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**RESOURCE MOBILISATION AND
FUNDING FOR WOMEN OWNED
AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES AND
PROGRAMMES**

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**Harnessing Parliamentary Diplomacy for the Realization of Global Solidarity,
Equality, and Sustainability**

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|----------------|---|
| AfCFTA | Africa Continental Free Trade Area |
| AU | African Union |
| AUC | African Union Commission |
| AUDA | African Union Development Agency |
| CAADP | Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme |
| COPAC | Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives |
| FAO | Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations |
| ICA | International Cooperative Alliance |
| ICBT | Informal Cross-Border Trade |
| ICT | Information and Communication Technology |
| ILO | International Labour Organisation |
| IFAD | International Fund for Agricultural Development |
| LDCs | Least Developed Countries |
| MFIs | Microfinance Institutions |
| NEPAD | New Partnership for Africa's Development |
| PAFO | Pan African Farmers Organisation |
| SDGs | Sustainable Development Goals |
| SMEs | Small and Medium Enterprises |
| UN | United Nations |
| UN DESA | United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs |

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ABSTRACT

Persistent inequalities between women and men in Africa and parts of Asia are evident, particularly in access to resources. Women dominate informal and precarious agricultural work. Agricultural cooperatives, crucial for enhancing productive capacity and market access, are underutilised by women. Globally, fewer than half of women have secure land rights, hindering their growth. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development addresses these inequalities, emphasising women's land rights under SDG Target 5.7. Promoting women's economic participation involves state support for cooperative formation, increased funding, and innovative public-private partnerships. Policies must mandate specific support for women farmers and cooperatives. Women require climate-smart agricultural knowledge and technologies to cope with climate impacts. Leadership skills and mentorship bolster their roles in agriculture. Global actions for empowerment mainly focus on partnerships and funding. Parliamentarians are urged to advocate for gender-sensitive policies and support women-led initiatives. Refining policy frameworks is crucial to adapt to global changes and ensure equality.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- Women are often concentrated in subsistence agriculture and unpaid labour, missing out on lucrative opportunities.
 - Women produce up to 80% of Africa's food but benefit from only 7% of agricultural extension services.
 - At a global level, only one of the eighteen indicators for achieving gender equality under SDG5 is close to reaching its target.
 - The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) presents significant opportunities for trade and industrial transformation across the continent.
 - Agricultural cooperatives can enhance productivity and market access for women in agriculture.
 - The global community should collaborate to strengthen support systems, mobilise targeted funding, and enhance accountability mechanisms to empower women in agribusiness.
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1. BACKGROUND

Across Africa and parts of Asia, profound inequalities persist between women and men regarding access to and control over social, political, and economic resources and opportunities. Women are, more frequently than men, found engaged in informal and precarious employment, with particularly pronounced imbalances in certain sectors. In the agricultural domain, women are estimated to be responsible for producing up to 80 percent of Africa’s food supply. Yet, despite their pivotal role, they benefit from a mere 7 percent of agricultural extension services. Furthermore, they secure less than 10 percent of smallholder credit and own just 1 percent of the land, underscoring a significant gender disparity in access to agricultural resources and support.¹ In this context, women are often relegated to subsistence agriculture and unpaid labour, and are systematically excluded from more lucrative agricultural ventures, such as cash crop production.

Agricultural cooperatives possess the potential to augment productive capacity and enhance market access, particularly for women-owned smallholders. However, it is crucial to recognise that when these smallholders operate independently outside the cooperative framework, they are unable to capitalise on these opportunities due to factors such as limited purchasing power or cultural impediments. The representation of women in agricultural cooperatives across Africa is constrained by various factors, including land ownership patterns and the division of labour and types of employment within the agricultural sector. Consequently, they increasingly choose to organise cooperatively in agriculture.

Substantial evidence indicates that cooperative membership significantly improves productivity, income, and the overall quality of life for both members and the broader community. A case study assessing the impact of cooperatives in Zanzibar reveals that, on average, cooperative members can generate incomes that are 28 percent higher annually compared to their non-cooperative counterparts.²

While women produce up to 80 percent of the African continent’s food, their ownership extends to only 1 percent of its land.

The reasons underlying persistent gender inequality are multifaceted and intricate, encompassing fundamental structural and socio-cultural challenges. These include disparities in access to resources, education and training, as well as the unequal distribution of labour between men and women, compounded by stereotypical perceptions of their respective roles—many of which are beyond the influence of the cooperative movement and similarly impact women’s labour in other sectors.

Women’s cooperatives and enterprises frequently function on a small scale due to social barriers and restricted access. Globally, smallholder farmers contribute approximately one-third of the world’s food supply, making a significant impact on agrifood systems and economies worldwide. However, their labour productivity continues to trail that of larger-scale producers, with more pronounced discrepancies observed in higher-income nations. In 90 percent of reporting countries,

¹ ILO (n.d)

² Research gate (2024)

small-scale food producers report an average annual income that is less than half that of large-scale food producers.

Access to land, including secure tenure rights, remains one of the critical barriers to the growth and sustainability of women farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs. Globally, when evaluating progress concerning the SDG-5 indicator on gender inequality in land ownership, fewer than 50 percent of women possess ownership or secure rights to agricultural land. In nearly half of countries assessed, men are twice as likely to own land as women. Further, 58 percent lack adequate legal safeguards for women's rights to land across family, inheritance, and land laws.³

Despite the pivotal role of women in the agricultural sector, the African continent's initiatives aimed at promoting women's empowerment by ensuring equitable economic opportunities for both men and women, including ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, have been inadequate. While the proportion of women with ownership or secure rights to agricultural land increased marginally from 16 percent in 2013 to 23 percent by 2021, it fell short of the 2021 target of 39 percent.

⁴

Internationally, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was unanimously endorsed by all United Nations Member States in 2015, primarily to confront issues of discrimination against women and eradicate poverty and inequalities across diverse sectors of society. This comprehensive framework delineates a collective strategy to foster peace and prosperity for both humanity and the environment, encompassing both present and future generations. The essence of the initiative consists of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which underscore the urgent need for collective action by nations worldwide.

SDG Target 5.7 emphasises the importance of securing women's land rights in achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls. A guaranteed and protected right to land for women enhances their economic independence, access to resources and decision-making power. It improves their well-being as well as that of their families and communities. This briefing paper aims to assess international and regional efforts, as reflected in declarations and treaties, in terms of progress made in addressing inequalities and obstacles faced by women-owned agricultural cooperatives in realising their full potential and contributing to socioeconomic development.

2. INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The raft of declarations to which South Africa is party include the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the 1995 Beijing Declaration and the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs became a universal call to action to end poverty, advance food security, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

2.1 International Frameworks and Agreements

- **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was agreed by 189 governments in 1995 in Beijing, China, during the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women. Although not a legally binding document, it remains the most comprehensive, internationally agreed and visionary plan to achieve equality for all women and girls.⁵

Slow progress towards the eighteen targets under SDG5 calls for urgent, coordinated action.

The Beijing Platform for Action focuses on 12 areas of action that encompass the economy and jobs, political participation, peace, the environment, ending violence against women, and other key areas.⁶ While all the priority areas of action are relevant and critical for the well-being of women and girls, the Beijing Platform holds significance for job creation, economic growth, and environmental sustainability, as the agricultural sector largely depends on these factors.

Three decades post the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted, some progress has been made in empowering women and addressing gender disparities, with many countries enacting legislation that seeks to prohibit gender discrimination.⁷

However, in the agricultural sector, remuneration inequalities between men and women still exist. On average, female employees earn 18 percent less than their male counterparts (i.e., for every \$1 earned by a man, a woman would earn 82 cents).⁸

- **Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development Goals**

Agenda 2030 for the SDGs is a global framework adopted by all 193 UN Member States in 2015. All 17 SDGs are an urgent universal call for action, in a global partnership, to end poverty and hunger, realise the human rights of all, achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources as well as ensuring that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. There are 17 SDGs with 169 associated targets that have been agreed to by all 191 Member States of the UN to try to achieve by 2030.

SDG 5 is the primary goal focused on gender equality. It is interlinked with various other SDGs, and for women in agriculture, these include SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 13 (Climate Action and its Impact). The UN Progress Report on SDGs has noted that the world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030.⁹

⁵ UN Women (2025)

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ FAO (2023a)

⁹ UN DESA (2025)

At the global level, progress toward gender equality remains alarmingly slow. None of the eighteen indicators under SDG5 have been fully achieved, and only one is close to reaching its target. This stark reality calls for urgent, coordinated action. Securing women's land rights is a critical lever for advancing gender equality and empowering women and girls. When women have legal and practical access to land, it transforms their lives and communities by:

- Enhancing economic independence and resilience.
- Expanding access to resources and decision-making power.
- Elevating social status and agency within households and society.
- Improving overall well-being for women, their families, and communities.

Land ownership is more than a mere matter of property; it is a foundation for dignity, social equity, and sustainable development.

2.2 Regional Frameworks and Agreements

- **Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA)**

The Declaration was signed by African Heads of State and governments of Member States of the African Union (AU) during the Third Ordinary Session of the AU held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in July 2004. It guides the AU's efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, building on various regional, continental and international instruments on gender equality and women's rights. Under the Solemn Declaration, AU Member States reaffirm commitment to gender equality. They agreed to actively promote the implementation of legislation to guarantee women's rights to land, property and inheritance, including the right to housing.¹⁰

- **Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP)**

The Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) was launched by the AU's New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in 2002 with the recognition that improvement in agriculture is a prerequisite for economic development on the continent. CAADP also seeks to address inequities in access to land, its resources and insecurity of tenure. It is a Pan-African Framework for accelerating long-term agricultural development and growth among African countries, focusing on improving food security, nutrition, and increasing incomes in Africa's mainly agricultural-based economies. Its overall goal is to eliminate hunger and reduce poverty in Africa through agriculture. CAADP is continental in scope, although it is realised through national efforts to promote growth in the agricultural sector and economic development.

- **Maputo Declaration on Agriculture and Food Security**

To realise the objectives of CAADP, in 2003, AU Member States signed the Maputo Declaration on Agriculture and Food Security. The Declaration commits African governments to increase public

¹⁰ AU (2004)

investment in the agricultural sector to a minimum of 10 percent of their national budgets, and to increase agricultural productivity by at least 6 percent by 2008.¹¹

- **Malabo Declaration on Accelerated Agricultural Growth and Transformation for Shared Prosperity and Improved Livelihoods**

AU Member States adopted the Malabo Declaration at the 23rd AU Summit in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, in June 2014. The Declaration, which is also closely linked to CAADP, reaffirms the 10 percent allocation of national budgets to agriculture. Member States committed to doubling agricultural productivity, ending hunger by 2025 through CAADP, and halving post-harvest losses and poverty.¹² It also emphasises addressing livelihood vulnerabilities by building resilient systems, particularly to climate and other weather-related risks. The Fourth Biennial CAADP Review Report (2015-2023) revealed a decline in the continent's performance regarding commitment to the ideals and principles of CAADP and adherence to relevant CAADP processes.¹³ It measures the level of completion by each country in the CAADP process and requires Member States to achieve 100 percent by 2018 (equivalent to a score of 10). Out of 49 Member States that reported on the indicator, only one country, Niger, was on track to maintain achievement on this Malabo Commitment.

In the 2021 Review, three countries were on track,¹⁴ namely Botswana, Seychelles and Zimbabwe. However, during this reporting period, it is highlighted that 9 Member States (Rwanda, Morocco, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Benin, Nigeria, Tunisia, Ethiopia, and Tanzania) were close to being on track, having scored over 9 out of 10. It is, however, unfortunate to note that none of the Member States reported on the thematic area of enhancing investment finance in agriculture, despite it being a key driver of agricultural transformation, which was initially reported as on track. This notion points to a regression compared to the previous (third) Biennial Review.¹⁵

In the previous Review, four countries were on track for this commitment. For the first indicator of the thematic area, on government agriculture expenditure as a share of total public spending, with a target of 10 percent each year, only 3 Member States achieved the target in this Fourth Biennial Review cycle (Burundi, Ethiopia, and Mauritania). In the previous review, four countries met the target, which included Burundi and Ethiopia.¹⁶

¹¹ AU (2003)

¹² AUC and NEPAD agency (2014)

¹³ AUDA – NEPAD (2024)

¹⁴ AU (2023)

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

- **Kampala Declaration on CAADP**

During the AU’s Extraordinary Summit on Post-Malabo CAADP, held in Kampala, Uganda, in January 2025, Member States adopted the Kampala CAADP Declaration on Building Resilient and Sustainable Agrifood Systems in Africa, along with the 10-year CAADP Strategy and Action Plan, which will be implemented from 2026 to 2035.

The CAADP Strategy and Action Plan, which comes into effect on January 1, 2026, seeks to transform Africa’s agri-food systems, improve food security, nutrition and livelihoods, while promoting sustainable agricultural practices and intra-African trade.

The Kampala Declaration is an action-oriented framework aligned with the SDGs and Agenda 2063. It differs from the Malabo and other declarations in that it boldly outlines, through the 10-year Strategy, specific actions along with targets.

The Kampala Declaration not only recognises gender dynamics in agriculture and the need to remove barriers for women, youth and people with disabilities, but also sets out specific targets to advance inclusivity and equity. It highlights the importance of partnerships in implementing the 10-year Strategy. Specifically, it calls for action from governments, regional bodies, agricultural producers, civil society, the private sector, parliamentarians, and development partners.

Parliamentarians are expected to utilise their legislative and oversight powers to support the development of policies and investment plans, and through budget allocations, ensure that 10 percent of public expenditure is invested in agriculture, while monitoring its utilisation.

The Kampala Declaration sets out definitive targets to advance inclusivity and equity in the agricultural sector.

3. PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

3.1 Training and capacity-building for female farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs.

It is estimated that globally, approximately 36 percent of women in the workforce are active in agrifood systems.¹⁷ However, the participation modalities in agrifood systems between men and women, including the returns for participation, are often unequal.¹⁸ Despite the pivotal role and invaluable contribution to agriculture, as food producers, employees, employers and entrepreneurs, women’s work in agriculture is often undervalued and not fully recognised. Women farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs often face limited access to essential resources, including land, credit, markets, production resources, training, and social networks.

¹⁷ FAO (2023a)
¹⁸ Ibid

3.2 Access to agricultural finance

Agriculture remains the predominant activity in African economies, although less than 4 percent of total commercial bank lending is allocated to the agricultural sector.¹⁹ Financial institutions often cite the following reasons for limited loans to smallholder farmers: lack of usable collateral, high transaction costs due to remoteness of clients, dispersed demand for financial services, the lag between investment needs and expected revenues, lack of irrigation, the prevalence of pests and diseases, modest size of farms and of individual transactions, underdeveloped communication and transportation infrastructure, and high covariate risks due to variable rainfall and price risks. Additional challenges include poorly developed agri-food value chains, which significantly increase risks and exposure for banks, as well as a general lack of understanding among financial institutions of the agricultural sector and its opportunities. In principle, the demand for financial services by smallholder farmers and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) can be met by microfinance institutions (MFIs).

To address the perception of high risk and lack of collateral that limits commercial banks' lending to farmers, development practitioners have rolled out innovative financing approaches, including credit guarantee schemes.²⁰ Credit guarantees have been used to cover part of the default risk, ensuring the secure repayment of all or part of the loan in the event of default. Besides covering default risk, credit guarantees help address the issue of a lack of collateral and poor credit history faced by farmers, thereby improving the terms of their loans. Additionally, allowing loans to borrowers, who would otherwise have been excluded from the lending market, enables farmers and SMEs to establish a future repayment reputation. As such, they also benefit from lower transaction costs, which helps raise productivity.

Improved access to credit, as outlined above, is directly related to access to land, which commercial lending institutions use as collateral. Achieving equitable land access is integral to the protection and enforcement of land rights for socially vulnerable groups. Without a legally protected right to land, vulnerable low-income households are unable to defend their land claims and positively engage in disputes over land tenure. Failure to administer rights granted to secure land access has been a primary factor in the rising land insecurity of the rural poor.²¹ Greater tenure security is expected to enhance income growth and asset status for individuals with low incomes, ensuring livelihood resilience while improving their ability to access credit and compete in domestic and global markets.

These institutions have emerged to provide credit facilities and deposits but have not succeeded in expanding financing for agriculture. This is attributed to several factors including limited capital bases, high interest rates, small disbursement sizes that are insufficient for investment, and their location in urban centres when the bulk of farmers reside in rural areas. Moreover, the repayment

¹⁹ Langyintuo (2020)

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ FAO (2010)

schedules for microfinance loans often do not synchronise with the seasonality of agriculture and the timing of farmers' cash flows.

3.3 Market access challenges and opportunities

Discriminatory social norms and barriers often confine women farmers to the smallholder category, excluding them from high-value, export-oriented value chains or entrepreneurship in agrifood systems.²² These gender disparities not only undermine the well-being of women and their families, but also constrain the overall productivity and efficiency of the agricultural sector, since women constitute approximately 43 percent of the agricultural workforce.²³ The FAO estimates that closing the gender gap in farm productivity and the wage gap in agriculture would increase global gross domestic product (GDP) by 1 per cent, which is nearly \$1 trillion in value.²⁴ It asserts that this would reduce global food insecurity by about 2 percent, thereby reducing the number of people who are food insecure by 45 million.

Providing women with equal access to resources, services, technologies and training can help close the gender gap in productivity, enabling them to achieve financial stability, food security and grow their agribusinesses. It is, therefore, imperative that structural inequalities and gender discrimination be addressed. A global concerted effort is required to ensure the economic inclusion and empowerment of women in agriculture through targeted capacity building and training programmes for women-owned agricultural enterprises.

Intervention measures for women farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs should be tailored to suit both their context and operational scales, addressing educational barriers and disparities within, and between, countries and regions.

As the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) unfolds, it presents significant opportunities for trade and industrial transformation across the continent. Within this framework, the large population of women entrepreneurs, exporters, farmers and workers hold the key to achieving equitable economic development and gender equality. The AfCFTA, a flagship initiative of Agenda 2063, aims not only to boost intra-African trade and promote socio-economic development but also to deepen economic integration inclusively and sustainably, ultimately contributing to gender equity. However, the benefits of this landmark agreement may not be equally accessible to men and women, necessitating proactive efforts to ensure that no woman is left behind.

Within the AfCFTA framework, women entrepreneurs, farmers and workers are key to achieving equitable economic development.

²² Ibid

²³ IFAD (2022)

²⁴ FAO (2023b)

3.4 The role of women: entrepreneurs, workers and consumers

African women play a vital role in the continent's economy. They are the driving force behind 70 per cent of Informal Cross-Border Trade (ICBT) and 40 percent of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).²⁵ In countries such as South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, and Ethiopia, women entrepreneurs are crucial contributors to economic growth. It is therefore essential for the AfCFTA Secretariat and State Parties to find practical ways to support women's participation in trade and investment. Despite their contributions, a stark reality remains: a 2023 report by UN Women found that women in Eastern and Southern Africa earn only \$0.81 per hour for every \$1 earned by men. This disparity is most profound for women with limited education, living in rural areas and working in the informal sector. Trade can impact women differently depending on their role in the economy, and changes in trade can have significant effects, especially on women responsible for household food purchases. The AfCFTA must address this wage gap to ensure that every woman can reap benefits from the economic integration.

The recent conclusion of negotiations on the Women and Youth Protocol of the AfCFTA is a significant step towards enhancing the participation of women within the AfCFTA, specifically designed to address the unique challenges and barriers faced by women in trade across the continent. The Protocol will be central to progress on the continent, as it was drafted to create an enabling environment that facilitates access to broader markets, improves competitiveness, and supports participation in regional value chains. It has the potential to promote women's empowerment as entrepreneurs, exporters, consumers and workers. The protocol also has the potential to promote women's entrepreneurship, labour rights, equal pay, and correct gender-based income distribution, as women's wages are expected to rise by 10.5 percent due to its implementation. However, its implementation must be tailored to address the unique challenges faced by diverse groups of women in different contexts and regions.

3.5 Capacity Development and Training

- **Business management skills**

Most women in agriculture have mastered the production side of farming but often lack the business acumen to ensure that their initiatives grow into sustainable profit-making businesses. This is illustrated by a FAO assessment of progress on agriculture-related to SDG indicators, which showed that the labour productivity of production units among small-scale farmers did not differ between men and women-headed production units.²⁶ Production units headed by women achieved 90 percent or more of the labour productivity of those headed by men in almost half of the reported countries.²⁷ Developing their business management skills is essential to guide women farmers and entrepreneurs, who often operate at a small scale. Areas to be covered include the development of business plans, marketing strategies, record keeping, legal requirements (business registration, tax

²⁵ Zarrilli and Linoci (2020)

²⁶ FAO (2023b)

²⁷ FAO (2023a)

obligations), certification where relevant, communication skills, group dynamics (for cooperatives) and other essential business management skills.

- **Financial Literacy**

Financial literacy is a crucial aspect of any business venture. Women farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs should be capacitated in budgeting, saving, and investing, as well as accessing loans, business insurance, and managing debt and finances in general, to improve their business operations and financial stability.

Addressing climate risks and enhancing resilience are central to the African Development Bank's 10-year strategy.

According to the World Bank Group, female farmers and entrepreneurs should also be equipped to safeguard their business finances and investments by adopting and utilising technology, such as digital banking.²⁸

3.6 Technological Integration

The digital age necessitates women farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs' acquaintance with the benefits of digital tools and technologies. Technology may assist with strengthening farming practices and agri-businesses, enhanced access to market information, as well as product marketing. It may also offer financial management support and improved communication, including early warning systems for climate-related disasters. While access to information and communication technology (ICT) expands globally, the digital divide remains wide, especially in lower-income countries. The gender gap in women's access to mobile internet services in low and middle-income countries narrowed from 25 percent to 16 percent between 2017 and 2021. The declining disparity is commendable, since mobile phones can be a powerful tool for women farmers and entrepreneurs.²⁹

The latest Progress Report on the implementation of SDG 5 illustrates that the gap in mobile phone ownership between men and women has narrowed globally from 9.4 percent in 2021, to 7 percent by 2024.³⁰ In contrast to global statistics, mobile phone ownership between men and women remain highly unequal in Sub-Saharan Africa, Central and Southern Asia, least developed (LDCs) and landlocked countries. Despite the gender disparities in mobile phone ownership in Sub-Saharan Africa, the share of mobile phone usage on the continent increased significantly from 39.8 percent in 2013, to 68.8 percent by 2021.³¹

Despite its potential benefits for agricultural businesses, the widespread use and ownership of mobile phones in some low-income and middle-income countries remain constrained by inadequate infrastructure and high data costs.

²⁸ World Bank Group (2021)

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ UN DESA (2025)

³¹ AUC and AUDA – NEPAD (2022)

3.7 Sustainable Farming Practices

The impact of climate change and associated disasters tend to have the most severe consequences for households afflicted by poverty, as well as socially vulnerable and agricultural-based populations. In the agrifood sector, women tend to be disproportionately impacted by climate disasters and other crises. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, globally, approximately 22 percent of women working in off-farm roles within the agrifood system lost their jobs, compared to 2 percent of men.³² These crises undermine development progress, constrain economic growth, and threaten food production and security. Women farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs should be equipped with knowledge on climate-smart agriculture (e.g., agroecology, conservation agriculture), as well as access to appropriate technologies that improve output, including irrigation technology, value addition (agro-processing), pest control and other techniques to enhance productivity and resilience. For Africa, interventions aimed at addressing climate risks and enhancing resilience are also outlined in the Kampala Declaration on CAADP and are central in the African Development Bank Group's 10-year Strategy (2024-2033).

3.8 Leadership Development and Mentorship Programmes

Women in agriculture should be empowered with leadership and governance skills so that they can take charge of their businesses and assume decision-making roles within agricultural cooperatives, other organisations, and their communities. The agricultural sector is complex and precarious, and can be daunting, particularly for inexperienced women farmers and entrepreneurs. Mentors play a vital role in guiding, offering support, and transferring knowledge to new entrants in the sector to build their confidence, as well as enhancing the skills of small-scale female farmers and entrepreneurs. They can also bridge the gap between conventional extension services support and practical farming business skills, particularly where extension capacity is limited.

Mentors also provide networking opportunities by connecting mentees with industry contacts, suppliers and buyers. Mentorship programmes should be formalised, regulated and accompanied by monitoring and evaluation, particularly where public funds are utilised, to ensure that women entrepreneurs derive benefits from the programme. Kenya is a good example with a formal academic programme specialising in cooperative development, including the training of mentors to cooperatives. Additional examples include the FAO-Pan African Farmers Organisation (PAFO) Youth Mentorship Programme, which empowers African youth in agriculture, and the Grain SA Farmer Development Programme, a private sector-led mentorship programme focusing on maize production in South Africa.

4. KEY ACTIONS FROM THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY

While individual countries have implemented interventions, some have enacted legislation to address gender equality and empower women in the agricultural sector. However, inequality and disparities persist within and between countries and regions. Inequalities remain with respect to

³² Ibid

access to technical and financial capacity, resource constraints, and vulnerabilities due to geographical location. For women farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs in least developed, low-income, and some middle-income countries, these challenges are compounded by existing gender disparities. The global community should:

- Facilitate public-private partnerships to leverage existing systems and instruments to support and capacitate women-owned agribusinesses.
- Assist in advocating for and mobilising additional funding to empower resource-constrained women in agribusiness, particularly from low-income and other developing countries.
- Work in partnerships to strengthen monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of international and regional frameworks to empower women in agriculture, including disbursement and utilisation of funds.

5. THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

Members of Parliament should, in their capacity, facilitate the empowerment of women farmers and women in agribusiness in their constituencies through networking opportunities, workshops, and connecting women entrepreneurs with relevant government agencies and other sector stakeholders.

Parliamentarians should utilise their positions and platforms to advocate for sector-specific, gender-sensitive policies that support the rights of women in agriculture and ensure equitable access to resources. They may conduct individual oversight visits to women-owned cooperatives and agribusinesses to gain firsthand experience and monitor policy implementation and budget utilisation at the constituency level.

**Members of Parliament
can advocate for sector-
specific, gender
sensitive policies that
support women in
agriculture.**

Further, Parliamentarians should engage with civil society groups involved in agricultural cooperatives and other agribusinesses, particularly those owned and/or led by women, to stay informed about developments in the sector.

6. THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTS

- To ensure domestication of the SDGs and other regional and country frameworks relevant to the empowerment of women in agriculture, review existing legislation to ensure that it reflects human rights principles and contributes to gender equality in the agricultural sector.
- Recognise the role of women in agriculture and ensure that they are adequately represented in agricultural dialogues, legislation and policy-making activities.
- Use their oversight powers in respect of country budgets to ensure that national and sectoral budgets are gender-sensitive and aligned to the agricultural development agenda. For example, African Parliaments are encouraged by the Kampala Declaration to utilise their legislative and oversight powers to support the development of policies and investment

plans, and through budget allocations, ensure that 10 percent of public expenditure is invested in agriculture, while monitoring its utilisation.

- Leverage regional and sector Parliaments to mobilise external resources to advance the empowerment of female farmers and entrepreneurs from least developed and low-income countries; and
- Ensure and strengthen civil society participation policy processes in their respective Parliaments and regions by enabling a wide range of stakeholders to comment and contribute to the debates regarding gender equality in agriculture.

7. CONCLUSION

Generally, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of cooperatives, accompanied by a trend towards developing supportive legislative and policy frameworks worldwide. It is fitting that the UN General Assembly proclaimed 2025 as the International Year of Cooperatives, underscoring the vital role cooperatives play in sustainable development. The theme adopted is “Cooperatives Build a Better World”, which underscores the enduring global impact of cooperatives, positioning them as essential solutions to today’s global challenges.

It also highlights the contributions of cooperatives to sustainable development across social, economic, and environmental dimensions, showing how cooperatives are key drivers in achieving the SDGs by 2030. The theme also emphasises the unique ability of cooperatives to foster inclusive growth and strengthen community resilience.³³

While it is recognised that women-led agricultural cooperatives provide economic and sociocultural benefits, they need additional assistance to overcome systemic and policy challenges. It is essential that those responsible for developing and implementing laws and policies be aware of gender issues and the shortcomings of existing systems. Considering the systemic and gender-specific constraints women face in agriculture; it is essential to take more action to improve gender equality in this sector across all regions. This can be expressed through national development plans, strategies and policies that are inclusive, gender-responsive and targeted at different categories of women involved throughout the agrifood value chain. Legislation and public policies must enable women's equitable and effective access to land, finance, markets, capacity building, as well as social and political empowerment. Some of the legislative and policy changes that can be introduced could be in the following thematic areas:

- Mainstreaming cooperatives as a vehicle to drive sustainable development, embodying principles of inclusivity, equity, and people-centred growth. It is through the prioritisation of the needs of the cooperatives’ members and communities that cooperatives contribute directly to the achievement of the SDGs.
- Promoting agricultural cooperatives as an instrument for achieving the goal of food security by increasing the productivity of women-led cooperatives in the sector, specifically by

³³ COPAC (2025)

improving affordable financing options, sustainable production techniques, investments in rural infrastructure and irrigation, among others.

- Enhancing international coordination and participation through organisations like the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) that are actively promoting cooperative development through research, policy recommendations, and technical assistance.
- Reviewing, harmonising, and modernising the legislative, policy and regulatory landscape with the view to establishing a level playing field for cooperatives as compared to other forms of enterprises.
- Institutionalising the overarching policy framework that supports the expansion of women-led cooperatives, with defined rules of engagement to ensure meaningful economic participation by women.
- Capacitating the state to provide a more supportive and enabling environment for cooperative formation and participation in national development efforts.
- Improving resource mobilisation and increasing funding for women-led cooperatives requires a general relook into the broader agricultural environment. There should be multi-stakeholder involvement in developing gender-responsive financial services and products. This requires innovative interventions involving public and private sector partnerships aimed at increasing women's access to technologies, strengthening their capacity, and raising their productivity levels.
- Setting a mandated provision for a determined percentage of agricultural support programmes to target women farmers and women-led agricultural cooperatives to improve market participation throughout the agrifood value chain.

Despite minimal global advancements in ensuring that women reap identical benefits and rights within the agricultural sector, there exist exemplary global practices that can fortify the sector and alleviate implementation challenges. These practices may be employed to refine and augment existing policy and legislative frameworks, ensuring they are attuned to global risks and the evolving environment.

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