

Concept Note
Accelerator Mentorship Programme for Women-led SMEs in Africa
May 2022

Background

Women agripreneurs are fundamental drivers of sustainable development and play a critical role towards the pursuit of more inclusive and prosperous societies. They play a significant role in job creation, improving household incomes, and in bringing about benefits beyond economic growth especially in developing countries. The empowerment of female agripreneurs, in particular those who lead and own small and medium enterprises (SMEs) active in agrifood value chains, is therefore key to enhance their contribution to development, as well as to enable them to grow and expand their businesses in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable manner.

In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), women constitute at least 50 percent (over 600 million) of the current population size, and female participation in entrepreneurial activities is considered the highest amongst all region. In addition, women provide the bulk of unpaid care and domestic work in rural areas, thereby supporting current and future generations of rural workers within their households and communities. African women entrepreneurs are considered key drivers of development and inclusive growth and prosperity. Despite their significant contribution to the agriculture sector, rural women typically find themselves in disadvantaged positions. Compared to their male counterparts, they tend to face more restricted access to productive resources and assets, capacity development, financial services and social protection. Gender-biased social norms, laws and practices also limit women's involvement in gainful work and their participation in workers' and producers' organizations, especially in organized labour institutions such as trade unions.

At the same time, SMEs in the region are the backbone of the region's private sector – representing 90 percent of the private sector in the region, and contributing to over 80 percent of jobs in the continent. Nonetheless, the challenges for SMEs, particularly those operating in agrifood systems, are many, with access to finance being the largest obstacle, followed by difficulties in doing business as a result of burdensome laws and regulations, as well as limited capacities and access to knowledge and technology also considered as challenges preventing them from expanding. COVID-19 has added to the pressures of business survival, growth and sustainability, and has served to urgently highlight the need for partnerships, leveraging knowledge, and innovative business models and strategies. For young women entrepreneurs, these challenges are even greater.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Agri-Food Network (IAFN) are launching a pilot Accelerator Mentorship Programme to support women entrepreneurs in addressing key challenges and constraints they face in their businesses.

Gender equality and women empowerment is central to FAO's mandate - to achieve food security for all and reduce rural poverty. Ensuring gender equality and empowering women operating within the agrifood systems presents a unique opportunity to ensure that women-owned

businesses not only invest in the agriculture and food, but that they are actively contributing to the agrifood systems transformation we are calling for.

For the International Agri-Food Network, a global network of private sector actors involved in the agrifood sector and committed to contributing to addressing global poverty and food security, ensuring women's leadership and expertise feed into work on food security such as guidelines and initiatives related to land, investment, and nutrition, particularly for women smallholder farmers, is also a huge priority.

Objective

The objective of the jointly-led Accelerator Mentorship Programme is to foster a selected number of women entrepreneurs in Sub-Saharan Africa with one-to-one mentorship with a panel of experts who are leading women entrepreneurs from around the globe, using a structure through which participants can interact and learn from the expert panel, as well as to provide them with access to knowledge and tools necessary to grow their enterprises and adapt to an ever-changing marketplace.

Specifically, the programme aims to provide selected women entrepreneurs with:

- a one-to-one mentorship/ coaching opportunity;
- a series of tailor-made trainings to enhance hard skills from a selection of available options;
- knowledge exchange, networking and peer-learning opportunities; and
- access/links to tools developed by FAO, IAFN and other institutions.

Participants

A cohort of **50 female entrepreneurs** operating in the agrifood sector in the Sub-Saharan Africa region will be selected to participate in the first year of the customised programme, planned to begin in **July 2022**.

Participants will be selected from an open call for expression of interest, by a panel of experts from FAO and IAFN, and the programme mentors.

Mentors

Mentors will include successful/high-profile business leaders and managers, particularly women, and a panel of experts in different fields across the agrifood value chain, from FAO and IAFN members.

Duration

The pilot programme will have a **duration of six months** to test the approach and methodology, and may be extended to 12 months in subsequent series.

Programme components

The Accelerator Mentorship Programme will include the following components:

i. **One-on-One Mentoring**

Each participant will be paired with a mentor through a matchmaking programme, with a leader/expert in their area of need, and will receive personal guidance and consultation for six months.

Each participant will be assigned according to her needs and priorities in selected areas from the list below:

- Farming skills, including digital and green solutions;
- Value-added processing, packaging;
- Food service and retail; and
- Marketing and distribution.

ii. **Capacity development and tools - Tailor-made training to enhance hard skills**

As a knowledge institution, FAO develops a number of knowledge products and guidance tools to help different constituencies contribute to more productive and sustainable agrifood systems, factoring social, economic and environmental considerations.

Through dedicated capacity development and short training sessions (self-paced and blended learning programmes) from a selection of available options offered by the [FAO eLearning Academy](https://elearning.fao.org/), and some topics will be complemented by the workshops with experts under component iii.

Each participant will be expected to complete 2 mandatory courses and select at least two of the optional courses, according to her interests, needs and priorities, from the list below:

Mandatory

Course name	Duration	Link
1. Market assessment		
Local area and market assessment	20mins	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=712
Selection, assessment and purchase of power sources and implements	1h15mins	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=713
2. Business planning		
Intro course: Rural Invest - An introduction	30mins	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=754
Course 1: Participatory data collection and investment planning in the field	2h30mins	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=755
Course 2: Business concept – Feasibility Snapshot	1h30mins	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=756
Course 3: Business plan – Detailed description	2h30mins	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=757
Responsible Investments in agriculture		

The Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems	1h	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=380
Creating an enabling environment for responsible investment in agriculture and food systems – fundamentals	3h	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=455
Creating an enabling environment for responsible investment in agriculture and food systems – Analysis	1h30	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=573
Creating an enabling environment for responsible investment in agriculture and food systems – Reform	1h30	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=651
Investing responsibly in agricultural land	1day 6h	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=514

Optional

Course name	Duration	Link
Gender/ Nutrition sensitive value chains		
Developing gender-sensitive value chains	1h30	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=543
Sustainable Food Value Chains for Nutrition	2h30	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=566
Sustainable food systems		
Sustainable food systems: An introduction	1h25	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=736
Sustainable food systems: Concept and framework	1h10	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=738
Sustainable food systems: Operationalizing the approach	1h20	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=737
Trade, Food Security and Nutrition		
Trade, Food Security and Nutrition	7h	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=331
Small and medium enterprises and nutrition - making the business case	2h	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=725
Design and monitor Nutrition-Sensitive Agriculture and Food Systems Programmes	4h30	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=603
Improving nutrition through agriculture and food systems	3h	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=307
Equipment and mechanization hire		
Selection, assessment and purchase of power sources and implements	1h25	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=714
Operation and maintenance of agricultural equipment for hire service businesses	2h	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=780
Small-scale agricultural mechanization hire services as a business enterprise	1h	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=711

Climate-smart agriculture		
Introduction to climate-smart agriculture	1h30	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=439
Climate-smart fisheries and aquaculture	1h30	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=579
Climate-smart forestry	2h15	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=578
Climate-smart crop production	2h30	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=436
Climate-smart livestock production	3h	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=437
Water management for climate-smart agriculture	1h30	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=438
Climate-smart soil and land management	2h	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=435
Decent employment and labour		
Productive employment and decent work in rural areas	5h	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=329
Business strategies and public-private partnerships to end child labour in agriculture	1h30	https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=300

Participants will receive digital badge* certifications to certify the acquisition of competencies by passing the final scenario-based performance evaluation after completing the courses offered by the FAO eLearning Academy.

The Digital Badge is not just a graphical element it is associated to metadata related to the learner, the gender, country, the institution of affiliation, the competencies acquired, for the course that is finalized. For more information on the Digital Badges System <https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=730>

In addition, participants will have access to a wide range of knowledge products and tools.

iii. **Workshops & Interaction with Global Leaders**

Through joint workshop sessions with experts in the field, participants will have access to knowledge exchange sessions, peer learning and networking with each other as well as with invited experts allowing for interactive moments. IAFN will also provide guidance and dedicated workshops on how to access finance, such as on the development of business plans and/or bankable proposals.

These workshops session will be recorded and made available in a password protected dedicated section of the FAO CONNECT Portal, which participants can access if they have missed a session and/or would like to refer to them subsequently.

Three workshops are anticipated and will focus on:

- Access to Financial Services;
- Leadership and Human Resources; and

- Business Development and Marketing.

At the end of each workshop, there will be interactive time with business leaders and mentors.

Graduation ceremony

A virtual graduation ceremony will take place at the end of the programme, involving FAO and IAFN management, and participants will be honored with certificates.

The ceremony will include a multistakeholder policy discussion on the achievement of gender equity organized by FAO.

Visibility

The selected participants will also provide brief clips or short videos showcasing their businesses and their experiences in participating in the programme. Experiences will be documented and published in the [FAO CONNECT Portal](#).