

Sowing the seeds of change: Advancing the interests of women agripreneurs through collaborative conversations

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Women in agriculture frequently face gender-specific obstacles worldwide. Impediments such as lack of access to land, education and finance often put women farmers at a disadvantage before they ever put a plough to a field or sow a seed in the ground. This gender gap imposes significant costs on society in terms of lost agricultural output, food security and economic growth. For Africa to fulfill the 2030 sustainable development goal (SDG) agenda, the empowerment of women agripreneurs must be placed at the centre of policy making, and then carefully monitored to ensure implementation and achieved outcomes.



Mindful of the challenge ahead, Corteva Agriscience commissioned a study in 2018 across 17 countries, examining the causes of gender inequality in agriculture. The top three constraints identified were access to land, finance and leadership training. The company's corporate 2030 sustainability goals not only commit to engaging with, and supporting women farmers to increase their productivity, incomes and sustainable agricultural practices, but also to empowering women within their communities wherever Corteva Agriscience operates. Mindful that the company cannot make the required impact alone, collaborative partnerships with many organisations have been launched to develop and deliver supportive solutions for women farmers worldwide.

In 2021, the Gordon Institute of Business Science's (Gibs) Entrepreneurship Development Academy (EDA) was selected as Corteva Agriscience's South African partner to teach business, managerial, entrepreneurial and leadership development skills to women agripreneurs. To raise public awareness of women's success in agriculture and to air policy issues relating to the advancement of women in the sector across Africa, four thought leadership roundtable events were held between March and November 2021.

The roundtable events were held under the following themes:

1. Creating an enabling environment for women entrepreneurs in agriculture
2. Humble Hustlers – anecdotes from accomplished farmers
3. Flourishing Farmers – harvesting a future in farming
4. A Food Systems Approach – setting the table to address agriculture's triple challenge

Keynote speakers, in order, were:

- South Africa's Minister of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, Thokozi Didiza, MP
- Nigerian agripreneur, Ndidi Nwuneli, founder of Leadership, Effectiveness, Accountability, and Professionalism (LEAP) Africa, co-founder of AACE Foods and managing partner of Sahel Consulting Agriculture & Nutrition Ltd.
- Ghanaian rural women's rights and food security champion, Lydia Sasu, founder and executive director of Noyaa Kpee (Development Action Association in English)
- Kenya-based Vanessa Adams, VP of Strategic Partnerships and Chief of Party, Partnership for Inclusive Agricultural Transformation in Africa at the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA).

Inclusive and diverse dialogue

Organisers aimed to include a diverse range of voices in the roundtable events to provide new (often younger) entrants with maximum interaction with, and insight from, key stakeholders in the business environment that they aspire to be a part of. Experienced women farmers generously shared accessible and inspirational personal stories of mistakes made, lessons learnt and obstacles overcome on their journeys to success. Corteva Agriscience representatives not only discussed the ways in which their seeds, crop protection technologies and digital innovations provide solutions to problems, promote profitability and ensure sustainability but also spoke about the company's corporate social responsibility ethos as it impacts farming communities worldwide.

The tone of the conversation was consistently respectful of Africa's traditional social, economic and political heritage but also recognised that culture is not, and never has been static, and that such structures can adapt and change where they currently discriminate against women. Women farmers who have successfully challenged and dislodged inequitable gender barriers offered testimony to inspire participants towards fulfilling their potential. Business and government decision-makers were called upon to reform policies to create an enabling environment. Uncomfortable truths were aired about the existential threats to Africa's food systems, putting forward valid reasons for stakeholders to change their practices, despite the disruption that it will cause to prevailing interests.

Threaded through each roundtable, at the centre of the exercise and the core justification for the resources, time, and effort of all involved, was the desire to facilitate the success of aspirant agripreneurs searching for paths to economic and personal fulfilment. Many of these new entrants into the sector were asking seemingly simple questions pertaining to business commencement and support that contained within them complex issues of transitioning from policy intention (i.e. increased participation and sustainability of women in agriculture) to achieved outcomes.

This policy brief distils the aforementioned conversations to make them available to as many stakeholders as possible, and to thereby increase the participation of women across African agriculture and agribusiness value chains.

Articulating the issues

Since time immemorial, all farmers, the world over have faced many challenges. Whether it is the problem of unpredictable product prices, the challenges associated with obtaining finance, the age-old vagaries of weather, or the more recent risks associated with climate change – farming is not for the faint-hearted. In addition to the challenges faced by all farmers, gender inequality adds an extra burden to women farmers. To assess the extent of this burden, Corteva Agriscience undertook research into how gender inequality in farming is understood and experienced worldwide. After surveying women in 17 countries across five regions, spanning subsistence to large-scale enterprises, the results were published in 2018. Gender discrimination in the form of pay, financial and employment opportunities, power to make financial decisions and having viewpoints taken seriously were issues for 66% of respondents. While those surveyed, particularly African respondents, reported a reduction in levels of discrimination over the previous decade, lower income was cited by 37% of women respondents with a similar percentage saying that they had less access to finance than men.

Technology advances in agriculture have made it possible to switch from uniform treatment of fields to applying specific treatments to areas with the benefit of reduced use of water, fertilizer and pest control (coupled with achieving higher

yields). Women reported that in this regard, the barrier they faced was access to training to make optimal use of technology.

The 2018 Corteva Agriscience report recommended the following interventions to empower women in agriculture:

- Improve access to finance in agriculture by working with the financial sector to ensure that women have equal access to finance and credit along with the knowledge to understand how credit markets work.
- Improve training and assistance for technology to place useable tools in the hands of the director-producers. This requires bridging the so-called “last mile problem” by working and communicating at a grassroots level.
- Improve access to academic education to open technical career paths, by providing financial support to women by forming partnerships with educational institutions at a secondary and higher level.
- Support women against discrimination through partnerships with government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to reform policies and practices that marginalise women.
- Raise awareness about the importance of women, and women’s successes in agriculture by creating platforms for women in the sector to communicate them, and by raising the profiles of leading women.
- Explore potential interventions to improve work/life balance. Women experience various challenges regarding transport, intermittent work, daycare, and personal safety among others.

Changing the way policy is made

Progress to improve women’s standing from the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa adopted by the African Union in 2004 notwithstanding, the roundtable discussions highlighted that women in agriculture continue to face issues relating to gender inequality. These problems have been repeatedly highlighted in the past, which points to existing policies and practices not working.

A recurring theme in the conversation was the disconnect between policies when they emerge from government processes and the priorities of women at a local level. Current practices tend to marginalise women on the ground and deny their agency in policies that affect them. Summed up in the words of Betty Kiplagat, head of Government Affairs and Sustainability for Corteva Agriscience Africa and the Middle East, “My challenge is not that the government is not making policies; my challenge is that government is making policies that sometimes forget a very key important player, and that is a woman.”

Agency to shape policy will not come to women by rights alone. Several speakers argued that women leaders had to become champions of change by choosing to challenge the obstacles in their way. Lydia Sasu from the Development Action Association, Ghana, reminded participants that it is a significant struggle, but through perseverance, her organisation has achieved results. There was consensus that progress requires constant asking of the question posed by Minister of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, Thokozile Didiza, MP: “How do we, as women policymakers and women leaders become change agents on the issues that affect women? We need to mobilise women to participate in the policy space. It is possible. In the South African situation, we have tried to do that not only in policy but in legislation as well. I do not deny we can do more, and we will. I appreciate for us to be able to respond appropriately to what women need, we need to understand what their lived experience is all about.”

Layered stakeholder testimony creating overall narratives

Qualitative ‘anecdotes’ told from lived experience have historically been dismissed by policymakers as lacking the academic rigour and the repeatability of quantitative data collection. Despite this, participants in the roundtable discussions demonstrated the power of such stakeholder testimony which, when layered as multiple stories across the diverse group, revealed the shared themes of an overall narrative.

Evaluation of such nuanced narratives are crucial if decision-makers are to achieve policy equity. In so doing they will gain invaluable understanding of how their work is experienced, interpreted and responded to by those they seek to serve. Such an understanding is crucial in developing policies that achieve goals and avoid unintended, counterproductive

consequences that may exacerbate inequality. Respecting such testimony can be the difference between inappropriate, unsustainable policy imposed on women in agriculture, and policy created with women in agriculture to support transformative social and economic change.

Throughout the discussions, insights drawn from stakeholder lived experience were recognised as valuable not only for their power to inspire others, but also for their role in activating inclusive thought leadership; thereby supporting policy development for context-specific implementation and achieved outcomes.

Building networks: Social media, mentoring and lifelong learning

Through all the conversations, the mantra of building networks and nurturing aspirant entrants could be heard. As Zimbabwean farmer Ruramiso Mashumba observed, “If you're going to grow, grow with other women. I have been fortunate in my journey to meet so many women, some who are my mentors, some who are my mentees, all of whom are my colleagues. I believe that when we are together as women, we can do a lot in our communities.” While it was agreed that those entering agriculture must learn by doing, there was consensus that there is immense value in talking to, listening to, and learning from experienced farmers. Several participants urged aspirant agripreneurs to use events like field days organised by government and input suppliers such as Corteva Agriscience to learn about new solutions coming to the market and developing strategic relationships with commercial and established farmers.

Mentorship was acknowledged as meaning different things in different contexts but all those involved stated that a mutual commitment from all involved to long-term, respectful relationships was required. Such relationships are not one-way give-and-take interactions but rather relationships, whereby both parties bring skills and insights to the table. It was recognised that the skilled and extremely beneficial use of social media at all stages of the farming process is something that younger, newer entrants to the farming scene can bring to such relationships.

Social media is more than a substitution of print information by a digital artefact that is virtually instantaneously disseminated and free to replicate. Social media meets a basic human need for community, to belong, communicate with and be recognised by the group. Young people are immersed in this media, comfortable using it and source the greater part of their news and information from it.

There was discussion of the changing role of mentorship at different stages of the farming journey, with several experienced individuals recognising that the rapid rate of social, economic and environmental change worldwide makes supportive, knowledge transferring relationships crucial throughout an agricultural career. The importance of lifelong learning and sharing of knowledge was stressed repeatedly. Thato Moagi, managing director of Legae La Banareng Farms (also the first South African to receive the prestigious Nuffield Agriculture Scholarship) observed that farmers should never stop learning: “I say take every opportunity with both hands when there is any opportunity. A seminar or training course? Apply for it and take it with both hands. I think we need to be humble about our business acumen, but we need to be fierce and take every opportunity. When we enter these spaces we must come with presence, we must command attention.”

Partnerships

The 2018 Corteva Agriscience report recognised that supporting women farmers and reducing the significant burden of social and economic inequality is a task that requires partnerships for reach and impact at scale. Mindful that the company cannot make the required impact alone, the report recommended collaborative partnerships to develop and deliver supportive solutions for women farmers worldwide. Dr Kolli Venkata Subbarao, Corteva Agriscience president, Africa and the Middle East, described the many and varied collaborations with governments, academic institutions, and industry associations throughout all the regions in which the company operates. He observed that the Gibbs partnership that had produced the current discussion series is similar to a project in Kenya, within which Corteva has partnered with Strathmore University in Nairobi to facilitate a Women in Agriculture Leadership Programme.

Humble Hustle: Resilient entrepreneurs

To understand the importance of ‘humble hustlers’, some term definitions were required. Across Africa the term ‘hustle’ is

used to describe feisty, goal orientated, innovative, 'good trouble' social and economic disruptors who find economically advantageous gaps in the existing business environment. Hustlers do not give up in the face of obstacles but rather manifest resilient, stubborn determination to achieve success against the odds. The addition of the prefix 'humble' to the hustling concept implies that a person who is disadvantaged by birth (through class, race, gender) is ideally placed to produce the dynamic innovation necessary for hustling to happen. Rather than being thwarted by the impediments created by class, race and gender, the humble hustler looks for, and finds, the gaps and workarounds that allow for success.

Explaining this quintessential entrepreneurial quality, Didiza said: "the power that women possess in transforming their own conditions and societies they live in... being disruptive in a positive way. Women have not always followed the norm but found alternatives on how to do things and achieve the same and even better outcomes. Women believe there are many alternatives in solving problems and arrive at solutions."

Solutioning for the problems to onboard agripreneurs

Access to finance

South Africa's Minister of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development Thokozi Didiza, MP outlined the South African government's new approach to the central problem of access to finance. This is a layered approach. Alongside traditional lending from the state Land Bank, and agricultural finance and insurance from commercial banks, a new blended finance instrument is to be launched in 2022. Through collaboration with commercial banks and development finance institutions (DFIs), commercial, concessionary and grant funding will be blended so that capital providers stay within the risk range they are equipped to handle, while farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs get access to low-cost funds. The effectiveness of blended finance instruments should be closely monitored to see whether this approach should be replicated more widely across the continent.

Participants observed time and again that seemingly simple things, like bookkeeping, really matter. These points underscored the need for women to access business and management training. De-risking a business opens access to finance. An agripreneur with a documented track record or strong balance sheet is far more likely to be able to raise commercial finance or qualify for grant funding or seed capital from government support schemes. They can also turn to angel networks and show they have a case to be backed.

Access to land

Communal land tenure systems that have a lot of complexities can deter investors in agriculture. Cultural traditions of fathers passing land onto sons and excluding women are widespread worldwide, including in Africa. The discussions offered up many African examples of women engaging in humble hustling and thereby overcoming these barriers and reshaping traditions. In South Africa's Eastern Cape province, commercialisation of farming on communal land has been proven to work, through strategies employed by women leaders. Working with women subsistence farmers and the wives of local leaders has proved successful as a strategy to persuade traditional authorities to allocate more land to women, and has shown that the subsequent boost to production has led to further investment in storage facilities.

Entry points to agriculture and agribusiness value chains

Agricultural value chains are long, stretching from primary production through processing and distribution. There are multiple entry points beyond primary production for women agripreneurs to consider, from participation in the processing of raw agricultural commodities and onward logistics through to trading and agribusiness services.

Access to markets

Advice for women farmers looking for market entry points from experienced entrepreneurs, is to be selective in their scale, choice of products and distribution channels and to begin by starting with their immediate community. Thorough market research is critical to identify the most suitable entry points. Integrated agricultural companies like Corteva Agriscience

provide the seed variety, inputs, and technology to maximise farming production and profitability, and connect producers to the agricultural value chain, but it is entrepreneurs themselves that make it work. Advice from those that have pioneered women's entry into agriculture is to draw support from all sources that are available.

Scaling up

Small-scale farmers were advised to scale up production to benefit from economies of scale on the price of imports and use of mechanisation if their objective is to operate in the formal agricultural sector. Many models for scaling up exist. Small-scale farmers can form associations, such as those showcased by Lydia Sasu in Ghana. Supplier development programmes run by major agricultural corporates provide training and crop advice to assist small producers. Co-operatives can be formed by groups who pool their assets, including intangible assets like farming knowledge and skills.

Access to exports

At the larger scale of international trade, the agricultural sector needs to act to make maximum use of the new opportunities that will flow from the adoption of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA). By engaging early on with the regulations and understanding the new trade rules, women farmers should be aware of how to take advantage of the AfCFTA. Participants showed that even small-scale producers could enter export markets, provided they kept to the key rules of consistent quality and documenting all inputs used for product traceability.

Taking South Africa as an example, some 40% of the \$10bn of annual agricultural exports go to African countries, mostly to Southern African Development Community (SADC) member states. Now is the time to explore opportunities across the continent. Strengthening trade links reduces costs and opens up volumes under which, all along the agricultural value chain can benefit. South African agricultural imports amount to \$6bn annually, much of it from the Middle East, so it is time to re-examine what African producers can supply.

Clear impediments to trade

While the 'big picture' potential of the AfCFTA is exciting, much more work still has to be done to clear the non-tariff barriers that keep the cost of inter-African trade high. Furthermore, despite the adoption of the AfCFTA, its full implementation requires regulations to be issued through national legislation. Where this has not been completed, or delayed, firms cannot take advantage of the AfCFTA to trade more easily. Stakeholders will have to work with their governments to get the necessary legislation enacted.

Build regional value chains

Seed production is an ideal example of the issues to be addressed in building regional value chains. Economic shocks from the Covid-19 pandemic, amongst other factors, have encouraged many governments to implement more processes in-country and to set up local content programmes. Integrated agricultural companies like Corteva Agriscience do not grow seeds in every country where they operate. Production centres operating at scale are set up to serve regional markets. Africa's Regional Economic Communities have harmonised systems for the movement of seeds between members. In countries where there is a strong commitment to partnerships and enabling the environment, companies are able to adopt a regional value chain approach to harness the comparative advantages in different countries, to locate facilities for research, testing and production. Encouraging countries to specialise in parts of the value chain where they are competitive, and trade regionally will more efficiently grow their economies.

Access to technology

Corteva Agriscience and similar companies devote their energies to devising solutions for farmers to provide the best seed, crop protection and technology to support profitable farming. The conversation revolved around removing barriers to put technology into the hands of agripreneurs at a local level. It was evident that technology adoption works through many channels, including leadership development, such as the Gibs Women Agripreneurs Programme, product demonstrations,

technical training, agronomists visiting farmers and sales through distribution companies. In Kenya, demonstration farm plots in seven counties are being used to transfer technology skills to 5000 small-scale woman farmers.

A shift to increased use of digital tools has transformed the way small-scale farmers can access real-time information on commodity prices and stock levels, previously out of their reach. Weather forecasts are vitally important to plan 1–3 days ahead of operations. Vanessa Adams at Agra shared their experience of working with more than 5,000 village-based advisors in East Africa who are using smartphones to disseminate information on improved inputs, market prices and weather forecasts to their smallholder farmer networks.

Speaking to the youth and aspirant agripreneurs was frequently mentioned and that going into the fields in your gumboots was not the only way to enter the agricultural value chain. At every stage, the level of technology is increasing, which is opening new opportunities for tech entrepreneurs. It is precisely at the local level where people experience a problem that energetic youth are best placed to devise a solution.

In South Africa, progress had been made in recent years to use smartphones to put information into the hands of small-scale farmers but it was agreed that the country was not at the level that it should be.

Profitable farming is sustainable farming

Emma Naluyima, a Ugandan veterinarian who operates an intensive urban farm on only one acre explained that she answers people who are bemused by her choice to farm by talking about the income she generates. “I say, ‘let’s talk about the money’ because at the end of the day that is what people are interested in. Suddenly the youth who have a negative perception of farming wake up and say, ‘now I get it’ and become very interested in getting into farming.”

Participants were told that going into farming will not make you a millionaire overnight. First-time farmers are, in fact, more likely to lose money while they are learning what works but they were encouraged to persevere because rewards come in time.

Farming is not easy, and farmers need the best tools at their disposal to farm profitably and stay sustainable; a truism that the conversation circled back to again and again.

Playing a role in the transformation of Africa’s food systems

The scale of problems to be addressed was raised up a level during the last roundtable (A Food Systems Approach) to reveal the food systems approach, which encompasses the entire range of actors and their interlinked value-adding activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food products and the broader economic, societal and natural environments in which they are embedded. Striving for a global food system that delivers food security and nutrition for all sustainably requires solutions to the triple challenge of profitability, delivering broad-based societal benefits and a positive or neutral impact on the natural environment.

Moving forward from the current state of food in Africa to healthier, more equitable and sustainable food systems turned the focus of the conversation towards how to achieve the changes required.

A quick inventory of food system challenges raised in the discussion flagged the following issues:

- Supply chain disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the lack of real-time data on food stocks necessary for governments to plan responses to shocks
- A burgeoning African health crisis of lifestyle diseases, such as diabetes, driven by the switch from traditional diets to increased consumption of refined foods
- Production systems that degrade soil health and the environment for future generations
- Production of commodities for which, there is expanding market demand on soils that they are not suited for
- High incidence of stunted growth amongst African children due to poor nutrition, particularly in early childhood and

the challenge of increasing the share of fresh produce in diets to raise their nutritional quality

- High levels of food waste, much of which, occurs in the field, owing to the lack of infrastructure for storage and inadequate food processing facilities to preserve it.

Taking into account that Africa's population is forecast to rise from its current 1.35bn to nearly 2.5bn by 2050, solving the triple challenge on the continent requires colossal effort from all stakeholders.

Taking a food systems approach requires complex, urgent and collaborative actions that are simultaneously highly ambitious and difficult, because stakeholders have different interests and are in conflict over how change threatens their entrenched positions. Several participants in the Gibs–Corteva roundtable discussions observed that collaboration is not only about agreeing on issues. Pragmatically, it is also about working on mutually beneficial opportunities, despite holding interests that conflict. Progress requires:

1. Accepting that some actions have to be done in unison
2. Recognising that there is no blueprint to follow because these are new conditions for humankind, meaning that solutions have to be worked out on the fly through experimentation (including the owning of mistakes)
3. Stakeholders have to act quickly in a structured way. Action on a systems approach can be seen in the climate change field as the world grapples with implementing a just transition away from fossil fuels.

Problems create opportunities for developing solutions. A call was made for seed specialists, like Corteva Agriscience, to develop a broader range of improved seed types suited to African conditions to complement the success achieved so far with improved grain varieties. Urbanisation across the continent will expand the market for food products that do not require the same amount of energy needed to cook traditional staples. There is a dearth of affordable, nutritious food products that meet this need. Such trends create opportunities for entrepreneurs to develop new food products.

"Soil health is a huge issue," said Eric Dereudre, Corteva Agriscience's head of Global Government Affairs and Business Advocacy, when describing the company's work on developing technologies to improve soil health through solutions for nitrogen management and tools for crop rotation. The company is working to bring the importance of soil health to the attention of policymakers as policy changes can accelerate soil regeneration, climate adaptation and the acceptance of modern breeding tools and technologies. Deruedre noted that "It is very important for Corteva to have these conversations to direct our research and development as well as our operations to the expected evolution the world is wanting to see from us." He observed that farmers can simultaneously contribute to climate change through greenhouse gas emissions, they can be victims of climate change from extreme weather events, and they can also be part of the solution to climate change by sequestering carbon.

"Mindsets are, however, changing rapidly," stated Vanessa Adams, VP of Strategic Partnerships at Agra. In the global food systems dialogue, conversations are becoming more strategic as governments and corporates move ahead with SDG 2 of Zero Hunger partnerships. Attention, for example, is being given to utilising indigenous grains more as they are more nutritious and have higher protein for school-feeding programmes.

Participants agreed that transforming Africa's food systems is a shared responsibility; that the continent's youth had to be centrally involved in developing new solutions, which will require a diversity of approaches to suit conditions on the ground. On these points, the conversation echoed the theme of 'humble hustling' running through the previous roundtable discussions. Such 'humble hustling' is the ideal approach for Africa's youth because it allows them to demonstrate their resilience, adaptability, and creativity.

Recommendations

Building upon the thought leadership arising from the roundtable discussions and energised by the passion for farming shown by all participants, it is clear that that all stakeholders are eager to collaborate on practical ways to advance the position of women in agriculture across the continent. It is recommended, therefore, that collaborative efforts be focused on four themes, as follows:

1. To continue the Corteva Agriscience-GIBS women in farming leadership programme in order to mobilise ideas and deepen the pool of women agripreneurs in Southern Africa.
2. To promote the concept that collaboration can occur between parties who have conflicting interests. Collaborators can, instead, identify pragmatic, mutually beneficial opportunities within the context of addressing Africa's food system challenges.
3. To educate policymakers to recognise the barriers currently denying many women farmers access to mainstream debate, and to lobby for their lived experience to be at the heart of policy formulation.
4. To further explore African agricultural livelihood strategies within the concept of 'hustling,' so as to understand how youth and women farmers create opportunities and build resilience.

Conclusion

There are only nine harvests left to reap to meet the 2030 SDGs. If Africa is to fulfil the 2030 SDG agenda and our unsustainable food systems are to be set on a new path, empowerment of women agripreneurs must be placed at the centre of policy, implementation and achieved outcomes. This target is ambitious but obtainable. While many of the obstructive issues are complex and have become entrenched across the ages, the Corteva–Gibs roundtable discussions have offered encouraging evidence of new partnerships between stakeholders, leading to growing diversity in the agricultural sector. Humble hustling is on the rise, and this is breaking down traditional age and gender barriers. Successful agripreneurs are willing to mentor and network with emerging entrants and governments are beginning to change their policy formulation methodologies to incorporate the lived experience of previously under-represented sectors of society. Only those who sow the seeds of change can hope to grow and reap a harvest. This series has placed such seeds in fertile soil. Continuing conversations are required to nurture future abundance.

First harvest from the Gibs EDA 2021 Corteva Agriscience Women Agripreneur Programme

Thirty-three women agripreneurs graduated out of a class of 36 selected from among 500 applicants to attend the inaugural Corteva Agriscience Women Agripreneur Programme for South Africa in 2021, an exceptionally high 92% success rate. The global agriscience company has committed, in its 2030 sustainability goals, to engaging with and supporting women and smallholder farmers to increase their productivity, incomes and sustainable farming practices, as well as to empower women in their communities wherever it operates. Turning commitments into results requires working with governments, universities, NGOs and research institutes to form solid partnerships that deliver results. The Gibs Entrepreneurship Development Academy was selected as Corteva Agriscience's South African partner to impart package of business, managerial, entrepreneurial, self and leadership development skills.

All the students accepted into the programme were already running a business involved in some aspect of agriculture thus, experiencing the physical reality of farming work such as rising early. They proved to be very engaged students.

At the beginning of the programme, students went through a personal leadership module that helps to build resilience. It has been shown in developing entrepreneurs that setting personal goals at the start of a venture helps with follow-through, and results in much higher rates of success. Resilience is very important so high priority was given to personal leadership skills that graduates could apply directly to their lives and businesses. Combined business coaching with leadership skills helps entrepreneurs think about the gaps in the businesses and the steps they can take to close those gaps. On this programme, the students spoke about how it boosted their own confidence. "Running any kind of business is scary, especially a small business because so much relies on you as the entrepreneur. The skills we developed are academically sound along with being practically useful," said Deirdre Steeneveldt, head of the Entrepreneurship Development Academy.

Students reported that the most exciting part of the course for them was the new ideas they were exposed to in the Farming for the Future module. Key lessons for the EDA from running the programme is the need to increase the practical sessions, exposing students to new ideas.

The 2021 Corteva Agriscience Women Agripreneur Programme piloted by Gibs proved to be very successful and laid a firm foundation for replicating the programme in future.

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