



Photo: Farm Africa / Brian Ongoro

Growing Resilience And Opportunities For Women (GROW) For Good

Roundtable Report

October 2024

Introduction

Farm Africa is an NGO working across eastern Africa to support small-scale farmers by promoting sustainable, locally adapted methods to boost productivity and resilience, while protecting and enhancing the local environment. Farm Africa also connects farmers to profitable markets, creating incentives to invest in productivity, which ultimately supports long-term economic stability for farming communities.

In October 2024, Farm Africa convened a roundtable discussion with female industry leaders in Nairobi, Kenya as part of its Growing Resilience and Opportunities for Women (GROW) initiative. The aim of the discussion was to explore women's role in the global food system and ways to drive positive change.

A summary of the key themes and conclusions emerging from the event are outlined below, along with a list of recommendations for further action in support of women in agriculture.

Background and context

Eastern African smallholder farmers face critical challenges, including degraded soils, climate extremes, and limited access to quality inputs and knowledge, which prevent them from meeting food demand and improving livelihoods. However, with sustainable practices like irrigation, better seeds, and soil conservation, they can significantly boost yields, increase incomes, and improve family nutrition.

Higher productivity on existing land reduces the need for expansion, helping to protect forests, and rangelands and conserve biodiversity. This approach supports both food security and environmental sustainability, demonstrating the vital role of regenerative agriculture in creating resilient farming communities.

Farm Africa is working to enhance the productivity, income levels, and climate resilience of 60,000 farmers in Kenya's Embu and Tharaka Nithi counties by training them in regenerative agriculture and business practices.

A central aspect of this initiative is the training of over 320 village-based advisors (VBAs), including 186 women, in regenerative agriculture techniques. These VBAs then share their knowledge with additional farmers across the counties, enabling them to boost their yields and support their families. Women face challenges in achieving the same agricultural yields as men due to limited access to resources like land, training and markets. Providing economic opportunities to women benefits entire communities and can enhance wider food security.



Photo: Farm Africa / Arete

Juliet (left) a farmer and VBA in Embu county, Kenya, mentors over 270 farmers and believes that that regenerative agriculture has been a game-changer for women in her community.

“Since learning these practices, women are able to support their families and sustain their farms by themselves.”

The GROW for Good Challenge

In October 2024, a group of female executives from the UK food and farming industry undertook the GROW for Good Challenge to Kenya to raise awareness and funds of Farm Africa's work with smallholder farmers. During their visit, they took part in hands-on regenerative agriculture activities and gained insight into the lives of Kenyan women farmers and how Farm Africa supports VBAs.

This roundtable event concluded their trip and brought together female industry leaders from the UK and Kenya to discuss ways to drive positive change for women in the global food system.

Photos (top left and right): Farm Africa / Ezra Kiriago



GROW roundtable discussion

The event included a panel discussion where subject matter experts responded to guiding questions from the moderator, followed by break-out sessions where participants discuss specific pre-assigned questions. The key discussion topics were:

- 1. Empowering women in agriculture:** Identify effective strategies for amplifying women's voices in the agriculture sector, enhancing their decision-making power, and addressing socio-cultural barriers that limit their participation in regenerative agriculture.
- 2. Advancing regenerative agriculture practices:** Identify how regenerative farming practices improve resilience to climate challenges, as well as creating resilient supply chains and actionable pathways to scale up regenerative agriculture. What the main challenges are in adopting regenerative agriculture for smallholder farmers and practical solutions to overcome them.
- 3. Promoting an enabling environment:** Engage private sector stakeholders, government, and NGOs to build a collaborative framework that enhances access to resources, certifications, and policy support, creating a sustainable business case for regenerative agriculture.



Key themes emerging from discussions

1. Regenerative Agriculture

Regenerative agriculture emphasises producing more food on less land while enhancing soil health and sequestering carbon, creating resilient and productive landscapes. This approach is particularly relevant in East Africa, where the majority of farmers are smallholders who lack the latest information and tools to adapt to climate change. By adopting regenerative practices, farmers can improve their resilience, leading to increased incomes and a better quality of life for their families.

Challenges faced by farmers include limited access to market information, finance, and the skills needed to manage crops effectively. Digital solutions like those promoted by the World Food Programme's Farm to Market Alliance (FtMA) are helping by providing market price data, crop management guidance, and links to services through smartphones. However, getting farmers, especially women and young people, bankable remains a significant challenge, exacerbated by issues like lack of collateral and limited access to loans.

The business case for regenerative agriculture

Sustainable practices: Regenerative practices like intercropping can improve soil health, increase yields, and reduce labour, while diversifying farmers' income. This approach not only supports environmental sustainability but also strengthens the resilience of farmers to climate variability.

Gender inclusion: Supporting women in managing cash flow and balancing labour within households is vital for the success of regenerative agriculture. Gender-sensitive approaches that recognise women's dual roles in farming and household responsibilities will enhance community resilience and economic stability.

Nutrition and value addition: Regenerative agriculture can improve household nutrition. Biofortified crops, which are enhanced with vitamins and minerals, offer an opportunity to address malnutrition while appealing to health-conscious consumers.

Private sector support: The private sector can play a significant role in scaling up regenerative agriculture by providing long-term contracts, flexible payment options, insurance, and affordable advisory services through VBAs. This support makes regenerative agriculture more feasible and profitable for smallholders, creating a more resilient and sustainable farming ecosystem. The private sector also plays a role in this adaptation journey. Exporters and agribusinesses provide farmers with market opportunities and set up demonstration plots to test new crop varieties suitable for different regions as climate change intensifies. They offer bulk purchasing of inputs to help farmers access quality seeds and fertilisers, which are essential for sustainable productivity.

Market challenges and fair trade: Access to land remains a barrier, but fair trade price premiums and organic certifications could make regenerative agriculture more profitable for smallholder farmers. However, ensuring these certifications are affordable, especially for vegetable producers, is essential.

Scaling up regenerative agriculture

Social media and digital content: Digital platforms, especially social media, are effective for reaching new audiences and amplifying the stories of women and youth in agriculture. The rising popularity of TikTok among young agripreneurs

is an example of this trend. Tapping into these platforms could broaden the appeal and visibility of regenerative agriculture.

Training and education: The role of VBAs and training programmes is critical. VBAs act as catalysts in disseminating regenerative practices to farmers, organising them locally to achieve scale. Training farmers to view their farms as businesses, and to grow high-value crops, can improve farm productivity and resilience. Succession planning programmes such as passing on know-how to young people or other family members, led by VBAs, can further ensure long-term sustainability and knowledge transfer.

Women's voices and socio-cultural barriers: Women's participation in agricultural decision-making is limited, particularly in community settings where men are typically the primary recipients of information. To empower women, there is a need to challenge socio-cultural norms that restrict their access to resources like land and financial services.

Access to finance through village loans and savings associations (VSLAs): VSLA is a promising approach to help women pool resources and invest in regenerative agriculture. Through this model, women can collaboratively save and access funds, allowing them to overcome some of the capital limitations that often prevent them from scaling up.

Private sector and supply chain collaboration: Strengthening off-takers (buyers) and input suppliers' direct engagement with VBAs could improve pricing for both food and farm inputs. Aggregation of produce via VBAs enables better market access and profitability for smallholder farmers.

Recommendations:

- Expand access to finance for smallholders, including low-interest loans and investments in essential inputs and technology for women and young people.
- Provide training to financial service providers to help them better understand the needs of farmers and equip farmers with information on loan eligibility requirements from financial service providers.
- Build on the traditional agricultural practices still used by communities that align with regenerative principles.

2. Amplifying women's voices in agriculture

Women play a critical role in agriculture, but they face challenges, particularly around access to finance, resources, and market opportunities. As entrepreneurs, women juggle sourcing inputs, managing farms, and family responsibilities. Limited land ownership and access to financial services make it difficult for them to access loans and can hinder their role as VBAs.

Initiatives like cage farming in aquaculture have provided opportunities for women without land to venture into fish farming, but challenges remain, such as long travel distances to fish cages and exploitation in the supply chain.

VBAs, many of whom are women, are crucial in promoting regenerative agriculture through peer-to-peer knowledge sharing. By connecting women with practical skills and market information, VBAs empower them to improve their livelihoods.

Existing networks: In both the UK and Kenya, networks exist to support and amplify women's voices in agriculture. In Kenya, specific initiatives encourage women's participation in agricultural leadership and work with women in villages to enhance their influence. The Department of Agriculture supports common interest groups, which often involve many women, creating platforms for knowledge sharing and advocacy.

Increasing access to finance: Access to finance remains a significant hurdle for female farmers. Collateral requirements for loans often prevent women from obtaining necessary financing to expand their farming activities. There is an opportunity to spotlight successful female farmers, building confidence within the

community and among financial institutions to make funding accessible. Financing female-led farming initiatives can empower more women to scale their operations.

Showcasing positive female role models:

The need for positive female role models is widely acknowledged. Sharing success stories of women in agriculture can shift perceptions, highlighting opportunities rather than barriers. Practical Action's mentoring schemes and Farm Africa's VBA programme are already supporting women agripreneurs, offering visibility to women who have transitioned into successful farming roles and inspiring others to follow suit.

Using technology: Reaching a vast audience of smallholder farmers remains a challenge, emphasising the need for robust, accessible communication networks. Digital tools, such as WhatsApp, are widely used to share information and foster peer learning among women farmers. These online groups complement traditional knowledge-sharing platforms, like trade shows, and will continue to be crucial for connecting and empowering female farmers.

Cultural barriers: Traditional beliefs that land and other resources should be passed down to men limit women's access to these resources. For example, women in aquaculture are restricted to trading fish rather than accessing fish stocks directly.

Recommendations:

- Conduct household dialogues to address gender dynamics and promote more equitable access to resources.
- Empower community resource persons (or VBAs) to disseminate information on regenerative agriculture and access to resources. Farm Africa is training women to be VBAs, an approach that is proving to be very successful.
- Develop and adapt technologies that enable women to ease their workload, such as those that allow women to manage farms remotely (eg in the case of fish ponds).
- Promote group-based role-sharing models, allowing women to collaborate and support each other's enterprises in a sustainable way.



Photo: Farm Africa / Brian Ongoro

3. Agri-insurance

Agricultural production is increasingly vulnerable to climate-related risks, making agri-insurance a crucial safety net for farmers. However, uptake remains low. Innovative models, like the Kenya Livestock Insurance Programme, which uses satellite mapping to trigger payouts when pasture levels drop, show promise for scaling up agri-insurance.

Scaling agri-insurance has however proved difficult due to farmers' limited financial capacity to pay premiums.

Recommendations:

- Bundle agri-insurance with other insurance products to increase value for farmers.
- Leverage satellite monitoring technology to improve coverage and reduce costs.
- Improve farmer awareness of agri-insurance benefits and close data gaps to make products more appealing.
- Develop affordable, accessible insurance products that meet the specific needs of smallholders.

Conclusions

There is a clear case for scaling up regenerative agriculture to build resilience and increase the incomes of smallholder farmers, as well as reduce environmental degradation and encourage biodiversity.

Evidence from Farm Africa's programme in Thara Nithi and Embu counties in Kenya where 52,250 farmers have received training on regenerative agricultural practices, indicates that 91% of those surveyed reported substantial increases to crop yields. Furthermore, 54% and 52% respectively saw improvements in water retention and in soil quality¹.

The VBA network plays a crucial role in supporting the scale up of sustainable farming methods, such as regenerative agriculture, through the dissemination of farming information and know-how to smallholder farmers. It also creates a vital link between farmers and the market through off-takers as well as strengthening connections to quality input suppliers.

There is an opportunity to train more women as VBAs supporting the empowerment of women and increasing their knowledge and incomes. The approach should also be adapted to be gender sensitive considering women's dual roles in farming and the household.

The VBA network can also be used as a platform to address the cultural barriers that prevent women fully participating in agriculture and give them more agency and decision-making authority within their communities.

It serves to amplify women's voices, support peer learning and provide a valuable support network for female entrepreneurs.

There is potential to explore how the VBA network can be leveraged as a group of trusted lead farmers to support the development of a range of services and products suited to farmers' needs through dialogue with agricultural suppliers and service providers. For example, strengthening relationships with exporters/off-takers to support climate adaptation in line with market opportunities, and building connections with insurance, digital and financial service providers to explore the expansion of available product options to support the specific needs of smallholder farmers.



¹ Farm Africa, Strengthening Regenerative Agriculture in Kenya project, July-Sept 24 project report.

Investing in women in agriculture

Empowering farmers is crucial to addressing the challenges of poverty, food insecurity and climate change. By providing farmers with the skills and support they need, we can help them restore ecosystems, improve yields and strengthen the resilience of their communities.

Farm Africa believes in the power of local women to lead change. Across eastern Africa, women are at the forefront of Farm Africa's work, supporting and empowering fellow farmers with the skills to grow and earn more, and improve their livelihoods.

We have successfully trained and empowered women as Village-based Advisors and each one goes on to support another 100 more farmers. They play a key role in the delivery of a wide range of services within their communities, from sharing new farming practices and technologies, such as the take up of regenerative agriculture,

to improving access to markets for produce, and providing business training and mentoring.

The Village-based Advisor model has proven to be extremely effective in empowering women, increasing their household incomes, and mobilising other farmers to build their resilience to climate change and create lasting change.

There is a real need to increase the number of VBAs to support more farmers. There is also potential to expand the role of VBAs leveraging their unique position in the community and their local knowledge to support the development of products and services adapted to the specific needs of smallholder farmers.

You can invest in helping us train and expand our network of female Village-based Advisors and change the lives and opportunities of thousands of farming families across eastern Africa.

Here are some examples of the impact your investment could make:

£1,154

could train 100 VBAs in financial literacy, giving them essential skills to manage and grow their farms sustainably. Each farmer will pass on this knowledge to fellow farmers, expanding the impact to entire communities

£5,200

could be invested in training 40 female VBAs, who will go on to provide vital training to other farmers on sustainable farming practices so that they can generate additional income for their families

£9,000

could provide 100 lead farmers with starter kits to set up demonstration sites showcasing regenerative agriculture techniques. These sites will serve as hands-on learning hubs, inspiring sustainable practices across their communities.

If you would like to donate, contact Anissa Msallem, Head of Partnerships on anissam@farmafrica.org or visit www.farmafrica.org

