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Navigating Impact

Practical approaches to designing better agribusiness support programs for women



Aya Report 2024

Program and research insights

2SCALE

Aya Report 2024

Version 1.1
January 2024
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Funded by:



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands

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Introduction



The big challenge

The focus of our work

Agri-food systems are a major source of livelihood for women. In sub-Saharan Africa specifically, agri-food systems employ 66 percent of women who play a key role from production to processing and selling.¹ Yet, women tend to have less access to resources and less decision-making power, which affects the amount of income they receive from processing, marketing and sales.

On top of that, African women in agribusiness face a combination of responsibilities towards their business, their family and community, giving them less time than most men to invest in their business.



What is Aya?

Our role in tackling this challenge

Aya is an initiative designed to help address inequalities faced by women agribusiness entrepreneurs in Africa. The name "Aya" comes from a West African Adinkra symbol that means fern, which is a symbol of endurance and resourcefulness. The Aya initiative aimed to enhance the business skills, self-confidence, and resilience of the women agribusiness entrepreneurs, and strengthen their social capital through connections.

Alongside training on managing their finances, customers and operations, women were also guided on self-care and household dynamics, such as how to better involve husbands in household responsibilities and chores. Aya also gave women the chance to meet and build long-lasting connections, for example through social media groups.

1. FAO. (2023). *The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems*. Rome.

What is 2SCALE?

Largest inclusive agribusiness incubator in Africa

Aya is part of **2SCALE**, an agribusiness incubator program funded by the department of Inclusive Green Growth of the Directorate General of International Cooperation of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This program, implemented by **Bopinc**, **IFDC** and **SNV**, manages a portfolio of 67 public-private partnerships in ten African countries for inclusive business in agri-food sectors and industries.

2SCALE offers a range of support services to its business champions - which are small to medium enterprises (SMEs) or farmer groups - and to the (micro-)businesses that are connected to the business champion. This enables them to produce, transform and supply quality food products to Base of the Pyramid (BoP) consumers.

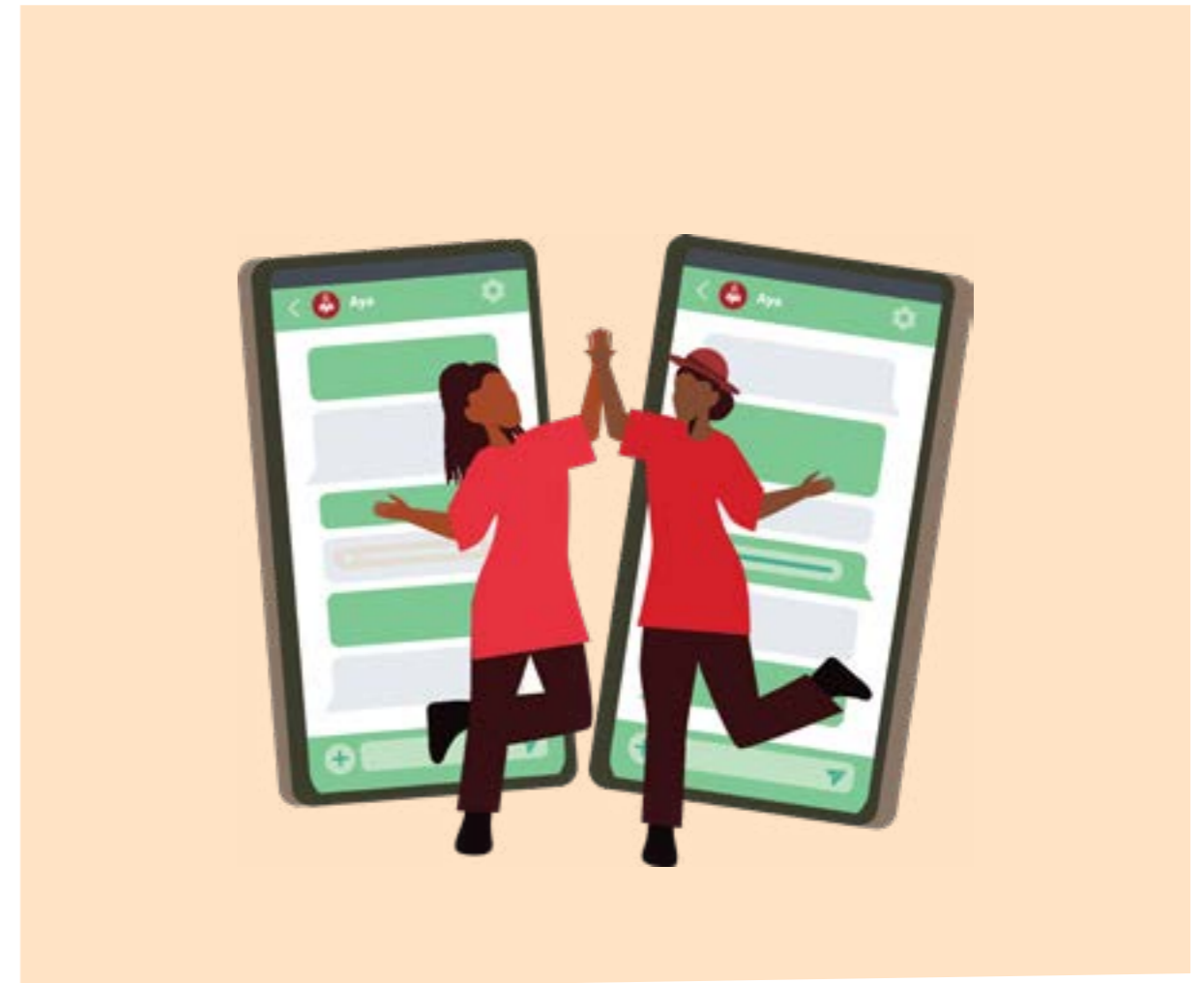
2SCALE aims for half of the included business champions and supporting (micro-)businesses to be led by women. Aya was founded to help 2SCALE reach this target and learn how to better support women-led agribusinesses in the future. Towards this end, 2SCALE also provided funding to a PhD research project focusing on agri-businesswomen in Kenya.

Why another report?

An insight into our insights

The purpose of this report is to share our lessons learned so far, from both our Aya program and the PhD research. With these insights, we hope to shape the content and format of our programs in the future. By getting it right, we aim to deliver more real, life-improving impact for women entrepreneurs and their communities in Africa.

The insights shared in this report are from the Aya program assessment, which included needs assessments, a mixed-methods impact assessment comprising surveys and interviews, and the published articles of the PhD research. About 300 people were included in the needs assessment, and more than 100 women from seven different countries in the impact assessment. For more details on methodology, see the Annex on page 34.



Who is this report for?

Anyone helping boost women agri-entrepreneurship

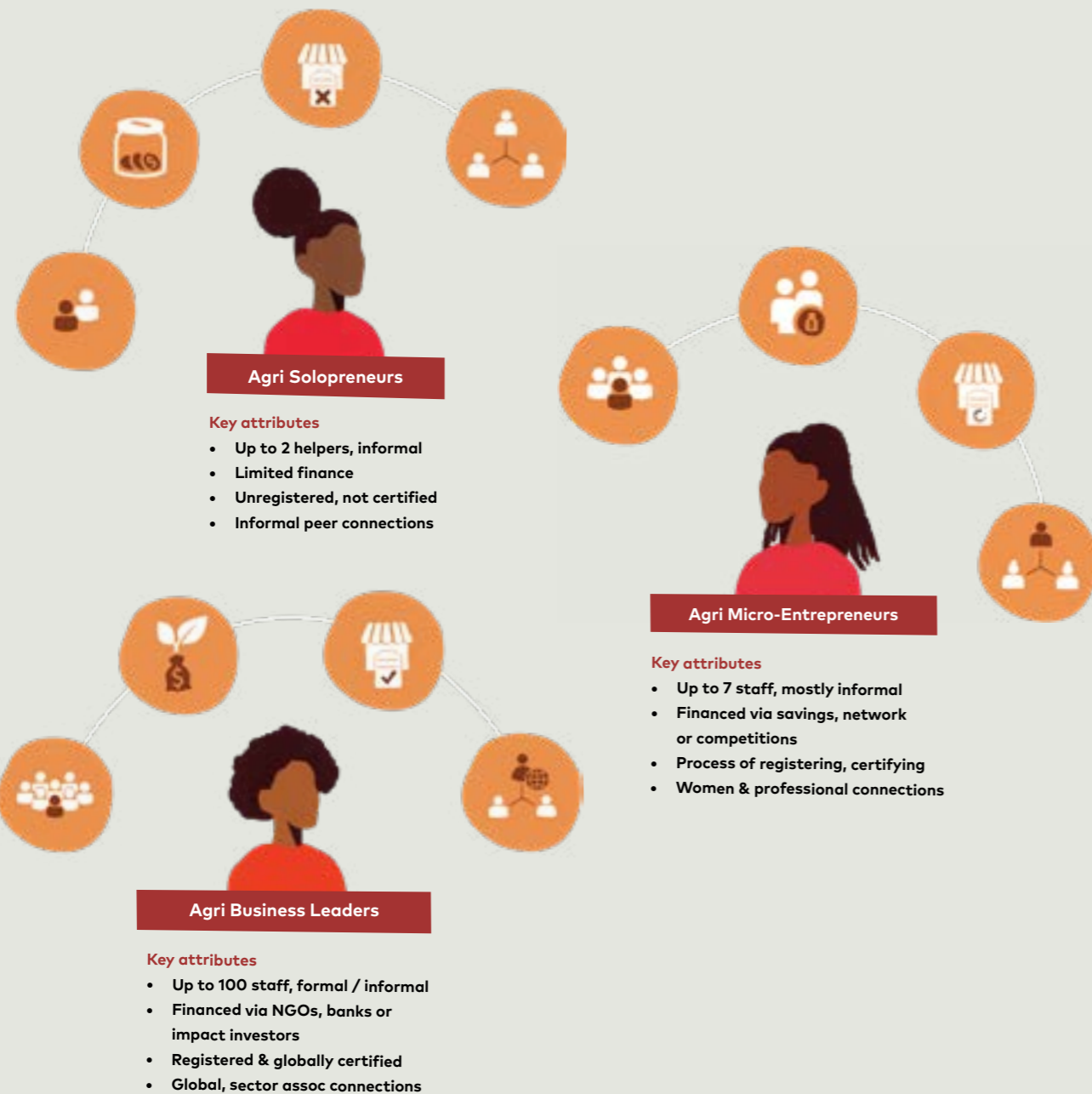
The objective of making the report public is to enable other practitioners (donors, governments, non-government organizations, local communities, advocacy groups, and more) to benefit from our learnings.

Especially those who design women's agri-entrepreneurship programs. In this report, you'll find actionable recommendations to help you create a greater and more positive impact for women entrepreneurs.



Learning 1

Discover the spectrum of diversity



Discover the spectrum of diversity

Most women working in African agricultural food sectors run informal, micro-enterprises within the least profitable parts of agricultural value chains.² This leads to donors and practitioners often assuming that African agri-entrepreneurs are the same homogeneous group of women. However, this is not the case. In fact, there is a much wider spectrum of African women agri-entrepreneurs that exists, with distinctive business goals, activities and backgrounds.

Within this broader spectrum, in our own work, we have come across some interesting commonalities, which we have segmented into three smaller groups. We share them in this report, not as a literal representation of any one individual - but to highlight the complexity within the wider group of women in agribusiness. We ask readers to keep this in mind when reading this report, and always be mindful of individual contexts.

What we saw in practice

Agri Solopreneurs

Women who may have initially started their business activity to make money to support the needs of their household. From time to time, they may have had one or two people helping in their business. Often they had little to no access to finance and due to external circumstances, had to drop out of school.

Their situation also required them to focus on the short-term, be needs-oriented - for example, providing food for their family. However, they also expressed an ambition to grow their activity, perhaps owning their own shop.

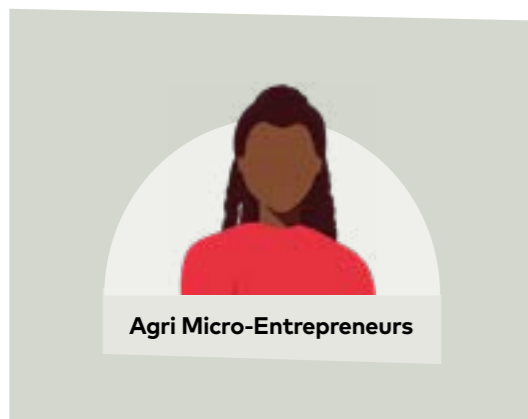


2. See Footnote 1.

Agri Micro-Entrepreneurs

These women were in a position to see beyond their more immediate needs. Who may have been raised by entrepreneurial parents, or able to finish secondary school or higher. They aspired to grow professionally: maybe their business was formally registered, or they planned to start the process. Generally they had up to seven people helping them in their business, mostly informally.

They may have had limited access to finance from formal institutions, but managed to either access finance from family and friends, or save and reinvest in their business from working for another organization. These business women were likely to have more mid-term goals and had aims to grow their business - for example, selling their products to large domestic supermarket chains and enlarging their farmer network.



Agri Micro-Entrepreneurs

Agri Business Leaders

These women were more established, with considerable experience in agri-business. Who had led their company for several years. Their business was more likely to be formally registered and employed up to 100 people, both formally and informally. Their business served the community by offering jobs and selling good quality products to the domestic market, and in some cases a certain share was also exported.

Some juggled access to finance: between the high interest rates of formal finance institutions, the growth pressures of investors, and the impact pressures of non-government organizations (NGOs).

This group also had a more long-term vision in making a positive change within their community and improving the market, such as substituting imports. Their focus was on stabilizing the business for future generations, which meant putting good structures in place for HR, farmer management, quality control and finance.



Agri Business Leaders

In summary

Considering the many differences amongst African women agri-entrepreneurs, a one-size-fits-all approach cannot succeed in strengthening these heterogeneous businesses and supporting the women leading them.

This is the reason these different profiles of women agri business women are important to acknowledge, in order to provide the right type of support.

What you can do (better)

Start engaging, stop assuming

- Women in agribusiness are not all the same, it is important to spend time understanding the different profiles and backgrounds of people within your program.
- Conduct a thorough needs assessment, zooming in on the different aspirations, challenges, success indicators, family support structures, social norms and influencers of different types of businesswomen.

This will inform the program and content design, as well as the evaluation of successes and improvement areas.

Learning 2

Customize your content and approach



Agri Solopreneurs

Key content priorities

- Decision-making power
- Attracting customers
- Separating business & personal finance



Agri Micro-Entrepreneurs

Key content priorities

- Managing family expectations
- Pitching the business
- Marketing strategies



Agri Business Leaders

Key content priorities

- Building a generational business
- Establishing leadership team
- ISO Certification

Customize your content and approach

Due to the diverse profiles of women agri-entrepreneurs, it becomes clear that a one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate. Therefore, when designing agri-business support programs, it is crucial to tailor them to your group's unique needs and aspirations. This approach ensures that we address specific gaps and provide relevant support that aligns with the distinct business levels of these women entrepreneurs.

To address these needs, the training modules included theoretical and practical components on decision-making, safety, self-care, and sessions on husband engagement, among others. By also using more engaging visuals, like videos and graphics, with an illustrated persona that spoke their local language, we saw increased participant engagement. In addition to gaining a hands-on grasp of the content, this approach enhances recall and improves the practical application of learning.

What we saw in practice

To understand the unique requirements and goals of the Aya participants, we conducted gender needs assessments which significantly shaped the content of our training curriculum. The customized curriculum more effectively addressed gaps in both hard and soft skills, resulting in more relevant and impactful business outcomes.

Solopreneurs found business basics important, especially the modules, where they learned to set clear business goals, manage personal and business finances, attract customers and sell more effectively. The needs assessment also revealed a demand for soft skills that would help balance household and business responsibilities, while enhancing household communication.

The video format was interesting because the demonstration stuck with me until now

Micro-Entrepreneur
South Sudan





For Agri Micro-Entrepreneurs, we offered modules that delved more into advanced aspects of business management, such as strategies for growth, market expansion, bookkeeping, and practical pitching sessions.

Alongside these more advanced business modules, we introduced an inspirational element where accomplished businesswomen were invited to share their journeys, shedding light on both their successes, and the challenges they overcame.

Some participants reported that they changed their business models after receiving the training. The advanced modules helped women to enhance their business models, better preparing them for the scalability they aspired to achieve.

Agri Business Leaders indicated they could benefit from targeted training, coaching, and support to help stabilize the business or further expand into international markets. This includes but is not limited to guidance on export regulations, and global networking opportunities to increase visibility of large buyers, enabling them to tap into new customer bases and diversify their market presence.

Additionally, some women expressed that advanced support, such as ISO certification assistance, contract farming management and building an executive team, will help facilitate their stability and competitiveness on the global stage.

This however doesn't mean that such targeted modules are standard practice in women's entrepreneurship training. Sometimes donor-funded projects do not consider the substantial differences in the business profiles of women and fail to provide them with adequate support.

The Agri Business Leaders from Kenya for example found some of the more basic business modules they are trained on in other development programs "insulting" - considering their level of education and business background.³

What you can do (better)

One-size does not fit all, tailor your approach

- **For Agri Solopreneurs**, tailor training content by emphasizing introductory business and soft skills modules. These training materials could cover the fundamental and foundational aspects of starting and running a business along with engaging visuals to enhance participant engagement and help them remember the modules better.

Using videos and visuals are especially important in case entrepreneurs have low literacy rates. All materials should be provided in the local language of the geography by trainers who speak the language fluently.

- **For Agri Micro-Entrepreneurs**, go beyond the basics. Offer training content that dives into more advanced business concepts and strategies, focused on growing the business over time.

This content needs to be designed to provide these business women with a deeper understanding of business operations, growth strategies, and market expansion.

Foster knowledge exchange and connections within the group, emphasizing networking and partnership building. For Agri Micro-Entrepreneurs in particular, this approach will help them to take their ventures to the next level.

- **For Agri Business Leaders**, consider more advanced leadership and executive mentoring programs - designed to meet the unique needs of this group. Connecting them with accomplished mentors, who have experience in scaling businesses, international expansion, and leadership at a higher level. Enabling these participants to further refine their strategies and leadership skills

Learning 3

Centralize her definition of success



Centralize her definition of success

Typically, in agri-entrepreneurship support programs, entrepreneurial success tends to be measured by business metrics like new market linkages, product creation, increased productivity, sales growth, and job creation.⁴ While these are undoubtedly important benchmarks, they tend to overlook the multifaceted nature of success in entrepreneurship, especially when viewed through the lens of different African women entrepreneurs.

When it comes to defining success from the viewpoint of women agri-entrepreneurs in our programs, numerous factors come into play. Their initial ambitions as well as their business profiles significantly shape their perception of entrepreneurial success.

We learned that for them, success is not confined to financial achievements or business growth; instead, they share a collective belief that it encompasses broader positive transformations within their communities, families, and social life.

What we saw in practice

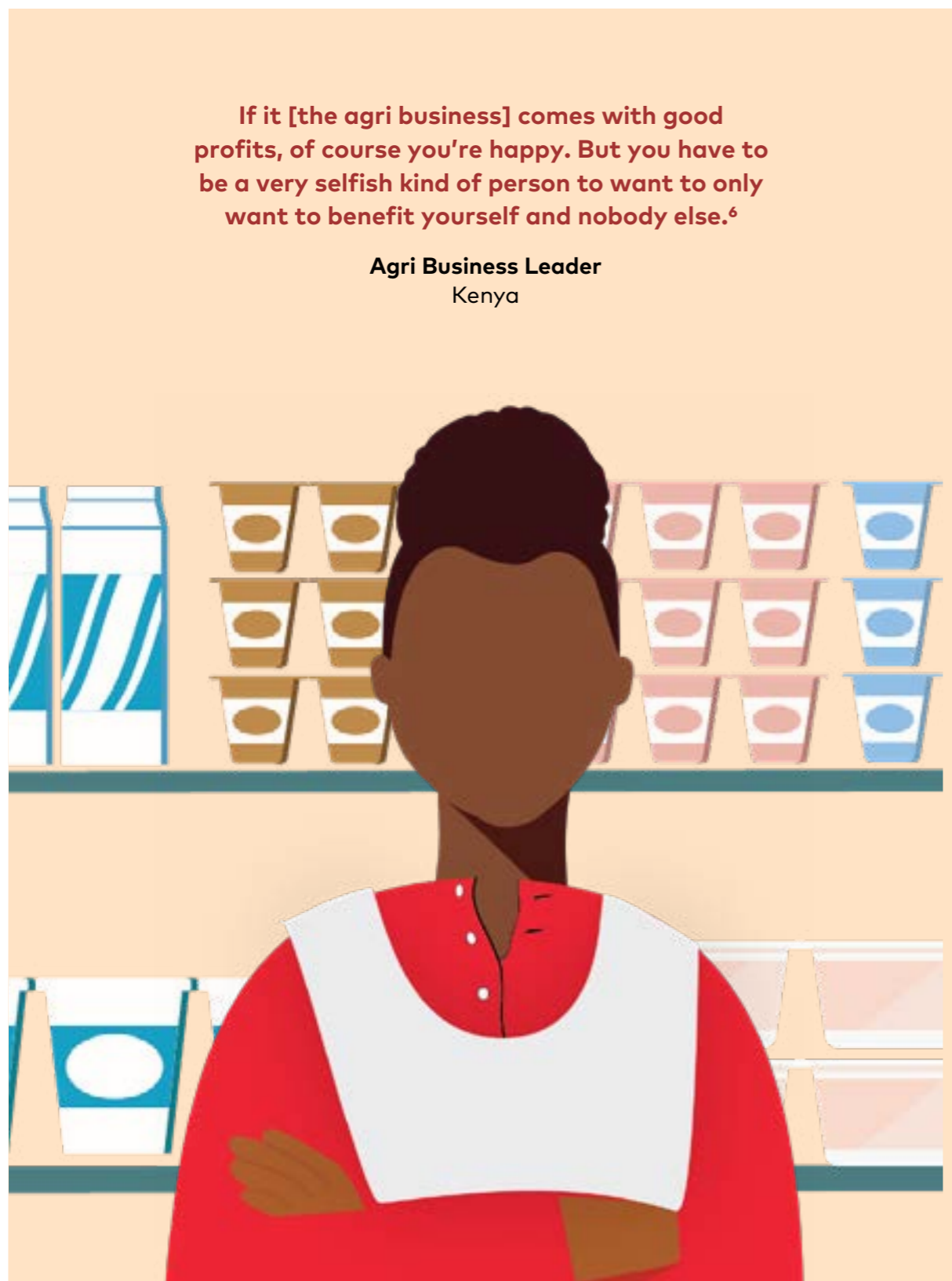
Amongst Agri Solopreneurs, we saw successful entrepreneurship equated with fulfilling immediate aspirations, such as paying for children's education fees, and covering household expenses. With each entrepreneurship category, we saw additional success indicators being added.

For example, from our Agri Micro-Entrepreneurs, these women added goals and achievements around scaling their business. Where from the group of Agri Business Leaders, these women added social impact as part of their definition of success. These can be employees who benefited from their business or women in the community inspired by the success of other women entrepreneurs.

This however does not mean women from the group of Agri Solopreneurs do not have growth or impact aspirations for their business.⁵ We observed it might be harder for them to act on more mid to long-term goals.

4. See Footnote 3.

5. Knox, A. J., Bressers, H., Mohlakoana, N., & De Groot, J. (2019). Aspirations to grow: when micro- and informal enterprises in the street food sector speak for themselves. *Journal of Global Entrepreneurship Research*, 9(1).



Beyond business metrics, all women agri-entrepreneurs emphasize the importance of increasing the quality of life of their families and communities. This could be in terms of nutrition, housing or health.

For Agri Business Leaders their business success also came in the form of building a generational business that can employ their children and grandchildren and substituting imported products from foreign countries.⁷

In summary, we found that business indicators, which are often dominant metrics of success in entrepreneurship programs, do not cover the success definitions of women agri-entrepreneurs themselves.

What you can do (better)

Let's go beyond the usual (success) suspects

- Practitioners and donors should broaden their definition of success for women agri-entrepreneurs, beyond the financial indicators.
- Incorporate the results that come out of the needs assessment into the impact measurement metrics, to see if the agri-entrepreneur achieved her pre-set goals and aspirations.

Learning 4

Bring support systems into the frame



Bring support systems into the frame

In the pursuit of supporting women agri-entrepreneurs, it is crucial that we broaden our perspective beyond the individual and acknowledge the web of social and familial systems that surround their daily life and business endeavors. Within Aya and the ongoing PhD research, we have delved deep into the social and family dynamics that define the journeys of women agri-entrepreneurs.

What we have uncovered is how individual women operate in a variety of social networks that either help or limit them in attaining their goals. Our research has highlighted the importance of family and community ties, across the different profiles of women agri-entrepreneurs.

What we saw in practice

For women agri-entrepreneurs family and community relations can function either as assets or constraints.⁸

Family and social relations as assets

Some participants in our program regard family relations, especially with their husbands, as a significant asset to their businesses. They find the support from their spouses invaluable, helping them balance household responsibilities, finance their businesses, and navigate gender role expectations within their work environments. According to some Agri Micro-Entrepreneurs, family members serve as inspiration to begin their business and they receive continuous encouragement and support in their business either through ideas, shared workload, or finance when needed.

When it comes to developing analytics and a formal business structure, my husband encourages me to use excel and develop business concepts. He supports production follow-up.

Micro-Entrepreneur
Ghana



8. Brouwer, L.C.M., Steel, G., Liebrand, J., & Zoomers, A. (to be published). Agri-business women in Kenya: Personal networks as gendered spaces in women's entrepreneurship. In Neergaard, H., Guerrero, M., Kenny, M., & F. Welter (Eds.), *Women Entrepreneurs in Emerging Markets*. De Gruyter Academic Publishing.

Family and social relations as constraints

Our findings reveal that, regardless of their business profile, some women face expectations to prioritize household duties over their businesses. They may be discouraged from taking risks and starting their own enterprises by family members.

These challenges highlight the importance of fostering an enabling environment that recognizes and supports women's entrepreneurial ambitions, alongside their family roles.

Furthermore, certain Agri Business Leaders have encountered resistance from their family members when transitioning from white-collar jobs to agri-entrepreneurship. There exists a misconception that this career path is not suitable for educated individuals and that the earnings would be insufficient to support their families.⁹

What you can do (better)

Stop ignoring the role of family and community

- Don't view women entrepreneurs as isolated individuals; instead, recognize them as integral parts of larger social and familial systems. Ask about the role of family as assets and constraints during the needs assessment.
- Based on the needs assessment you may decide to involve the husband or family members in the program selection process, or training sessions - or organize a peer support session discussing how to leverage the support of the family.
- You could also invite a married couple successfully running a family business to share how they do this in combination with their private life.

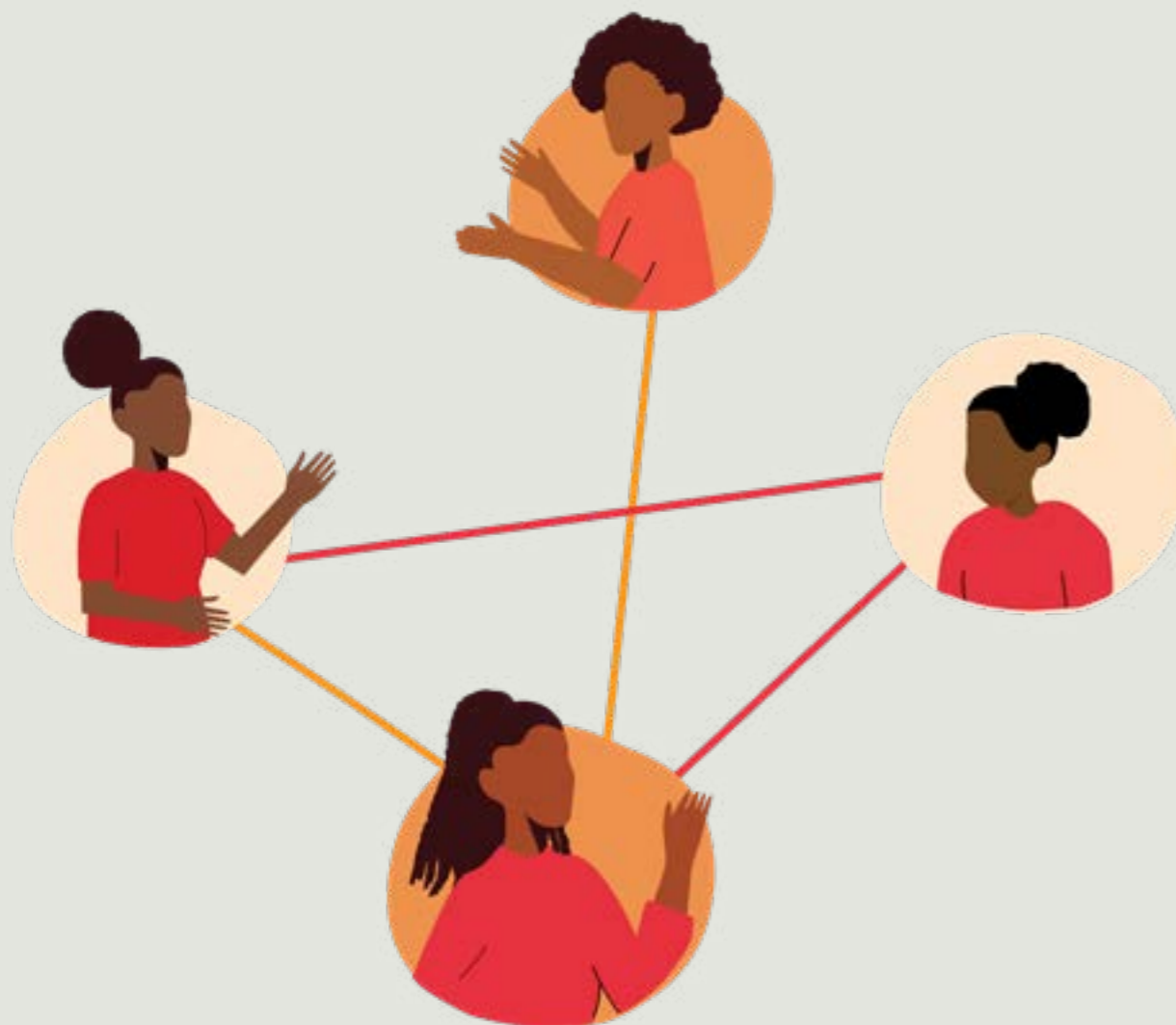
My baby is very young, and it's challenging to go to the market because I need to care for her, especially when her siblings are at school.

Micro-Entrepreneur
South Sudan



Learning 5

Foster stronger peer connections



Foster stronger peer connections

Nurturing strong peer connections between women entrepreneurs is not always prioritized in entrepreneur support programs. We see this as a missed opportunity. In our research, these connections were essential to women in starting, maintaining, and growing their agri-businesses.

Also, where programs end, peer connections can last much longer. Through peer connections, women also better retain and implement training content, while also practically supporting one another.

In the Aya program, we fostered these peer connections during training sessions through organizing fun energizers, inviting honest conversations about gender-specific issues and dancing while singing the Aya mantra 'dream it, do it, persist'. After the training sessions, women were invited to self-governed chat-groups (mostly on WhatsApp). Through our insight study, we found that over 90% of participants stayed connected for several years after Aya ended.

After more than four years, Aya women entrepreneurs in Ghana were still selling products and services to one another, celebrating successes, sharing opportunities for funding and pictures of meeting one another at exhibitions.

What we saw in practice

The power of peers

Across all agri-entrepreneur groups, we found women connected with peers for exchanging knowledge, experiences and gathering emotional and practical support. In Ivory Coast, an Agri Micro-Entrepreneur turned to her peer group to borrow money. More established agribusiness women in Kenya shared how they join women-only entrepreneurship associations on purpose, as they feel they can better discuss their business frustrations with other women entrepreneurs.¹⁰

The connection is very, very helpful. If I need something - packaging material in Accra for instance - I put a message on WhatsApp, I can call one of them. Members get solutions for you.

Micro-Entrepreneur
Ghana



10. Brouwer, L.C.M. (2022). Adaptive Resilience among Agri-Businesswomen amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic in Kenya. In: *Entrepreneurial Responses to Covid-19 in Africa*. (Ed.) Merriënboer, M. Eburon Academic Publishers; See Footnote 8.

Paying it forward

Women entrepreneurs also connect to one another as mentors and mentees. Agri Business Leaders in Kenya at the start of their entrepreneurial journey, received mentorship from other leading Kenyan women entrepreneurs. They take pride in mentoring other women entrepreneurs in their own community and beyond to pay it forward.¹¹

This sentiment was shared among Agri Micro-Entrepreneurs who were part of Aya in Ethiopia and Burkina Faso.

I was a trainer myself and a teacher. I believe in sharing since it benefits other people. Since I believe it helps me it will help others.

Micro-Entrepreneur
Ethiopia



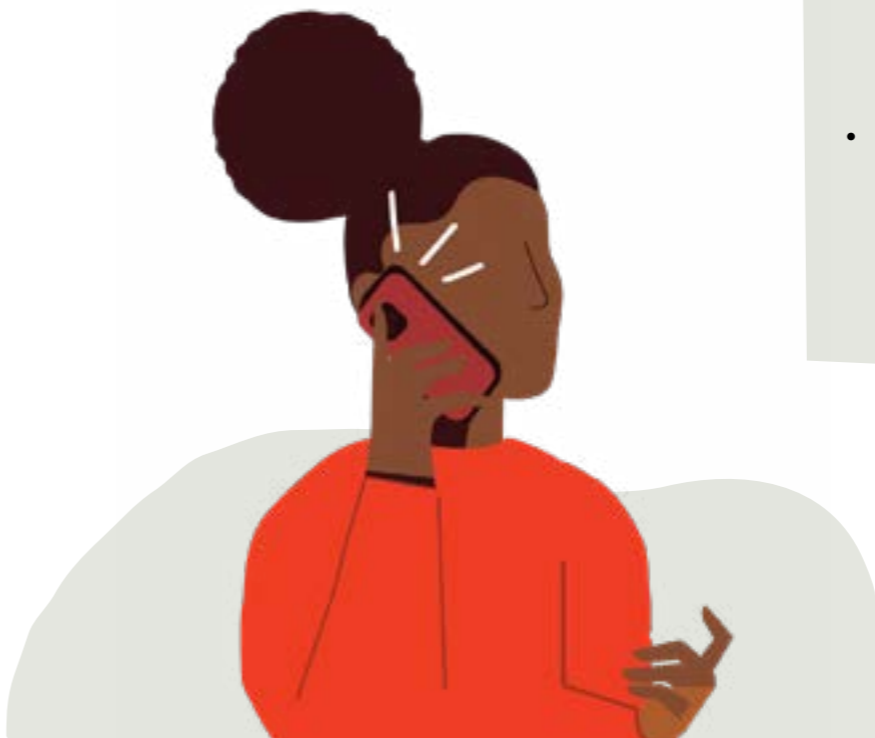
A shared experience

We found that entrepreneurs shared lessons from Aya with as few as five and as many as 550 others. In the Aya program itself we also made sure to invite role models to training sessions. We briefed the role models prior to the Aya sessions, to go beyond simply sharing their business models and business successes - but instead to honestly reflect on their fluctuating self-confidence, issues in running the business with their husband, surviving in a male-dominated sector, dealing with limiting beliefs, and other social and psychological topics relevant to them.

In our impact assessment, we found that Aya participants responded positively to the role models. A woman from Ethiopia shared: "Some of the key moments that stuck with me the most were the inspirational sessions. I remember this woman who shared with us how she did business with her husband harmoniously and how that helped her grow as a businesswoman. Even after her husband passed away, she shared the challenges she faced and the resilience to continue her business. I was inspired by her and I think of her a lot."

Other Aya women even started doing business with the role models we invited. The importance of peer connections, coaching and mentorship, shows us again how entrepreneur support programs need to look beyond simply individual women entrepreneurs.

Trying to stimulate peer connections among women even further, 2SCALE has put in place the Aya ambassadorship program in 2023 which encourages women to actively mentor and coach other women entrepreneurs in their locality.



What you can do (better)

Foster peer-to-peer connection. And make it fun!

- Organize fun, interactive exercises to establish the connection between entrepreneurs. Provide a joint vision and mission, with songs and symbols which reinforce this bond.
- Establish a low-cost easy way for women to stay in touch, either through messaging platforms or having each other's phone numbers.
- Encourage women entrepreneurs to share materials and learnings with peers.
- Invite role models to training sessions to talk about gender-specific issues that go beyond the business model itself.

The key takeaways



A key takeaways

As we observe across our programs and research, women agri-entrepreneurs in Africa are not a homogeneous group. We propose a distinction based on the different business characteristics and goals: the Agri Solopreneur, the Agri Micro-Entrepreneur and the Agri Business Leader.

By acknowledging the differences and commonalities between these groups of women agri-entrepreneurs, we become able to design agri-business support projects using a tailored approach to women's individual definition of success.


What is also important to keep in mind for practitioners when designing women's agri-entrepreneurship programs is that women's entrepreneurship is not about individuals.

Women entrepreneurs are part of larger social and familial systems that greatly influence not only their business activities but also their personal lives. We learned that connecting women agri-entrepreneurs to one another is crucial to create a lasting impact.

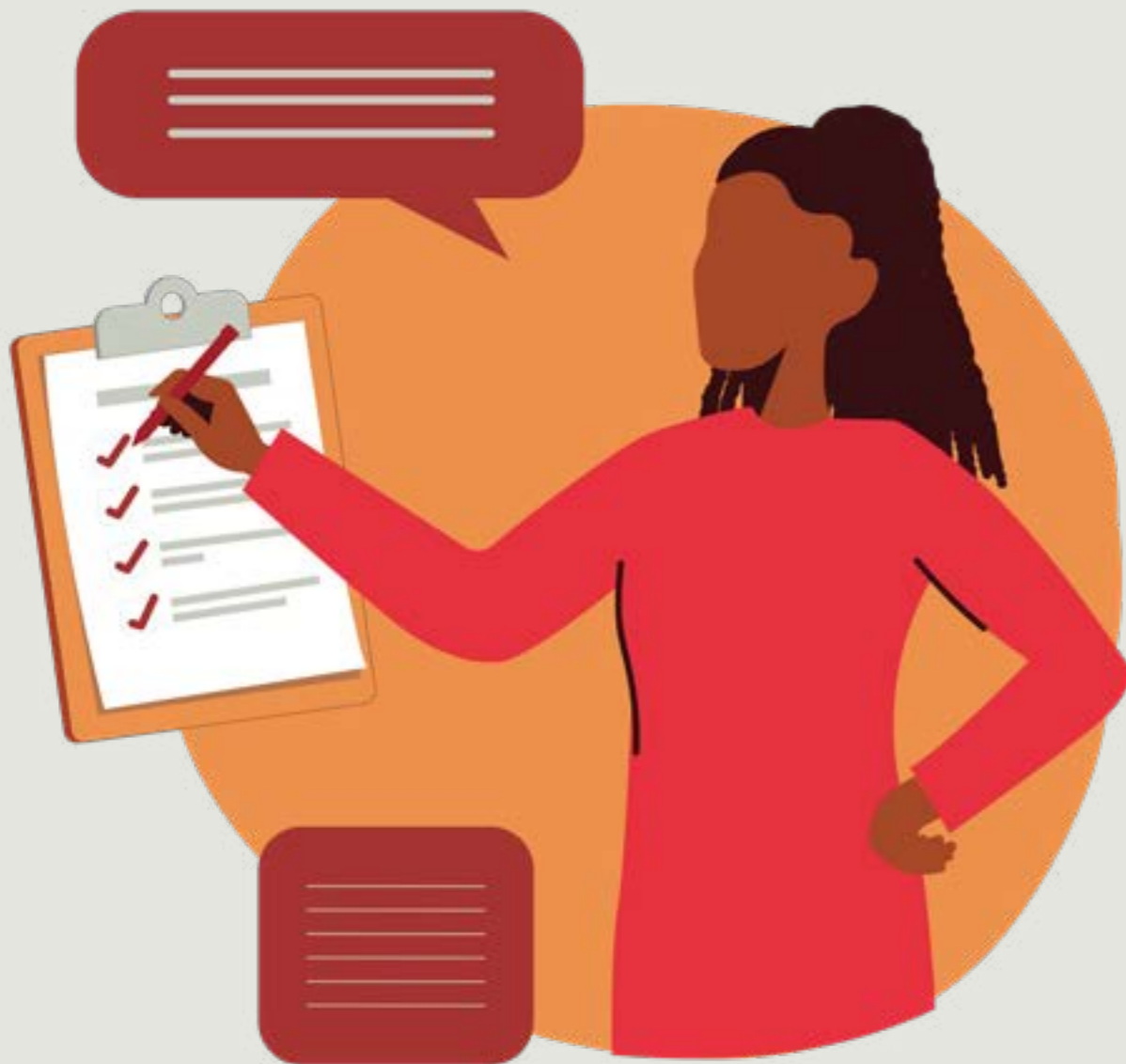
Our recommendations are spread across the different program stages, from design to monitoring and evaluation. We see program design as one of the most decisive stages, in whether a program will be successful and reach its impact goals (see next page for table of stages).



Program stages

1	2	3
Program design	Program implementation	Monitoring and evaluation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand your target group: women's ambitions for herself, her family and her business.• Broaden the definition of success for women agri-entrepreneurs, beyond financial metrics.• Consider women's larger social and familial systems.• Design tailored approaches and content for each target group identified during the needs assessment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Organize fun, interactive exercises to create a connection between program participants.• Set up networks for women to stay in touch.• Encourage women entrepreneurs to share materials and learnings with peers.• Invite role models to share their experiences at training sessions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Include the agri-entrepreneurs' own goals as impact measurement metrics. <p>For example, social impact metrics (improved access to education, healthcare, community development).</p> 

Methodology



Methodology

This report is based on our Aya program assessment, which included needs assessments, a mixed-methods impact assessment comprising surveys and interviews, and the published articles of the PhD research.

The needs assessments

The needs assessments were conducted with the women before the Aya training to help the team come up with the best curriculum possible. Key discussion topics of the needs assessment were the following: business, aspirations, training, community, violence and safety, and household relations. We analyzed data from 79 surveys with women entrepreneurs, 24 individual interviews with experts / community leaders, 124 women entrepreneurs participating in focus group discussion, and 71 husbands of women entrepreneurs participating in focus group discussion.

The impact assessment surveys

To assess the impact of the Aya training and enable improvement in the future, we surveyed the participants about their experience with the training and their current situation. The following topics were addressed: Aya training recall and

evaluation, self-confidence and safety, household dynamics, husband role, connections, aspirations, impact in quality of life, and business status update and outcome change.

We worked with two datasets: the first one is 31 respondents from four countries (Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana and Nigeria) surveyed in October / November 2022 who had received the training between 2018 and 2020; second one is 73 respondents from five countries (Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Niger, Nigeria, South Sudan) surveyed in July / August 2023 who had received the training in 2021 or in 2022. Respondents' selection was based on availability and willingness of women to answer the impact assessment survey.

The impact assessment individual interviews

To deepen the insights we collected from the impact assessment surveys, we conducted 10 individual interviews with respondents from three countries (Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana) from our first Aya cohort. Respondents' selection was based on availability and willingness to participate.

We draw on quantitative and qualitative data from our impact questionnaire and follow-up interviews. We used a mix of

descriptive statistical analysis, inductive coding and participatory sense making to come to our conclusions. The impact data only reflect the experiences of Aya participants who responded to our questionnaire and are not generalizable to all Aya participants.

References

Articles PhD research and other insights

The following articles were used in the formation of this report, including three PhD research articles, one yet to be published:

- Brouwer, L.C.M. (2022). Adaptive Resilience among Agri-Businesswomen amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic in Kenya. In: *Entrepreneurial Responses to Covid-19 in Africa*. (Ed.) Merriënboer, M. Eburon Academic Publishers. <https://eburon.nl/product/entrepreneurial-responses-to-covid-19-in-africa/>
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