0.414–0.606		<0.001	Significant positive relationship

Source: Field Data (2026)

The results in Table 2 show a positive and statistically significant relationship between borrowing literacy and economic empowerment ($r = 0.517$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.414, 0.606]). The positive correlation indicates that higher borrowing literacy was associated with higher economic empowerment among VSLA members. This result suggests that understanding loan conditions, assessing repayment ability, managing debt and using borrowed funds productively are important aspects of borrowing literacy linked with improved economic outcomes among VSLA members in Kilombero District.

Regression Analysis

Regression analysis was conducted to assess the impact of borrowing literacy on economic empowerment among VSLA members. The results presented below focus on borrowing literacy, which is the independent variable examined in this manuscript.

Table 3: Regression Coefficients for Borrowing Literacy and Economic Empowerment

Independent Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig. (p-value)	95% CI for B (Lower–Upper)	Interpretation
Constant	0.548	0.285	—	1.922	0.056	-0.014–1.110	Not significant
Borrowing Literacy	0.109	0.051	0.148	2.124	0.035	0.008–0.211	Significant positive impact

Source: Field Data (2026)

The regression results show that borrowing literacy had a positive and statistically significant impact on economic empowerment among VSLA members ($B = 0.109$, $\beta = 0.148$, $t = 2.124$, $p = 0.035$, 95% CI = 0.008–0.211). The positive coefficient indicates that an increase in borrowing literacy was associated with an increase in economic empowerment. The result shows that knowledge of loan conditions, repayment responsibilities and appropriate use of borrowed funds was associated with better economic outcomes among VSLA members. The significance level of 0.035, which is below 0.05, confirms that borrowing literacy was a significant predictor of economic empowerment in the regression model.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that borrowing literacy has a positive and significant impact on the economic empowerment of VSLA members in selected groups in Kilombero District. Members who understand VSLA loan conditions, assess their ability to repay loans, manage borrowing responsibilities and use borrowed funds for income-generating activities are more likely to experience improved economic empowerment. The regression results showed a significant positive impact of borrowing literacy on economic empowerment. This indicates that improving members' borrowing knowledge is important for strengthening the productive use of VSLA loans and supporting members' economic activities.

The study recommends that organizations involved in VSLA promotion, including STEP and VSLA facilitators strengthen borrowing literacy training by focusing on practical skills in assessing loan affordability, understanding loan conditions, planning repayment and selecting productive uses of borrowed funds. VSLA group leaders should provide regular guidance on responsible borrowing and repayment planning, while Kilombero District Council should support financial literacy programmes that strengthen members' capacity to use VSLA loans for sustainable income-generating activities. These actions should give greater attention to practical borrowing decisions rather than general financial knowledge.

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