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sustainable environment, education & development

**Final Project Report for:  
Stitch Sainte Luce (Phase III):**

**Empowering women and increasing incomes through embroidery in rural  
southeast Madagascar**



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**SEED Madagascar**

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## 1. Introduction

Madagascar is globally renowned for its rich biodiversity, yet for decades the country has been fighting a losing battle against chronic poverty. Ranking 154/188 on the Human Development Index (UNDP: 2016), the country failed to achieve a single Millennium Development Goal (World Bank: 2016). Poverty in the isolated, southeast Anosy Region is particularly severe with average annual income in agricultural households 48% below the national average (World Bank, 2017). In the rural fishing community of Sainte Luce, education and employment opportunities are limited. Women are typically dependent on the marginal income of male fishermen, or rely on reed weaving or mangrove fishing for income which yield little return and damage the local environment.

Since 2012, Project Stitch Sainte Luce (hereafter Project Stitch) has been developing embroidery as a sustainable livelihood for disadvantaged women in Sainte Luce, increasing their incomes, social standing and economic resilience. With women typically investing more of their earnings in their families than men (UNICEF, 2016), improving female livelihoods holds the potential to alleviate poverty across the wider community. This is the final report for Phase III of Project Stitch, covering the two-year period from 1<sup>st</sup> February 2015 to 31<sup>st</sup> January 2017. The report provides a comprehensive account of all project activity, along with an evaluation of achievements, impact and lessons learned, as well as considerations for future action.

Following the successes of previous phases, Phase III of Project Stitch has focused on building long-term sustainability and establishing a robust women's embroidery association. Phase III has developed the skills of the embroiderers to take on many of the operational and business elements of the Stitch association; including recording sales, organising stock to be sold in the studio and abroad, product development, buying equipment and materials, and conducting sales with tourists. Phase III has also empowered the embroiderers in other areas; all of the women attended ten educational sessions on health, hygiene and nutrition, whilst levels of English amongst the women have continued to improve. One of the highlights of Phase III was a successful cross-visit to a silk-weaving cooperative in central Madagascar to share experiences and learning on running an independent and successful business.

The continuing success of Project Stitch is reflected by the steady increases in sales seen over the two years. In 2014, the year before Phase III began, Stitch generated a total of 33.9 million MGA (Malagasy Ariary), or approximately 8,500 GBP (Great British Pounds) in sales across the year.<sup>1</sup> In the final year of Phase III, total sales amounted to 53 million MGA, or around 13,350 GBP; an increase of 55% across the two year period. Accordingly, the embroiderer's collective income is now over 370% higher than before Project Stitch. This marked increase enables the women to provide their families with more nutritious food, access to healthcare and school fees for their children.

The project has also increased the women's social standing both within their households and amongst the wider community, with just over half of the embroiderers now contributing the largest share of household income. Phase III of Project Stitch has made significant progress in fostering gender empowerment and livelihood development, alleviating multi-dimensional poverty for men, women and children throughout the Sainte Luce community.

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<sup>1</sup> All exchange rates calculated using XE currency converter at a rate of 1 GBP = 3,973 MGA on 09/02/17.

## 2. Project Background and Objectives

Established in 2012, Project Stitch aimed to tackle the combined challenges of livelihood diversification and women's empowerment through embroidery. It supports women living in the rural fishing community of Sainte Luce, who prior to Project Stitch had few educational or livelihood opportunities outside traditional weaving or mangrove fishing. Phases I and II of Project Stitch trained and supported a group of 23 women (now 21 women) to produce high quality embroidered products to sell both to tourists and on the international market. A studio was subsequently built, providing a space for the embroiderers to meet, create and sell their products. With support from SEED project staff, sales of Stitch products both in Madagascar and internationally steadily rose, increasing the embroiderers' income and ability buy more nutritious food, medicine, education and clothing for their families.

Although Phases I and II were successful in proving that embroidery was a viable and lucrative alternative livelihood in Sainte Luce, the newly trained embroiderers remained heavily reliant on project staff to administer and manage the business elements of Stitch. Thus, Phase III focused on building the capacity of the embroiderers to take over operational aspects of the business, as well as supporting the women to form a self-governing association to manage the embroidery enterprise. Training was designed to build capacity in English, photography, computer literacy, alongside key business skills such as book-keeping, stock management, sourcing materials, liaising with customers and processing orders. The aim was to support the newly formed association in transitioning towards independence, thus gradually removing reliance on SEED.

Other objectives of Phase III included supporting project beneficiaries to disseminate their skills to other members of the community, as well as engaging the embroiderers on a variety of subjects from nutrition and family planning to malaria prevention, with the intention of disseminating vital information through the community of Sainte Luce. The development of regional and international market for Stitch products was also a crucial aspect of Phase III, to ensure the embroiderers have reliable and sufficient sources of income.



Rosine working in the studio



An array of belts for sale



Bunting with Brown Lemur design

### 3. Project Activities

#### **3.1 Support and training in forming a successful business association**

In the first year of the Phase III, training was delivered on how to build a working association and develop effective internal governance structures. Project staff worked with the embroiderers to write a *Dina* (a Malagasy word describing local customary law) for the emerging association, outlining the rules and protocols which all the embroiderers must adhere to. A *Vono-dina* was also drawn up, declaring the agreed consequences for violations of the *Dina*. A Committee was elected to lead the association, consisting of a President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer and Auditor.

Throughout Phase III, the *Dina* has proven to be a valuable foundation for the association, with all 21 of the embroiderers asserting that it is respected and adhered to in final monitoring. During Phase III, two embroiderers were caught in violation of the *Dina* and subsequently expelled by the association following a democratic vote – one for stealing threads and one for refusing to share commission work that should have been divided according to the *Dina*. While it is regrettable that either of these incidents took place, the resulting action demonstrates the association's commitment to good governance and validates both the necessity for and the efficacy of the *Dina* and *Vono-Dina*. The Committee has also grown in confidence and aptitude over the course of Phase III, chairing regular meetings with the embroiderers and providing leadership for the association. Confidence in the Committee was reaffirmed through an election held in January 2017, with four out of five members retaining their positions.

Alongside building internal structures, training was delivered to the embroiderers on the skills required to run a successful and effective embroidery business. Five teams were established to oversee key areas of collective responsibility; a sales team, a quality control team, a materials team, a stock management team and a housekeeping team. A system of rotational training was introduced to ensure every woman had the opportunity to experience each role prior to making a longer-term commitment. This training was effective in ensuring the five teams were made up of women who were both suitable and motivated, whilst also ensuring that every embroiderer had an understanding of each team's responsibilities. Once the embroiderers had allocated themselves into five teams, further bespoke training was given to build the specialist skills required to carry out team responsibilities, such as book-keeping and purchasing materials.

Over the duration of Phase III, there has been significant, tangible progress in the ability of embroiderers to manage the everyday running of the business. Control of routine tasks such as buying materials, selling to customers, recording product sales and stock and handling finances has gradually been transferred from project staff to the embroiderers. The five teams responsible for housekeeping, managing stock, buying materials, handling sales and quality control are now performing these tasks with minimal support, gaining experience and confidence in these roles. In Phase III monitoring, 70% of the women reported that they felt the teams within the association were working well and were completing their jobs effectively.

In year two, a series of photography workshops were held with all embroiderers on the use of digital cameras and value of taking attractive, high-quality product photos. Using examples of professional photography from magazines, the women were encouraged to think about what makes a good

photograph and to practice photographing their products in the studio. The training proved successful, with the women increasingly able to take appealing, marketable product photos for use on the website, social media and online Etsy shop. The most recent product photos posted online were taken by two embroiderers, Rolline and Kirisy, who have both shown a particular talent and flare for photography and are keen to develop their skills further.

A series of four computer training sessions were also delivered in year two, by SEED's IT Specialist, providing a basic overview of starting a laptop, opening and saving spreadsheets, and data entry. Some progress was made amongst the embroiderers, particularly with entering sales records into spreadsheets. Nonetheless, low levels of literacy and English language, and unfamiliarity with computer systems, posed challenges to the women's progress in IT. Moreover, as a result of time constraints and the rescheduling of the cross-visit, fewer training sessions were conducted than had originally been scheduled. With the association having identified IT skills as vital to long-term sustainability, enthusiasm for more computer training remains high; in the final monitoring, 43% of women stated a desire for further computer training.



Product photo taken by Rolline



Managing the sales books

### **3.2 Cross-visit to successful women's association**

In August 2016, five members of the Stitch association, including the President and Secretary, participated in a long-awaited cross-visit to a women's silk weaving cooperative in Soatanana, central Madagascar. The group, which also included three project staff, travelled two days across the highlands of Madagascar to share knowledge with and learn from a successful and independent women's textile association. The trip was the first time the embroiderers had left the Anosy Region, giving them a valuable experience in travelling across and discovering their own country.

Prior to the trip, meetings were held with participating embroiders and the wider association to identify key learning objectives. During the three-day visit, the Stitch embroiderers were able to have several in-depth and productive meetings with key figures in the silk weaving cooperative. Topics covered during the meetings included quality control of products, enforcement of internal rules and access to markets. The meetings allowed both parties to share experiences and learning, and reflect on the challenges of running a sustainable business. The embroiderers also visited the silk weavers' village, a local artisan craft market and the shop where the women sell their silk scarves.

The trip was highly successful, with the insights gained by participants reported back to the association upon their return. Following the cross-visit, the association agreed to adopt a 5% internal commission on products, creating a pot of collective finances to cover shared costs, such as transportation of products for sale or studio maintenance. Several members of the Committee also reaffirmed the need to be more rigorous in ensuring internal rules on quality control are met by all embroiderers.

The visit established a productive working relationship with the Soatanana silk weavers' cooperative, and has fostered opportunities for future collaboration. The Stitch embroiderers have since sold the silk weavers' scarves in the Sainte Luce studio, transferring the money back to Soatanana through mobile payment. The silk weavers also agreed to sell Stitch Sainte Luce embroidery in their shop, with the first shipment of stock sent by post in November 2016. By January 2017, all the Stitch products had been sold by the silk weavers. Looking forwards, the embroiderers will be encouraged to nurture this burgeoning relationship and establish a formal agreement with the silk weavers, providing Stitch with a permanent retail outlet in central Madagascar.



Stitch embroiderers with the Soatanana silk weavers



Inspecting the silk scarves

### **3.3 Dissemination of skills and information to the community**

The most direct and significant way in which the Stitch embroiderers have spread information and skills to the community in Sainte Luce has been through the training of associate embroiderers. At the beginning of Phase III, there were 35 associates who had been or were being trained by Stitch members to produce embroidery. These mainly consisted of mothers, sisters or daughters of the Stitch embroiderers. By the end of Phase III, there were 79 associate embroiderers producing embroidery, with 90% having sold products through the association.. More associates are now from outside the immediate Stitch members' families; with embroiderers training aunts, nieces and friends, the financial benefits of Stitch are being spread further across the community. Some embroiderers have even trained their husbands as associates, highlighting the women's empowered status within the household.

The rise in associate embroiderers has been accompanied by a rise in sales of products made by associate embroiderers. In the first six months of Phase III, 42 associate embroiderer items had been sold with a total sales value of 476,000 MGA, representing 4% of total Stitch sales. In the final six months of the Phase III, associate embroiderers collectively sold 563 items with a total sales value of

11,953,000 MGA, representing 38% of total Stitch sales. This amounts to a 2,411% increase in the value of sales from associate products, compared to only a 125% increase in the number of associate embroiderers. It can therefore be confidently asserted that Phase III supported a major increase in the number of community members financially benefiting from the Stitch association.

A number of other initiatives were undertaken in Phase III to disseminate information and services to the Sainte Luce community through the Stitch association. In June 2016, a video of the Stitch association and the role their embroidery plays in highlighting the unique, beautiful and threatened environment of Sainte Luce was produced and screened for the community during World Environment Day celebrations. The video was subsequently broadcast on local television in the Anosy Region.

Monthly mending sessions were also trialled in the first year, allowing the community to come to the studio and have their clothes repaired for free. Although formal mending sessions were stopped after a few months, due to a limited number of attendees, the Stitch embroiderers independently came up with a solution better suited to the association and the community. They now run an informal drop-in mending service for free, whereby members of the community can come into the studio at any time, and receive help and advice on mending and access to sewing machines.



Examples of embroidered cushions made by the Stitch women

### **3.4 English language training**

English teaching has been ongoing with the embroiderers throughout Phase III, delivered by SEED's qualified English teaching volunteers. The embroiderers have been primarily taught in three groups according to their English language ability, with lesson plans and records maintained by SEED's English department to ensure continuity and progression. Alongside these formal teaching sessions, other educational aids such as recordings to play in the studio have also been trialled to enable the embroiderers to practice when a teacher is unavailable.

Between April and October 2016, the Stitch embroiderers received week-long blocks of English teaching every month from a regular, long-term English teacher. In line with a new curriculum designed specifically for Project Stitch, lessons focused on customer service to enable the embroiderers to sell products to English visitors. Sessions utilised live role-playing of sales scenarios, peer-to-peer learning and informal assessments as learning tools. Unfortunately, due to illness, the regular English teacher for Project Stitch left Madagascar in October 2016 and no immediate

replacement was available – although several English lessons were given in November by a temporary teacher.

Over the course of the project, the English language skills of the women have steadily improved and eagerness to learn English remains high amongst the majority of embroiderers. In February 2016, the embroiderers scored on average 40/54 in a test of embroidery-specific vocabulary. In August 2016, after six months of lessons with a regular English teacher, this average had risen to 51/54. At project close, nearly all embroiderers had some basic vocabulary of spoken English being able to introduce themselves and speak about the range of products, colours, designs and prices in the studio. Several of the more advanced embroiderers are able to greet customers and conduct sales in English.

Despite this progress, it has been highlighted that many of the women lack confidence interacting in English outside the comfort of their lessons and that the overall standard of English amongst the embroiderers is still at beginner level. Phase III has highlighted several challenges in teaching the embroiderers English, notably the low levels of literacy amongst the women and the logistical challenges of regularly sending an English teacher to Sainte Luce (for more detail, see section 4.2.1 on lessons learnt). Given the importance of English language skills for sales and the development of national and international markets, English teaching has been identified as an area for further development moving forwards.



SEED's long-term English Teacher, Ben, giving lessons to the embroiderers

### **3.5 Capacity building for Stitch Sainte Luce members on health, hygiene and nutrition issues**

Ten health training sessions were held with the Stitch embroiderers on a range of health, hygiene and nutritional issues. All sessions were led by trained staff working within SEED's health department, utilising existing research and SEED's expertise on health issues amongst rural populations in the region. The first three sessions, conducted in March and April 2016, focused on: hand-washing, during which a tippy-tap<sup>2</sup> was built; the medical benefits of *moringa* plants, including the planting of *moringa* seedlings around the studio; and eye care, concluding with the provision of glasses, donated to the project by a private donor, to those in need.

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<sup>2</sup> A tippy tap provides a hygienic way to wash hands without running water, made by filling a modified plastic bottle with water and tipping.

In November 2016, four further talks were given on sexual health by SEED's Community Health Officer. Two sessions were provided for the embroiderers and two sessions for the associate embroiderers, covering family planning and contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as HIV and AIDS, and sexual relationships. These sessions were well received and generated open and engaging debates amongst both groups of women, leading to many additional questions for the Community Health Officer. Two further sessions were also held in November on malaria and the risks of self-medication.

The health sessions were completed in December 2016 with a talk on water hygiene, led by the coordinator of Project Tatirano, a rainwater-harvesting project in Sainte Luce. The session covered water hygiene principles, collection in Sainte Luce and the importance of clean drinking water. The Coordinator encouraged the women to consider installing a rainwater-harvesting system in their home when these are made available in Phase II of Project Tatirano.

Average attendance across the health talks for Stitch embroiderers was 88%. As a result of their status and respected position within the household and wider community, the Stitch embroiderers are also able to disseminate the learning gained from health talks to their families and friends throughout Sainte Luce. Incorporating the associate embroiderers into half of the health sessions also enhanced the sharing of informed health advice amongst the community of Sainte Luce.



Planting *Moringa* seeds outside the Studio



Health talk on hand-washing and hygiene

### **3.6 Establishing a shop for embroidery equipment**

As part of the business skills training conducted in the first six months of Phase III, an internal materials 'shop' was established, allowing the embroiderers to buy their threads and fabrics from within the association. Whilst Project Stitch staff initially established relationships with suppliers in Fort Dauphin and coordinated purchases, the materials shop and processes of purchasing from suppliers are now independently managed by the embroiderers. Members of the materials team purchase recycled fabric in nearby Mahatalaky and higher quality material in Fort Dauphin.

At the beginning of Phase III, threads were purchased from Antananarivo as they were of higher quality to those sold in Fort Dauphin. Following negotiations between project staff and a local retailer, the higher quality thread is stocked in Fort Dauphin, enabling the embroiderers to take over the purchasing of threads from the retailer. The materials team records transactions and manages material stocks, reporting back to the association regularly to ensure transparency and enable

decisions on future purchases. When necessary, the materials team also buy and stock embroidery equipment such as needles and embroidery rings, enabling the association to replace equipment and buy new tools for associate embroiderers.

In December 2016, project staff coordinated an order of 32 rechargeable, solar powered Luci Lights™ which the embroiderers could purchase through the association. By project close, 15 lights had been purchased, providing a cheaper, safer and more environmentally friendly solution for working at night, compared to the kerosene lamps previously used. In addition to this, a further five Luci Lights were donated to the associate embroiderers, who can access the studio and borrow one of these lights for a period of two days when working on a commission.

The materials shop within the association has been now been running for over 18 months, becoming steadily more efficient, confident and autonomous. The success of the shop in maintaining a regular stock of locally sourced materials in Sainte Luce has enabled the embroiderers to increase their self-reliance and complete embroidery products without supply-related delays. Sourcing local, recycled fabrics and buying in bulk has also allowed the embroiderers to save money and avoid purchasing expensive items from Antananarivo and abroad, enabling the association to move towards self-sufficiency. Given the competence and experience now gained by the materials team in managing the shop, it is anticipated that this arrangement will continue to thrive in the future.



Updating the stock book



Threads for sale in the Materials Shop

### **3.7 Developing international market chains for Stitch Sainte Luce products**

Significant progress was made in developing international markets for Stitch products during Phase III, with emphasis on raising awareness through exposure in printed publications, at handicraft events and online. Stitch Sainte Luce was featured in a number of local and international publications, including the Guardian newspaper and Hand Eye magazine, a renowned international global craft publication. The online presence of Stitch has grown through both frequent posts on social media – there has been a 95% increase in followers of Stitch’s Facebook page during Phase III - and through the Stitch website, which was redesigned by a digital designer in the UK. The updated website now provides a sleek, professional platform for advertising information about the Stitch enterprise, future events and products for sales online. Phase III has also seen a steady increase in sales made through the online Etsy shop, generating 756 GBP or over 3 million MGA in 2016. A UK-based volunteer has taken on coordination of all aspects of selling online.

Throughout Phase III, volunteers working for Stitch in the UK have researched, organised and attended over a dozen events in the UK to sell and market Stitch products. This has included The Big Textile show in Leicester, The Handmade Fair in London and Africa OYE music festival in Liverpool. In 2015, Stitch was commissioned by a gallery in Wisconsin, USA to produce a series of wall-hangings depicting traditional stories for the 'Cultural Cloth' exhibition. The show was a great success, selling all the embroidery commissioned, worth a total of 578 USD. Stitch also had its first stall at Glastonbury music festival in June 2016, with the embroiderers creating a range of Glastonbury themed products, such as bracelets and bunting, to sell at the event. Across the weekend over 4 million MGA, or 1,000 GBP, was made in sales, with all 120 bracelets sold by the second day. After the success of the event in 2016, Stitch has applied once more for a stall this year. If successful, lessons learnt from last year will help to ensure an even more profitable and successful event in 2017.

Over the past six months, significant progress has been made towards consolidating and developing international markets. In November 2016, a new Communications and Marketing Intern was hired on a three-month placement in the UK, tasked with evaluating the effectiveness and long-term viability of Stitch's international retail strategy. Since taking on the role, she has updated the online sales records and conducted research into the sale of Stitch products at various events in the UK, focusing particularly on how to generate greater profits and cover costs. The results of her assessment will be used to inform and develop a future strategy for sales in the UK.



Bracelets on sale in the UK



Stitch at the Handmade Fair



A collection of vibrant Stitch products

### **3.8 Trial independence**

Throughout Phase III, one of the foci has been the stepped withdrawal of support from SEED to increase the independence of the embroidery association, thus supporting its long-term sustainability. In August 2015 the Project Coordinator, who had been permanently based in Sainte Luce managing Project Stitch, returned to the UK having delivered key training and skills sharing to the association to strengthen their autonomy and self-governance (*see section 3.1*). Increased responsibility was therefore placed on the local Malagasy Project Assistant throughout Phase III, supported by an International Project Assistant and SEED's core staff. The Malagasy Project Assistant has been effective in building capacity in the day-to-day running of the association and has facilitated a steady transfer of skills and responsibilities to the embroiderers. During monitoring completed in July 2016, all women stated they were happy with the running of association in the

absence of the Project Coordinator.

A planned visit of the Project Coordinator to the project in May 2016 was unfortunately cancelled due to health reasons. However, the Project Coordinator continued to provide vital oversight and support from the UK throughout 2016. The Coordinator returned to Madagascar for the last month of Phase III to support the final monitoring, evaluate progress and identify challenges and issues that have arisen since her absence.

The gradual increase in the ability of the embroiderers to manage the association and coordinate the business elements of Stitch has naturally led to an increase in autonomy for the embroiderers. For example, the women now travel into Fort Dauphin themselves once a month to collect the money made from international sales – a task previously carried out by the Project Assistant. Moreover, the cross-visit to Soatanana has further fuelled the embroiderers' aspirations for independence, with two-thirds of women confirming in the final monitoring that the exchange had increased their confidence in an independent Stitch association. Despite this progress, it is recognised by both the embroiderers and SEED project staff that complete independence will require further training and capacity building to cement learning and ensure activities are sustained following the withdrawal of SEED support. Working together with project staff and the embroiderers, the Project Coordinator is currently developing the next phase for Stitch to ensure the association continues to grow in strength, ability and independence.



Stitching an embroidered card



Embroiderers at work in the studio

## 4. Monitoring, Evaluation and Lessons

### 4.1 Monitoring

Throughout Phase III, biannual monitoring was conducted to assess progress and results, evaluate the impact of the project, and ensure Phase III responded to emerging priorities and needs of the embroiderers and the wider community. Project staff conducted interviews with each embroiderer separately and in confidence. The embroiderers were asked about income, expenditure, saving, quality of life, training and their thoughts on the association. The results were collated and compared to both the baseline taken at the beginning of Project Stitch and monitoring conducted before Phase III, giving SEED a broad overview of the project impact, both to the embroiderers and their families.

The final monitoring, carried out in January 2017, indicated that the income generated by the Stitch embroiderers now directly supports 181<sup>3</sup> people in Sainte Luce, providing food for 168 family members and school places for 54 children. These numbers are likely to be under-representative as they do not take into account the people supported by the 79 associate embroiderers; the number of actual beneficiaries of Stitch Sainte Luce is therefore estimated to be over 200 people or around 10% of the community. Increased income not only alleviates poverty, it also serves to increase the women's social standing within both their households and the community. Over 50% of embroiderers, 11 women, now bring in the largest share of household income, elevating their position in the family and giving them greater autonomy over household expenditure.

On average the embroiderers are now eating rice with *Laoky*, some variety of nutritional side-dish such as fish, greens or beans, 14 times a week (or twice every day). This demonstrates significantly improved diet and nutrition compared to the typical diet in Sainte Luce of cassava for each meal. proportion of disposal income spent on items such as clothes, gifts, livestock, or house-building has also increased, making up 36% of total household expenditure. A further 9% of income is used for savings, also a sign of increased wealth, with the remaining 55% spent on food, healthcare and education. Many of the embroiderers have achieved their aspirational goals made at the beginning of Project Stitch, with nine women having built, or almost finished building, a new house. Others have been able to buy *Zebu* (cattle, seen in Madagascar as symbols of status as well as investments), cooking pots and sewing machines.

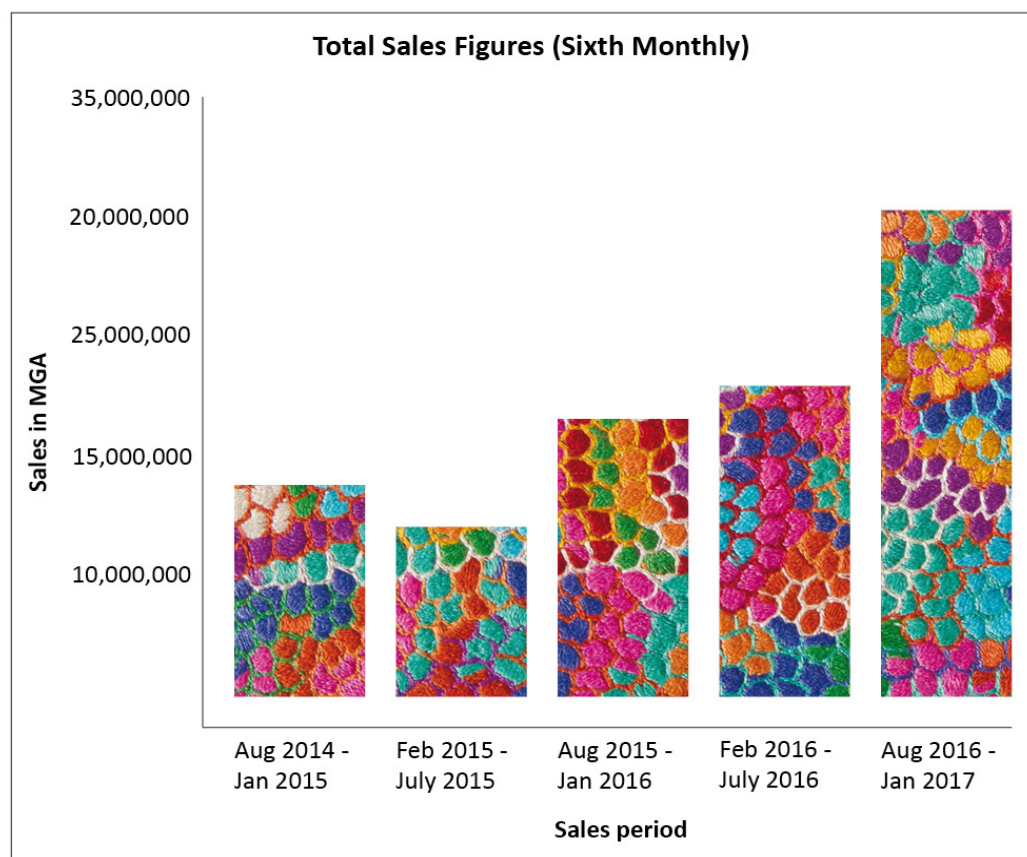
## **4.2 Sales**

Sales figures for Stitch Sainte Luce have continued to rise across the two project years, with a significant increase in the second year of Phase III (see Figure 1). In 2014, before the start of Phase III, annual sales amounted to 33.9 million MGA. At the end of project year one, throughout which significant time was dedicated to training, total sales for the year were 38.6 million MGA and by the end of project year two, yearly sales had jumped up to 53 million MGA. In total, sales of Stitch products generated 91.7 million MGA, or over £23,000 GBP, during Phase III, leading to greatly increased incomes for the embroiderers.

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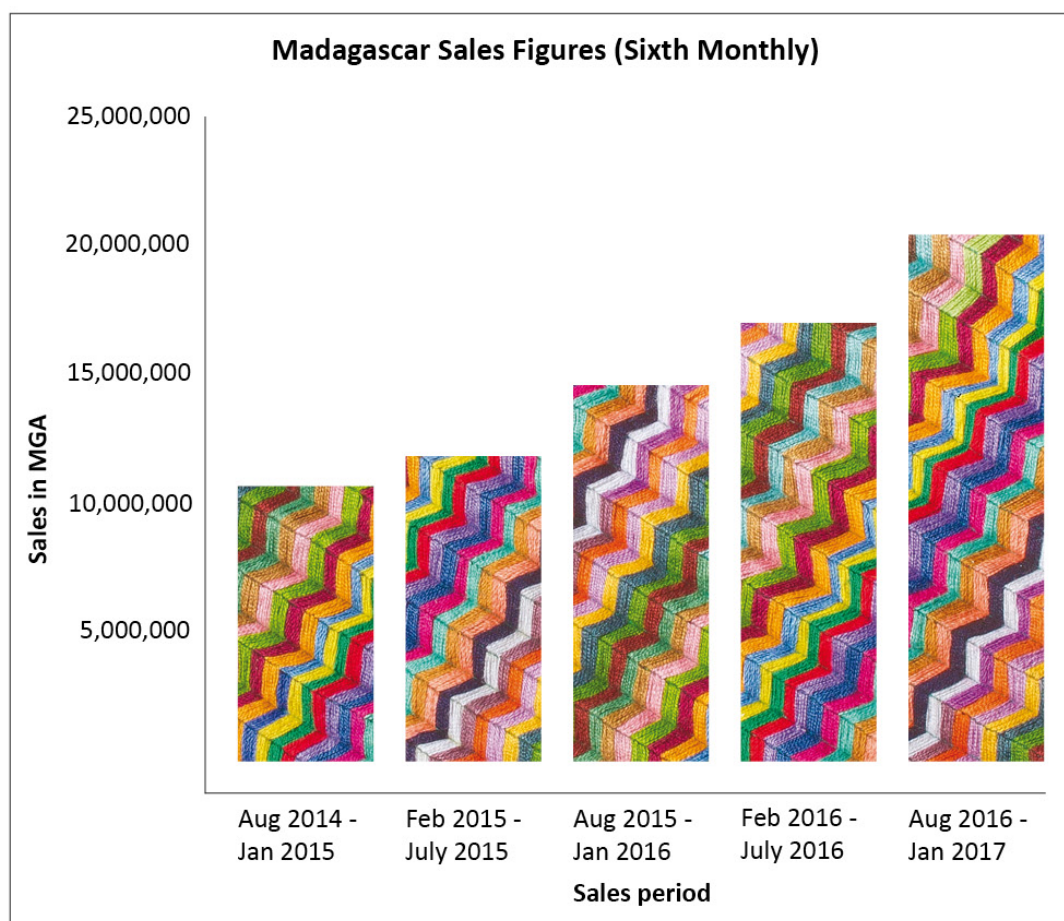
<sup>3</sup> At 181, the number of direct beneficiaries of Stitch incomes has decreased compared to monitoring conducted in July 2016, where the figure was 215. A likely explanation for this is that associate embroiderers, many of whom are family members to the embroiderers, are now regarded as being able to support themselves and are thus no longer included as dependents.

**Figure 1. Total Sales of Stitch Products**



Sales in Madagascar have been strong, rising from 10.4 million MGA in the six months preceding Phase III to 20.2 million MGA in the final six months of Phase III; an increase of almost 100% (see Figure 2 below). On average across Phase III, national sales have accounted for 69% - or around two-thirds – of total sales, showing that there is a strong domestic market for Stitch products amongst visitors to the Anosy Region. The majority of these sales have been made in the studio, to SEED staff and conservation volunteers and tourists to Sainte Luce. Profitable sales have also been made at opportunities across Madagascar, including sales to research students at Operation Wallecea in Northern Madagascar and Peace Boat customers at the port in Fort Dauphin. Given the current strength of national sales, opportunities for expansion and development of new retail opportunities in Madagascar will be a focus for the association moving forwards.

**Figure 2. Sales of Stitch Products in Madagascar**



International sales have also been healthy, rising from 12.3 million MGA in the first year of Phase III to 15.8 million MGA in the second year. This is testament to the commitment of SEED staff in developing and exploring international market chains and retail opportunities (*see section 3.7 above*). The final six months of Phase III, from August 2016 – January 2017, saw the largest revenue from international sales of any six monthly period in the history of the project, generating 9.8 million MGA. International sales accounted for an average of 31% of total sales during Phase III.

### **4.3 Lessons Learnt**

Phase III of Project Stitch integrated mutually supporting activity components and outcomes, which have yielded a number of opportunities for learning across a range of themes and project areas, as outlined below.

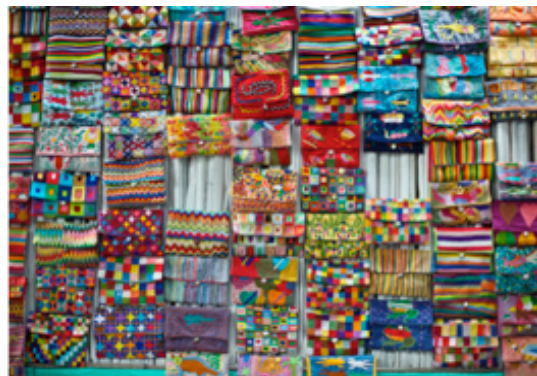
- 4.3.1 Teaching English to the embroiderers proved to be more difficult than expected, with learning and progress relatively slow. Many of the embroiderers had limited previous education, with varying levels of illiteracy within the group. Learning a foreign language without written prompts or reading materials proved challenging and made opportunities for independent study limited. The remote location of Sainte Luce also limited the frequency and regularity of English teaching, with intensive teaching over one week on a monthly basis. While this solution maximised teacher contact time, it limited opportunities for regular practice. To combat these challenges in the future, English teaching will focus on a smaller

group of more educated, highly motivated embroiderers within the sales team, helping to advance English levels within the association at a quicker rate.

- 4.3.2 The rural location of Sainte Luce, coupled with poor road infrastructure and limited public transport options, created logistical challenges, particularly during rainy season. On occasion, there were difficulties in sending personnel to Sainte Luce, such as English teachers, IT trainers and the Community Health Officer, affecting the delivery of scheduled activities. There were also at times issues with telecommunications between office based project staff and staff and/or the embroiderers in the studio. The obstacles were overcome by flexible work plans and the use of 4x4s where required. An insufficient electricity supply from the studio solar panels created additional obstacles in the delivery of computer training, preventing the embroiderers from practicing and experimenting with laptops outside of lessons.
- 4.3.3 Phase III has highlighted several areas where the monitoring framework could be updated or refined to provide more accurate data on the outcomes and impacts of Project Stitch. The framework was focused on the embroiderers, and therefore did not capture benefits to associate embroiderers and their dependents. This issue was identified by project staff and focus groups and meetings were conducted with associate embroiderers. Whilst this provided some information on wider impact, the absence of regular monitoring made it difficult to draw accurate comparisons or conclusions. Monitoring questions were unchanged from the baseline, enabling SEED to track progress over the course of the project and draw comparisons with earlier project phases. However, this reduced scope to revise questions in light of changing priorities or circumstances.
- 4.3.4 Throughout the development and execution of Phase III, one of the stated aims was making the Stitch association independent from SEED (then Azafady) support. However, the concept and meaning of independence was never specifically defined, creating ambiguity on whether complete withdrawal of SEED support was feasible or desirable in the two-year period. With hindsight, the target of full independence for the Stitch association within two years was overly ambitious, particularly in light of the growing international and online sales which require fluent levels of English, computer literacy and the need for close working relationships with UK Stitch staff. SEED intends to build on the successes and learning of Phase III through a fourth project phase, designed to strengthen and expand the association, whilst also building markets (*see section 5*).



Producing a wall-hanging in the studio



Purses for sale in the Studio

## **5. Conclusion and Future Action**

During Phase III, significant progress has been made towards ensuring the sustainability of Project Stitch and supporting the Stitch association to become a successful, independent business. Training and support given by SEED staff has enabled the embroiderers to form a working Committee to lead the association, and establish a set of governing rules which are respected by all members of the association. Through the operation of five teams running different aspects of the retail and production process, the embroiderers are now able to manage most of the day-to-day activities of the business with little or no support. Training in English, photography and computer skills have built the capacity of the association to coordinate sales in Madagascar, whilst increasing their knowledge of and input to international sales.

Project Stitch continues to bring a range of positive benefits to the community of Sainte Luce, with the embroiderers now earning on average 370% more than their pre-Stitch incomes. Across the five years that Project Stitch has been running, SEED has seen significant, marked improvements in the lives of the embroiderers and their families, including a more nourishing and substantial diet, more money for school fees and education, the ability to afford healthcare and medicines and the means to save up to build new houses, buy livestock, and protect against external shocks. This is supported by an increase in sales both nationally and internationally over the last two years. The association now lies in a strong position to move forward and build on the successes achieved so far.

Phase III has also been an invaluable learning curve for both the association and SEED project staff, yielding many lessons which will inform and determine future actions. Through ongoing monitoring, SEED has identified that further training is required to cement the learning from Phase III and secure the sustainability of the Stitch association as an independent business without external support. To this end SEED project staff, in close collaboration with the Stitch embroiderers, have been developing a fourth phase for Project Stitch. A priority going forwards will be developing a strategy for increasing the levels of English amongst the embroiderers, whilst also their confidence in speaking and interacting with customers and UK Stitch staff. Research into expanding markets and supporting the women to sustainably access these opportunities will also be a focus for the immediate future, building on the work started at the end of Phase III. Further support will facilitate the expansion of the association, enabling more women to receive the positive socio-economic benefits of Project Stitch.