



SESSION N°27

Empowering Youth and Women in Agrifood: Bridging Entrepreneurship and Job Creation for Sustainable Impact

Tuesday 7 July 2026 - 12:00-14:00 UTC

Online ([Zoom](#))

English-French-Portuguese interpretation available

1. Context

Africa's agrifood systems are at a turning point. As millions of young people enter the labour market each year, and as food systems face growing pressure to become more inclusive, resilient and sustainable, the question of how youth and women participate in - and benefit from - agrifood is more urgent than ever.

Two distinct but deeply connected pathways define this participation: entrepreneurship and employment. Some young people and women will build their own enterprises as processors, traders, service providers, digital innovators or agri-entrepreneurs across local value chains. Others will seek and access decent jobs within those same value chains as skilled workers, technicians, managers or cooperative members. Both pathways matter, need to be supported, and they reinforce each other. More viable youth - and women - led enterprises create more decent jobs and a stronger pool of skilled workers strengthens the enterprises that employ them.

Globally, 44% of working youth were employed in agrifood systems in 2021 but employment too often means informal, low-paid or precarious work rather than jobs with stability and growth prospects.¹ At the same time, many youth - and women - led enterprises remain trapped at small scale, unable to grow, formalise or create employment for others. Women and young women face the sharpest constraints: concentrated in the least visible and least rewarded segments of value chains, and facing persistent barriers linked to land, finance, skills, mobility, social norms and exclusion from leadership and decision-making.²

The 27th PAFO–COLEAD Innovations Session takes both pathways in consideration. It asks how agrifood systems and the organisations, cooperatives, MSMEs and support ecosystems within them can better serve youth and women as both entrepreneurs and jobseekers, and how strengthening one pathway can reinforce the other for sustainable, inclusive impact.

¹ [FAO, 2025, The Status of Youth in Agrifood Systems](#)

² [FAO, 2024, The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems](#); [ILO, 2024, Global Employment Trends for Youth](#)



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2. Opportunities and pathways for youth and women in agrifood

The **entrepreneurship pathway** is most powerful when it moves beyond survival and subsistence toward viable, growing businesses. Agrifood systems offer a wide range of opportunities beyond primary production - in food processing, post-harvest handling, packaging, logistics, quality services, digital solutions, agri-services, circular economy and e-commerce. For youth and women, these spaces can open real possibilities for income generation, leadership, business growth and job creation.

However, turning opportunities into a sustainable enterprise requires more than a good idea or initial training. It requires access to finance, equipment, markets, mentorship, networks and buyers - and the business skills to manage growth, meet quality standards and engage with formal institutions.

The **employment pathway** is most powerful when it leads to decent work, jobs that offer fair wages, stability, safe conditions, skills development and the prospect of advancement. In Africa, MSMEs represent around 85% of private-sector agrifood value chains, making them the primary source of employment across local economies³. When youth- and women-led enterprises grow, they become job creators. When larger agrifood businesses, cooperatives and farmer organizations invest in inclusive hiring and workforce development, they open pathways to decent employment for young people and women who may not have the resources or risk appetite to start their own venture.

Farmer organizations, cooperatives and MSMEs sit at the intersection of both pathways. They can facilitate access to inputs, aggregation, collective marketing and market linkages for entrepreneurs. They can also create employment opportunities, provide skills development and open leadership pathways for young workers. Strengthening their capacity to serve both functions - and to do so inclusively is central to making agrifood systems work for youth and women.

3. Persistent Barriers for youth and women

Despite these opportunities, youth and women continue to face barriers that limit their progress along both pathways.

For **entrepreneurs**, the most critical constraints include limited access to finance - particularly for young people and women who lack collateral, credit history or land ownership - alongside gaps in business skills, market information, equipment and buyer connections. Without these, enterprises struggle to grow beyond micro-scale, formalise or create stable jobs for others.

For those seeking **decent employment**, barriers include mismatches between available skills and employer needs, limited access to vocational or technical training relevant to agrifood value chains, and the absence of structured pathways from training into work. Informal recruitment, unpaid or underpaid trial periods and lack of contracts remain common.

Across **both pathways**, women and young women face compounding constraints: social norms that restrict mobility and time, unpaid care responsibilities, unequal access to resources and persistent exclusion from leadership, cooperative governance and decision-making spaces. These are not individual limitations; they are structural barriers that require deliberate and targeted responses.

³ [AGRA, 2025, Africa Agriculture Status Report](#)

2. Way forward

Empowering youth and women in agrifood require moving beyond the choice between supporting entrepreneurs and creating jobs. The most effective approaches will connect both by helping enterprises grow to the point where they create decent employment, and by building the skills and pathways that connect young people and women to those opportunities.

This means moving beyond one-off training toward integrated, sustained support that includes coaching, mentorship, investment readiness, market linkages, technical assistance, leadership development and stronger connections with buyers, financial institutions and employers. It means farmer organizations, cooperatives, SMEs and development partners adapting their services to actively serve both entrepreneurs and jobseekers and recognizing that these groups often overlap and shift over time.

It also means paying specific attention to the barriers women and young women face across both pathways not as an add-on but as a design principle for every programme, initiative and institutional practice.

This session will explore:

- How can youth- and women-led agrifood enterprises move from small-scale activity to viable businesses that generate sustainable income and decent jobs?
- How can agrifood value chains offer more stable, better paid and attractive employment opportunities for youth and women?
- What support is needed from farmer organizations, cooperatives, MSMEs and support actors to connect training with entrepreneurship and employment pathways?
- How can support ecosystems better address the specific barriers faced by women and young women across both entrepreneurship and employment pathways?

PAFO-COLEAD INNOVATIONS SERIES:
Innovations and successes of African farmer-led businesses and SMEs

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Agenda

- **Moderator:** *Aimable Twagirayezu, Programs Officer, PAFO*

12:00-12:25 Introduction

- *Laura Wauters, Head of Training Department, COLEAD*
- *Babafemi Oyewole, CEO, PAFO*
- *Olusola Adeyemo, Lead Sustainable Farming, Distribution and Extension, AGRA*

12:25-13:00 Panel 1: youth- and women-led agrifood businesses creating value and quality work (*Practical experiences across the entrepreneurship and employment pathways*)

- *Chiamaka Ndukwu, CEO, AgroHive*
- *Akejo Gordon Victor, CEO, Gordon Agricultural Organisation*
- *Fatoumatta Joof, Director of Programs, The Woman Boss*

13:00-13:25 Panel 2: Building support ecosystems for inclusive growth: strengthening skills, entrepreneurship and quality employment

- *Genna Tesdall, Director of Young Professionals for Agricultural Development (YPARD)*
- *Mathabo Tsepa, Women Leader, SACAU, PAFO*

13:25-13:50 Debate

13:50-14:00 Key takeaways and conclusion *Ahoefa Soklou, Project officer, Networks and Alliances, COLEAD*



This event was organised by the Fit For Market Plus (FFM+) programme, implemented by COLEAD within the framework of development cooperation between the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) and the European Union (EU)

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