ASPEN NETWORK OF DEVELOPMENT ENTREPRENEURS

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ROUNDTABLE REPORTS

ANDE PAN AFRICA CONFERENCE 2025

DAKAR | FEB. 11 - 13

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PANGEA GLOBAL VENTURES

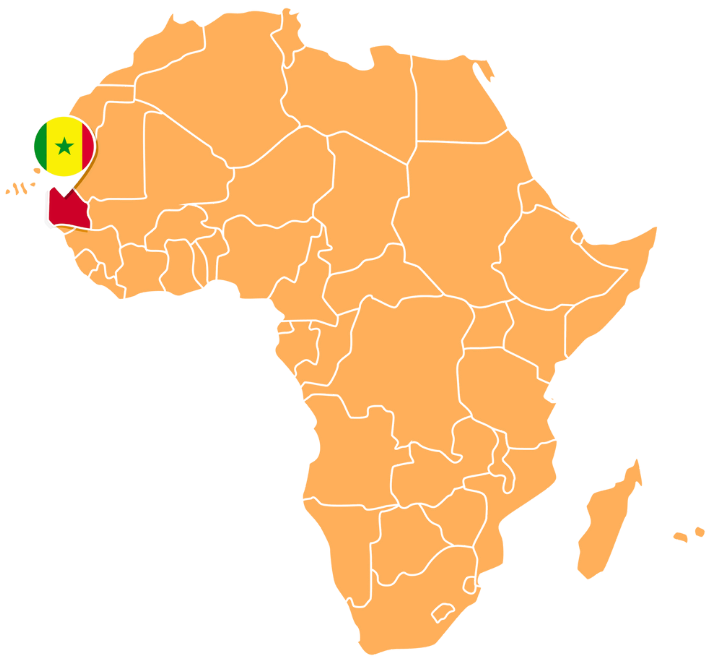
ENTREPRENEURSHIP TO THE POINT

TECH QUEST

ANDE PAN AFRICA CONFERENCE 2025

DAKAR | FEB. 11 - 13

From **February 11-13**, **2025**, ANDE hosted the groundbreaking **Pan Africa Conference** in **Dakar, Senegal**. This event brought together passionate individuals, organizations, and entrepreneurs from across the continent to tackle some of Africa's most pressing challenges and explore collaborative solutions.



Here are some of the key highlights and takeaways from this transformative conference:

- **Collective Action**
- **Focus on the Future of Work & Youth**
- **Building Pan-African Collaborations**
- **The Power of Collaboration**
- **Storytelling for Impact**
- **Creative Entrepreneurship on Display**
- **A Collaborative Space for Growth**

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Roundtable 1

FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE – BRINGING MEANINGFUL POLICY CHANGES TO DRIVE INCLUSIVE AND FEMALE ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN PAN-AFRICA

Youth Business International (YBI) & FATE Foundation




Moderator:

- Christine Anene

Panelists:

- Freya Bottomley - Membership Development Manager Youth Business International
- Adenike Adeyemi - FATE Foundation

This session explored how policy recommendations can be effectively implemented to create an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem, particularly for female entrepreneurs across Africa. Youth Business International (YBI) and Fate Foundation shared insights from their research, case studies, and policy frameworks aimed at tackling systemic barriers to youth and women entrepreneurship. The discussion highlighted the role of policy advocacy, data-driven insights, and ecosystem coordination in ensuring that entrepreneurship policies translate into meaningful impact.

YBI's E-Competitive Framework

Freya Bottomley introduced the E-Competitive Framework, a policy guide developed by YBI in collaboration with key stakeholders such as UNCTAD, Orange Corner, YMCA, the Commonwealth Secretariat, and Arbidius. This framework provides practical, evidence-based solutions that help governments and other ecosystem enablers improve youth entrepreneurship outcomes. One of the primary objectives of the framework is to offer tangible and adaptable recommendations that can be implemented at the national and local levels. It integrates real-world case studies to illustrate what works and how governments can bridge the gap between policy formulation and execution.

The Role of Policy in Enabling Female and Youth Entrepreneurship

A major challenge identified is that there is no single global governance system to enforce uniform entrepreneurship policies. Instead, organizations and local policymakers must collect data, analyze trends, and advocate for policy improvements at the national and regional levels. The session emphasized the need to bridge the policy-to-practice gap, as many entrepreneurs struggle with regulatory complexities, taxation issues, and financial literacy gaps. Effective policy implementation requires strong data collection systems and collaboration among policymakers, financial institutions, and business support organizations.

Challenges Faced by Female Entrepreneurs

Structural Barriers

Women entrepreneurs often face significant regulatory and financial hurdles, including high taxation and bureaucratic challenges that hinder business growth,

Limited access to capital due to stringent collateral requirements, Difficulty in accessing markets and scaling businesses, especially in high-growth industries, and Mindset and Perception Issues. Many women hesitate to seek external investment due to the fear of losing control over their businesses. Additionally, entrepreneurship is often perceived as a high-risk venture, discouraging women from pursuing business opportunities.

Security and Mobility Constraints

Female entrepreneurs, particularly in agribusiness and rural industries, are disproportionately affected by security challenges and restricted mobility. Many women are forced to close businesses or limit expansion due to concerns about safety, particularly in regions with political instability or conflict.

The Importance of Gender-Responsive Data

Fate Foundation emphasized the need for gender-disaggregated data to inform policymaking. Governments and financial institutions must track female-led businesses across different sectors, regions, and funding needs to design more effective interventions.

Beyond capturing funding gaps, data collection should also focus on education, training, financial literacy, and access to networks, ensuring that policies are designed to meet the specific needs of female entrepreneurs.

Policy Recommendations and Practical Solutions

Somel key recommendations to create a more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem include:

- Ecosystem Coordination: Government agencies to identify the appropriate departments responsible for entrepreneurship policies and foster cross-sector collaboration.
- National Entrepreneurship Strategies: Countries should develop and integrate youth and women entrepreneurship policies within their broader economic development plans.
- Financial Inclusion: Financial institutions should offer tailored financial products, such as blended finance, matching grants, and gender-responsive investment funds, to improve access to capital for women entrepreneurs.

- Capacity Building and Training: entrepreneurship training programs should go beyond basic skills and focus on scaling strategies for female-led businesses.
- Mentorship and networking opportunities should be expanded to help women enter high-growth industries.

Key Takeaways

- Policies must transition from theory to practice by ensuring they are actionable, locally adaptable, and backed by real-world data.
- Women entrepreneurs require more than just training—they need access to finance, networks, and growth-stage support.
- A data-driven approach to entrepreneurship policy helps allocate resources efficiently and ensures targeted interventions.
- Collaboration across stakeholders—governments, private sector, and NGOs—is crucial to creating an enabling environment for women-led businesses.
- Financial institutions must develop gender-responsive investment mechanisms to close the funding gap for women entrepreneurs.

Action Points

- Conduct national and regional ecosystem audits to identify gaps in policies and support systems for female entrepreneurs.
- Develop national entrepreneurship strategies that integrate women and youth entrepreneurship within broader economic development frameworks.
- Expand investment instruments such as blended finance, gender-lens investing, and micro-loan guarantees for female entrepreneurs.
- Move beyond training programs to focus on scaling businesses, improving financial literacy, and fostering networking opportunities.
- Encourage public-private partnerships to create targeted support mechanisms for women and youth entrepreneurs.

Roundtable 2

COLLABORATION IN ECOSYSTEM BUILDING

ENABEL (IYBA - SEED program)





Facilitators:

- Ms Capucine Gonnord - Lead Expert Capacity and Network Development for Entrepreneurial Ecosystems
- Mrs Alya Trabelsi - Expertise France IYBA-SEED Senegal Country Co-lead.

The workshop was designed to explore the significance of harmonized ecosystems and how collaborative approaches can enhance the effectiveness of entrepreneurial support structures. It highlighted the pitfalls of fragmented ecosystems, which often lead to inefficiencies, wasted resources, and redundant initiatives. The speakers advocated for a collective and strategic approach where different ecosystem actors work together toward common goals.

The workshop sought to equip participants with practical tools and best practices for strengthening collaboration, aligning efforts with existing programs, and ensuring support in urban centers.

Why Build in Collaboration?

The discussion opened with a fundamental question: Why is collaboration essential in building strong ecosystems? Speakers emphasized that working in isolation leads to duplicated efforts, inefficient resource allocation, and limited impact. A harmonized ecosystem fosters better resource sharing, creates synergies, and enhances opportunities for entrepreneurs by reducing gaps in services and support structures.

A major challenge discussed was the lack of ecosystem coordination, with entrepreneurial support systems heavily concentrated in capital cities, leaving businesses in secondary and rural areas underserved. Without a collaborative approach that involves decentralization, economic growth remains uneven, and many talented entrepreneurs are left without the necessary support to scale their businesses.

The session highlighted the importance of a clear vision and defined roles among ecosystem players. Many initiatives fail because they lack a coherent value proposition, operating independently rather than as part of a larger, coordinated effort. Collaboration allows stakeholders to define their contributions, ensuring that efforts complement rather than compete with one another to enhance impact and strengthen the overall resilience of the ecosystem.

How to Build in Collaboration?

Building a collaborative ecosystem requires a structured approach that involves strategic alignment, resource-sharing, and the establishment of clear communication channels. Speakers shared key tools and best practices that ecosystem actors can use to improve coordination and maximize impact.

One of the most critical aspects of effective collaboration is identifying ecosystem needs and bridging existing gaps. This requires data-driven analysis, ecosystem mapping, and consultations with key stakeholders to determine what services are missing, who is best positioned to provide them, and how resources can be optimally allocated. For example, the IYBA-SEED project has successfully employed ecosystem mapping to connect support structures and ensure more efficient service delivery.

Another key point was the importance of aligning with existing programs and local actors. Many organizations work on similar initiatives, yet they often operate in silos due to a lack of coordination. By aligning with ongoing programs, political priorities, and strategic orientations, organizations can avoid duplication and enhance the efficiency of ecosystem-building efforts. This requires early engagement with decision-makers, a commitment to shared objectives, and a willingness to adapt to evolving needs.

Decentralization was also emphasized as a crucial component of ecosystem building. While major entrepreneurial hubs often receive the bulk of investment and support, entrepreneurs in secondary and tertiary cities face significant barriers to access. Collaborative efforts should focus on expanding outreach beyond capital cities by empowering regional hubs, supporting grassroots organizations, and tailoring support mechanisms to local realities. This approach ensures that entrepreneurs across diverse geographies have equal opportunities to succeed.

Best Practices for Effective Collaboration

Participants identified key foundations for building collaborative ecosystems and strategies for overcoming common roadblocks. Five core principles emerged as essential for successful ecosystem collaboration:

Overcoming Roadblocks to Collaboration

- Lack of Coordination Among Stakeholders – Many organizations operate independently, leading to redundancies and inefficiencies. Solution: Develop exchange platforms and monitoring frameworks to ensure regular communication and coordination.
- Limited Resources – Funding constraints often hinder ecosystem actors from expanding their reach. Solution: Strengthen synergies between organizations, promote co-funding models, and leverage public-private partnerships.
- Resistance to Change – Some institutions are reluctant to shift from traditional, top-down approaches to more collaborative models. Solution: Involve decision-makers early in the process and demonstrate the long-term benefits of collaboration through case studies and pilot programs.
- Governance and Bureaucratic Barriers – Complex governance structures can slow down decision-making and hinder innovation. Solution: Streamline processes, advocate for policy reforms, and promote flexible governance models that facilitate more agile collaboration.

Towards a More Collaborative Future

The workshop concluded with a strong call to action for stakeholders to commit to long-term collaboration in ecosystem building. By enhancing knowledge sharing, fostering multi-sector partnerships, and decentralizing support structures, the entrepreneurial landscape in Africa can become more inclusive, resilient, and impactful.

Action Points

- Develop practical collaboration frameworks to guide future partnerships.
- Expand outreach beyond capital cities to ensure ecosystem inclusivity.
- Continue engagement and capacity-building efforts to strengthen collaboration across diverse stakeholders.

Key takeways & Action Points

- Stronger collaboration needed between financial institutions, investors, BDSPs, and policymakers for data-driven decision-making into SGB financing and to scale digital financial solutions Data-driven financing models are key to financial inclusion. By leveraging alternative credit scoring, digital transaction data, and mobile payment analytics, financial institutions can expand access to capital for millions of SGBs.
- Financial services should be customized to business needs with industry-specific financing solutions instead of rigid, one-size-fits-all loan structures.
- BDSPs to achieve financial sustainability by reducing donor dependency and adopting fee-based mentorship, digital coaching, and corporate-backed funding models.
- Bridging the urban-rural financing gap requires decentralized business support, mobile banking, and tailored financial literacy programs for true financial inclusion.
- Collaboration among financial institutions, BDSPs, and policymakers is essential to creating a transparent, inclusive, and efficient financing ecosystem for small businesses in Africa.

Roundtable 3

AFRICA IMPACT INVESTING GROUP

AliG: IIGH / IIF / Kenya / Senegal / Burkina/Cote D'Ivoire

Facilitators:

- Rosemary Amondi, Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs – ANDE / Kenya Impact Investing
- AliG: IIGH/IIF/Kenya/Senegal/Burkina/Cote D'Ivoire

The Ci-Gaba Fund of Funds is a $75 million blended investment vehicle focused on investing in venture funds, including both experienced fund managers and emerging fund managers known for their innovation. The fund invests in both debt and equity, with a thin fund structure designed to minimize fees. Given the lack of long-term capital in Ghana, the fund aims to provide a patient investment approach while delivering returns slightly above market rate in local currency to benefit pension clients. One of the primary challenges facing venture capital in Ghana is the macroeconomic environment, particularly the high depreciation of the local currency. While local investments may show strong returns in real terms, currency devaluation often reduces their value when converted to foreign currencies. This underscores the importance of investing in local currency funds to support market growth and reduce currency risk for businesses. By adopting this strategy, investors can help stabilize the investment ecosystem and prevent financial burdens from being passed down to businesses. To build a sustainable investment environment, it is crucial to address systemic barriers such as high operational costs and regulatory inconsistency. Many fund managers report strong portfolio performance yet struggle with profitability due to high costs of doing business. Additionally, regulatory uncertainty makes it difficult for investors to plan long-term. By advocating for consistent policies and an enabling investment environment, Ghana can attract more sustainable funding and reduce reliance on debt-driven economic models.

In the enterprise support sector, many Enterprise Support Organizations (ESOs) lack an intentional approach to reaching the right entrepreneurs. Because many programs are grant-based, they often prioritize urban businesses, neglecting grassroots innovators who may have greater impact. To address this, a tiered segmentation system (TS system) is being introduced to categorize ESOs based on their capacity, impact, infrastructure, and business scope. This system will ensure that businesses receive appropriate support based on their stage of growth, rather than being grouped together in a one-size-fits-all approach.

Ghana's 116 innovation hubs across 16 regions are also being mapped to provide data-driven investment insights. By segmenting these hubs, stakeholders—including donors, government agencies, and global partners—can identify specific regions and sectors for targeted funding. Furthermore, research-based innovations from educational institutions are being integrated into innovation hubs to create a stronger pipeline of startups and SMEs.

Collaboration remains a key focus, with the ESO collaborative supporting initiatives in research, impact investing, and SME matchmaking. Attendees are encouraged to engage with industry leaders and stakeholders to explore investment opportunities. The event concluded with a call for continued networking, with participants urged to connect with key figures such as Amma, Lee, Daniel, and Efoa and scan the QR code for the NCAP Summit to stay informed.

Key Takeaways

- Ci-Gaba Fund of Funds is a $75 million investment vehicle supporting both established and emerging venture fund managers.
- The fund focuses on local currency investments to counteract currency depreciation and reduce risk for businesses.
- The ESO sector lacks proper targeting, often prioritizing urban businesses and neglecting grassroots innovation.
- A tiered segmentation system (TS system) is being implemented to classify ESOs based on capacity, impact, and business stage.
- Ghana has 116 innovation hubs across 16 regions, and data is being collected to enhance targeted investments.
- Strong collaborations between investors, ESOs, and SMEs are key to developing a sustainable investment ecosystem.

Action Points

- Strengthen local currency investments to protect businesses from currency depreciation risks.
- Advocate for policy consistency to encourage investor confidence and long-term funding.
- Reduce operational costs for fund managers to improve investment sustainability.
- Expand support for grassroots innovation by ensuring ESOs reach beyond urban areas.
- Implement the tiered segmentation system (TS system) to provide tailored support for businesses.
- Leverage data-driven insights to identify high-impact investment opportunities.
- Foster stronger industry collaborations by connecting investors, innovation hubs, and SMEs.
- Encourage continued engagement by networking with key stakeholders and attending future discussions.

Roundtable 4

ACCELERATING CATALYTIC COLLABORATIONS TOWARDS CLIMATE-PROOFING SMES

ANDE Pan-Africa Climate & Environment Working

Facilitators:

- Group/Decarbonize/ACT Foundation/GFA Consulting

The session on Accelerating Catalytic Collaborations towards Climate-Proofing SMEs was led by Samanta Soulanoudjingar Dapidissi & Badji-N'Poneh, representing the ANDE Pan-Africa Climate & Environment Working Group, Decarbonize, ACT Foundation, and GFA Consulting. This discussion focused on the critical role of collaboration in strengthening SMEs against climate challenges and ensuring their resilience in an evolving global economy. The session highlighted the increasing urgency of gender inclusion and climate-conscious business practices, drawing from the insights gained from the SheBuilds documentary. This documentary showcased the struggles and triumphs of women entrepreneurs in South Africa's construction and property sectors, tracing their journey from historical challenges to modern-day successes. A key takeaway from the documentary was that gender barriers continue to hinder women's full participation in key economic sectors, despite reforms and policy advancements.

Historically, South African women played a pivotal role in activism, however, the journey toward gender equality in business has been fraught with challenges. As of 2021, women made up only 13% of registered professionals in the built environment sector, even though they constituted 51% of the national population.

The SheBuilds documentary further emphasized the resilience of women in navigating these obstacles, balancing multiple responsibilities, and breaking barriers in male-dominated industries.

Beyond gender inclusion, the session discussed how climate-proofing SMEs is essential to ensure their survival and sustainability. Climate change has increasingly disrupted supply chains, caused unpredictable weather patterns, and impacted business operations, particularly in agriculture, real estate, and energy-intensive industries. Many SMEs lack the financial resources and technical expertise to adopt sustainable business practices, making them vulnerable to climate risks. A major challenge identified was stereotypes about women-led businesses, which are often perceived as small-scale, hand-to-mouth enterprises rather than viable, scalable ventures. This perception affects their ability to secure investment and limits their expansion opportunities. The discussion emphasized the importance of financial literacy and inclusion, urging businesses, especially those in rural areas, to develop better financial management skills.

Solutions proposed in the session included masterclasses and training programs tailored to help women entrepreneurs build their skills, access financial resources, and play a broader role in business and policy advocacy. The speakers emphasized that given the right opportunities, women-led businesses can thrive and significantly contribute to economic development. A crucial takeaway was the need to redefine economic mechanisms to ensure inclusion. Many policies and financial structures do not adequately cater to women entrepreneurs, limiting their participation in high-growth industries. There was a call for policy adjustments and private sector interventions to support women's economic empowerment and climate-conscious entrepreneurship.

The future of SME development in Africa lies in creating an environment where businesses—particularly women-led enterprises—are supported with the right skills, capital, and policy frameworks. The SheBuilds initiative serves as an inspiration for gender inclusivity and the empowerment of women in various industries, demonstrating that when given equal opportunities, women can lead sustainable business transformations.

Key Takeaways

- Gender equality remains a challenge in key industries like construction, real estate, and energy despite policy reforms.
- Only 13% of registered professionals in South Africa's built environment are women, despite women making up 51% of the population.
- Stereotypes about women-led businesses hinder investment and scalability, reinforcing the perception that they are merely survivalist ventures.
- Financial literacy and access to capital remain critical barriers, particularly for rural women entrepreneurs.
- Climate change is a major business disruptor affecting SMEs, particularly in agriculture, infrastructure, and resource-intensive sectors.
- Masterclasses and business training are essential for women entrepreneurs to enhance financial literacy and climate resilience.
- Economic mechanisms and policies need to be redesigned to ensure women's inclusion in high-growth industries.

Action Points

- Expand gender-focused policies to support women-led businesses in high-growth sectors.
- Create financial instruments that facilitate access to capital for SMEs, especially those led by women in rural areas.
- Develop training and masterclass programs to enhance women entrepreneurs' business acumen, financial literacy, and sustainability practices.
- Encourage climate-conscious business models that integrate sustainability and green financing for SMEs.
- Standardize impact measurement frameworks to ensure that businesses receiving investment and grants demonstrate real progress in gender and climate resilience.
- Foster collaboration among policymakers, investors, and ecosystem enablers to ensure that business environments are inclusive and climate resilient.
- Scale up initiatives like SheBuilds to increase awareness, representation, and inclusion of women in male-dominated industries.
- Leverage digital platforms and networks to share success stories, case studies, and opportunities for women-led businesses to grow and attract investment.

Roundtable 5

VALUE COLLABORATION TO INCREASE FINANCING FOR SGBS IN AFRICA

Kenya Climate Ventures and Smart Regional Consultants, SNDB International, I&P, Halycon




Moderator:

- Grace Wachori, Regional Director Africa, ANDE

Panelists:

- Grace Wachori, Regional Director Africa, ANDE
- Mark Ameyo, Enterprise Development Officer, Kenya Climate Ventures (KCV)
- Joram Mwinamo, CEO, SNDBX International
- Daniel Baker, CEO, Halycon
- Catherine Gitonga, CEO, Smart Regional Consultants (SRC)
- Alice Petetin, I &P

The session on Value Collaboration to Increase Financing for Small and Growing Businesses (SGBs) in Africa brought together key stakeholders from investment firms, entrepreneur support organizations (ESOs), and climate-focused financiers to address the persistent challenges in accessing capital for African SGBs.

The discussion, moderated by Grace Wachori, Regional Director Africa at ANDE, featured insights from Kenya Climate Ventures, Smart Regional Consultants, SNDBX International, I&P, and Halcyon. The session underscored the importance of collaboration, ecosystem strengthening, and innovative financing models in enabling small businesses to scale and thrive.

Challenges in Accessing Finance for SGBs

A primary challenge highlighted was the disconnect between investors and SGBs, particularly in emerging markets like Africa. Many businesses struggle to meet the strict investment criteria set by financiers, which often prioritize formalized, high-growth enterprises over smaller, informal businesses with strong potential. Traditional investment structures tend to favor businesses that demonstrate immediate scalability, clear governance structures, and financial sophistication, leaving many promising but early-stage businesses unable to access capital.

While many SGBs have viable business models, they lack the financial reporting and investment readiness required by investors. Entrepreneurs often struggle with aspects such as financial forecasting, risk assessment, and compliance with regulatory requirements, making them appear less attractive to potential funders. Without structured investment readiness programs, even high-impact businesses fail to attract financing.

Bias and risk perception further compound the problem. Financial institutions frequently perceive donor-funded businesses as risky, assuming that their success is contingent on grants and subsidies rather than solid business fundamentals. Similarly, SGBs operating in marginalized or informal sectors often face discriminatory lending practices, with banks preferring to finance established corporate entities over emerging businesses.

Finally, the fragmentation of the funding ecosystem creates additional hurdles. The African investment landscape comprises a mix of private equity, venture capital, development finance, and philanthropic funding, yet these entities often operate in silos. Entrepreneurs struggle to navigate the diverse financing options available, and mismatches between funding needs and available capital persist. Without a harmonized approach to financing, SGBs find it difficult to secure the right type of funding at the right stage of their growth.

Collaborative Solutions to Address the Financing Gap

Strengthening collaboration and partnerships between investors, ESOs, and financial institutions is key to unlocking financing for SGBs, particularly those who act as intermediaries between SGBs and capital providers. By working closely with accelerators, business hubs, and technical assistance providers, investors can ensure that businesses receive adequate training in financial management, governance, and compliance, making them more attractive funding candidates.

An important initiative discussed was the development of investment readiness frameworks. Standardized criteria for assessing business viability, scalability, and risk would allow ESOs to prepare businesses effectively before they approach investors. Such a framework could help streamline deal flow, reduce due diligence costs, and increase the success rate of financing applications. Kenya Climate Ventures (KCV) emphasized the need for aligning expectations between funders and SGBs, ensuring that entrepreneurs are equipped with the right financial documentation, investment proposals, and governance structures before seeking funding.

Another key strategy is leveraging technology to bridge financing gaps. Digital platforms are being explored as a way to aggregate funding sources and provide a centralized access point for SGB financing. Initiatives like Collaborative Finance Platforms (CFFs) aim to pool funds from different investors, including grant providers, development finance institutions, and impact investors, into a single structured financing solution. These platforms enable a more seamless and efficient deployment of capital, ensuring that businesses receive financing tailored to their specific growth stage and sector.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of blended finance models, which combine grants, concessional loans, and equity investments to create a more flexible, patient form of capital. Unlike traditional venture capital, which demands rapid growth and high returns, blended finance allows for a longer-term investment horizon, enabling SGBs to grow sustainably without immediate pressure to scale beyond their capacity.

Furthermore, fostering inclusive lending policies and risk-sharing mechanisms was proposed as a solution to address bias in financing. Financial institutions need to rethink their risk assessment models to better accommodate businesses in informal sectors, rural areas, and climate-focused industries. The development of loan guarantee schemes and risk-sharing facilities would allow investors to de-risk their capital while providing SGBs with improved access to loans and investment.

Key Takeaways

- Collaboration is essential – No single organization can solve the financing gap alone. Investors, ESOs, and policymakers must work together to create a more cohesive funding ecosystem.
- Investment readiness is a major bottleneck – Many businesses fail to secure financing not because of a lack of potential, but because they lack the financial literacy and governance structures required by investors.
- Blended finance and patient capital are crucial – Traditional venture capital models do not work for most African SGBs; alternative financing mechanisms such as impact-driven funds, concessional loans, and blended finance models are needed.
- Technology and digital platforms can improve access to finance – Digital solutions, such as funding aggregation platforms and credit assessment tools, can streamline financing and increase transparency in funding processes.
- Inclusive financing models must be prioritized – The current funding landscape favors well-established businesses, leaving many promising enterprises without the capital they need to grow. Risk-sharing mechanisms, flexible lending models, and policy-driven incentives are necessary to create a more inclusive financial environment.

Action Points

- Develop an SGB Investment Readiness Framework with standardized viability criteria and equip entrepreneurs with financial management, governance, and regulatory compliance tools.

- Enhance collaboration between ESOs and investors by fostering partnerships, improving investment pipelines, and implementing shared due diligence to streamline financing and reduce risks. Leverage Digital Financing Platforms by developing a centralized funding platform for entrepreneurs to access information on grants, equity, and loan. Also implement AI-driven credit assessment tools to improve financing eligibility.

- Expand Blended Finance and Patient Capital Initiatives by promoting models that combine grants, soft loans, and equity, while engaging development finance institutions and private investors. Promote Inclusive Financing Policies by working with policymakers to redesign credit frameworks and establish risk-sharing mechanisms that support and are accessible by SGBs in informal and marginalized sectors.

- Encourage Cross-Border and Regional Investment Networks by strengthening international collaborations and fostering knowledge-sharing platforms for investors to exchange best practices and success stories.

Roundtable 6

FACILITATING A COLLABORATIVE AND INCLUSIVE ECOSYSTEM TO ENABLE MARKET SUCCESS FOR YOUNG GREEN ENTREPRENEURS IN THE WASTE VALUE CHAIN.

Voluntary Service Overseas




Facilitators

- Catherine Mwangi, Country Representative, VSO Kenya
- Jeff Otieno, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Manager, Waste to Work Projec, VSO Kenya

The session, organized by Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) and moderated by Alex, focused on the challenges and opportunities within the waste management sector for young green entrepreneurs. It explored ways to develop a more collaborative and inclusive ecosystem that fosters market success for businesses operating in the circular economy. Speakers and participants discussed the structural barriers, financial constraints, and policy gaps that hinder youth-led waste enterprises, while also highlighting successful case studies and practical solutions that can scale up the sector.

A key challenge identified in the discussion was the limited financial access for youth entrepreneurs in the waste value chain. Many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in waste management struggle to secure funding for their operations due to the high costs of waste collection, transportation, and processing. Traditional financial institutions often require collateral, credit history, or established revenue streams, criteria that most young green entrepreneurs cannot meet. The session underscored the importance of innovative financing models such as microfinance, impact investment, and blended finance to support youth-led circular economy initiatives.

The participants also called for greater private-sector involvement, where corporations could provide pre-financing or guaranteed off-take agreements for recycled materials, ensuring a steady revenue stream for young entrepreneurs.

Another significant challenge discussed was the fragmentation of the waste value chain and the inefficiencies within collection and sorting systems. In many African cities, waste collection is informal, with individual waste pickers gathering materials without structured aggregation centers. This lack of organization means that many recyclable materials never reach processing plants or are sold at low prices to middlemen. The session highlighted the need for integrated waste collection networks, including community-led buy-back centers and local waste aggregation hubs. Such models have been successfully implemented in countries like South Africa, where township-based buy-back centers allow small waste collectors to sell their materials directly to recyclers, reducing transportation costs and improving profit margins for small-scale waste entrepreneurs.

The discussion emphasized the importance of behavioral change and community engagement in improving waste management practices. Despite the economic potential of recycling, waste is still largely seen as a burden rather than a business opportunity. Poor waste disposal habits, lack of proper sorting, and limited public awareness hinder the efficiency of waste collection efforts. The participants stressed the need for education campaigns, school programs, and digital awareness initiatives to promote waste segregation at the source. Encouraging citizens to sort plastics, paper, and organic waste before disposal could significantly improve the quality of raw materials collected by recyclers, reducing processing costs and increasing profitability for young entrepreneurs in the sector.

Successful case studies from Ethiopia, South Africa, and Nigeria were presented to illustrate how structured waste management systems can create employment opportunities for youth. One notable example was the New Wave Project in Addis Ababa, which focused on plastics and paper recycling while providing financial and technical support to young entrepreneurs and women-led businesses. The initiative was co-funded by municipalities and private investors, ensuring that financial resources were available to scale up waste collection networks and improve processing capacity. Over a seven-year period, this project created more than 10,500 jobs, demonstrating the employment potential of the circular economy when effectively structured.

Another key example discussed was the South African Buy-Back Centers Initiative, which created localized waste collection and sorting centers in rural and urban communities. These buy-back centers enabled youth and small businesses to sell waste materials directly to recyclers, cutting out middlemen and ensuring fair pricing. The program not only supported entrepreneurial ventures but also helped clean up local communities, creating a sustainable business model that benefits both the environment and the economy.

In West Africa, corporate-backed initiatives have also played a significant role in creating sustainable markets for recycled materials. Large multinational companies such as Coca-Cola and Nestlé have begun investing in plastic recycling programs to meet their sustainability commitments.

The session highlighted how such companies could play a pivotal role in driving market access for youth entrepreneurs by establishing long-term purchase agreements for recycled plastics. This would create market certainty for young recyclers, encouraging more investments in the sector.
The conversation addressed key strategies to strengthen the circular economy for youth entrepreneurs. One such strategy is the development of public-private partnerships to improve waste processing infrastructure. Governments can incentivize private sector investment in recycling plants and bio-waste processing facilities by offering tax breaks, subsidies, and investment grants. Establishing waste collection hubs in local communities would further enhance the efficiency of supply chains, ensuring that waste materials reach processing centers in a cost-effective manner.
Another crucial recommendation was capacity-building and technical training for young waste entrepreneurs. Many youth-led businesses lack the necessary business management skills, technical know-how, and market linkages to scale their operations. The session proposed the creation of mentorship programs, incubation hubs, and vocational training centers focused on waste management and recycling technologies. Governments, universities, and development agencies could work together to provide specialized training in waste sorting, upcycling, and bio-energy production, ensuring that young entrepreneurs are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed.
Additionally, there was a strong call to change public perceptions of waste management through awareness campaigns, media engagement, and policy-driven incentives. Many communities still view waste collection as a low-income, unskilled activity, making it difficult for young entrepreneurs to attract investments or skilled labor. By positioning waste management as a critical industry for sustainability and economic growth, stakeholders can help elevate the status of the sector and encourage more youth to see it as a viable career path.

Key Takeaways

- Youth-led waste enterprises face significant financial and structural barriers, but innovative financing models such as impact investment, corporate-backed funding, and micro-loans can help bridge this gap.
- Creating structured waste aggregation centers and integrated supply chains is essential for improving market access and reducing operational inefficiencies in waste management.
- Public awareness and behavioral change programs can drive better waste segregation and improve raw material quality, increasing the profitability of youth-led waste businesses.
- Public-private partnerships and corporate commitments can provide stable demand for recycled materials, ensuring the long-term sustainability of waste enterprises.
- Capacity-building initiatives, including business training and mentorship, are critical to helping young entrepreneurs scale their waste businesses effectively.

Call to Action: Strengthening Market Access for Youth in Waste Management

To ensure that young green entrepreneurs thrive in the circular economy, the session called for coordinated action from governments, private sector stakeholders, development agencies, and financial institutions. Policymakers were urged to introduce targeted incentives for youth-led waste enterprises, including tax breaks for recyclers, subsidies for waste processing equipment, and investment in waste collection infrastructure. Private companies were encouraged to develop inclusive supply chains that source materials from young waste entrepreneurs, while also offering technical support and funding opportunities.

Roundtable 7

ENGAGING THE HIDDEN MIDDLE FOR SAFER, MORE NUTRITIOUS, AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD ENVIRONMENTS: STRATEGIES FOR TRANSPORTERS, TRADERS, AND WHOLESALERS

Rikolto





Moderator:

- Francis Guitau

Facilitators:

- Bernadette Ouattara- Rikolto
- Selase Sabah- Partners in Food Solutions
- Kain Mvanda- Rikolto
- Josephine Ecklu- Rikolto

The session, organized by Rikolto, focused on the critical role of midstream actors in food systems. These actors, often referred to as the hidden middle, include traders, transporters, wholesalers, processors, and logistics providers who operate between food production and consumption. Despite being essential to ensuring food distribution, storage, and processing, these actors are frequently overlooked in policy discussions and development interventions.

The session featured expert panelists, including Bernadette Ouattara (Rikolto), Selase Sabah (Partners in Food Solutions), Kain Mvanda (Rikolto), and Josephine Ecklu (Rikolto), who provided insights into the challenges and strategies needed to strengthen this segment of the food supply chain.

The discussion emphasized the importance of building a more resilient and sustainable food system by addressing the needs, inefficiencies, and potential of midstream actors. While smallholder farmers and urban retailers often receive the bulk of support and investment, those working in transportation, wholesale distribution, and processing play a pivotal role in ensuring food safety, nutrition, and accessibility. The session also highlighted practical strategies for

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Understanding the Hidden Middle

The hidden middle or midstream actors consists of businesses and individuals who handle food after it leaves farms and before it reaches consumers. This includes transporters, wholesalers, traders, processors, and logistics providers who manage food movement, processing, and storage. These actors are responsible for getting food from farms to markets, ensuring supply chain efficiency, reducing waste, and maintaining food quality.

Despite their significant contribution, midstream actors are rarely considered in policy frameworks and development initiatives. Most food security programs focus on boosting agricultural production or modernizing urban retail sectors, leaving the vast network of intermediaries without formal support. This oversight results in inefficiencies, high food prices, post-harvest losses, and unsafe food handling practices, all of which negatively impact food security, affordability, and nutrition.

Research conducted by IFAD and AGRA highlights how urbanization and increased food demand have led to longer and more complex supply chains. In many African countries, food must travel over 1,000 kilometers from production areas to urban centers, requiring effective transportation, storage, and distribution systems. SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises) have stepped in to fill gaps left by the government, taking on roles in warehousing, cold storage, and logistics. However, they lack investment, financial access, and policy support, limiting their ability to function efficiently.

Challenges Facing Midstream Food Actors

Infrastructure and Logistics Constraints

One of the primary barriers to efficiency in food systems is inadequate infrastructure and poor logistics management. Many midstream actors operate in challenging conditions, facing poor road networks, unreliable transportation, and lack of cold storage facilities. As a result, food spoilage rates are high, leading to significant post-harvest losses. In addition, fuel and maintenance costs for transporters are high, making it expensive to move food from production areas to cities.

Without adequate storage facilities, perishable goods such as fruits, vegetables, dairy, and meat spoil quickly, forcing traders to sell at a loss or dispose of unsold stock.

Limited Access to Finance

Midstream actors, especially those in informal markets, struggle to access credit and financial support. Most traders, transporters, and wholesalers operate on low margins and lack financial records, making it difficult to qualify for bank loans or investment capital. Without funding, they cannot scale their businesses, invest in modern logistics solutions, or improve food safety measures.

Financial institutions and impact investors often prioritize formal businesses over informal traders, creating a financing gap that prevents growth and innovation. Governments and development agencies must work on creating specialized financial products for midstream actors, allowing them to access affordable loans, grants, and business development services. Digital banking solutions and mobile financing platforms could also provide alternative ways for informal food traders to access capital and improve business resilience.

Food Safety and Quality Standards

A major concern in food supply chains is ensuring food safety and quality control. Many midstream actors lack the knowledge, infrastructure, and regulations needed to prevent food contamination. In informal markets, meat, dairy, and fresh produce are often transported in open vehicles, exposed to dust, bacteria, and extreme temperatures.

Additionally, many traders lack proper storage and packaging solutions, leading to food deterioration before it reaches consumers. Governments need to develop and enforce clear food safety guidelines for transporters and wholesalers, providing training on hygienic food handling, storage, and processing. Investments in covered transport vehicles, better storage facilities, and standardized packaging methods could help reduce foodborne illnesses and improve consumer confidence in local markets.

The Informal Market Dilemma

A significant portion of Africa's food supply comes from informal markets, with 96% of food purchases occurring outside of supermarkets or formal retail chains. However, policies often favor large, formal businesses, leaving traders, street vendors, and small processors without legal protections or institutional support.

Because informal markets lack regulation, food distribution remains disorganized and inefficient, increasing food waste, price fluctuations, and contamination risks. Governments must work with informal sector actors to create policies that formalize market structures while maintaining affordability and accessibility for consumers. Providing licenses, business training, and market infrastructure can help integrate informal traders into formal food supply chains, improving efficiency and stability.

Key Takeaways & Action Points

- Midstream actors, including transporters, traders, wholesalers, and processors, play a vital role in food security but remain under-recognized in policies and development programs.
- Investing in logistics, road networks, and cold storage can significantly reduce post-harvest losses, improve food safety, and increase market access for small businesses.
- Financial barriers, such as limited access to loans and lack of collateral, prevent SMEs from scaling, necessitating microloans, mobile banking, and impact investment solutions.
- Food safety and quality standards remain a challenge in informal markets, requiring hygiene training, safe food transport policies, and licensing for street vendors.
- Climate-smart food systems should be strengthened through solar-powered cold storage, efficient transport solutions, and waste recycling initiatives.
- Localizing food distribution hubs and promoting short food supply chains can lower emissions, improve efficiency, and reduce food miles.
- Governments must integrate midstream actors into national food security policies by providing investment incentives, lowering import taxes on refrigeration, and supporting financial inclusion.
- Businesses and entrepreneurs in the food sector should adopt climate-smart technologies, enhance supply chain efficiency, and invest in value-added processing.
- Development agencies and investors must prioritize funding midstream actors, providing business training, and fostering public-private partnerships (PPPs) to improve food logistics and processing.
- Collaboration among governments, private sector players, financial institutions, and development organizations is essential to reducing food waste, stabilizing prices, and building a resilient food economy.

Credits & Acknowledgments

This report was compiled with contributions from key experts, rapporteurs, and speakers who played a significant role in shaping its content.

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