

Inclusive Agri-Business Models, Gender, and Kenyans' Experiences in Successful Entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

Northern donors increasingly frame inclusive agri-businesses (IABs) as key drivers of transformative change in agricultural sectors in Africa. Building on the concept of inclusive growth, economic and development objectives are assumed to be complementary by Northern donors as IABs are supposed to profit from including previously excluded low-income and marginalized populations into their value chains. In development program implementation, these assumptions translate to specific selection criteria and support mechanisms for African agri-business entrepreneurs, and particular interpretations on what is considered success. By zooming in on the case of agri-business women and men in Kenya, this article demonstrates the discrepancies between Northern donor-funded programs' definitions, support mechanisms and measurements of successful IABs on the one hand, and on the other, the realities and experiences of Kenyan agri-business entrepreneurs themselves. It shows that Kenyan agri-business entrepreneurs' lived experiences, and how those experiences are shaped by gender, are only very partially acknowledged by Northern donors in their IAB approaches. In doing so, this article provides input for the design of alternative, more diverse approaches in development programs that aim to support agri-businesses in Africa.

Keywords: Donor-Funded Programs, Entrepreneurship, Gender, Inclusive Agri-Business, Kenya.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Following the concept of inclusive growth – one of the pillars of the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – Northern donors increasingly frame inclusive agri-businesses (IABs) as key drivers of transformative change in agricultural sectors in Africa (German *et al.*, 2020; Woodhill, 2016). IABs are assumed to be commercially viable businesses that integrate low-income and marginalized populations into their value chains as suppliers, processors, distributors, retailers or consumers at scale or with the potential to scale up (FAO, 2015; IFC, 2023; Woodhill, 2016; Wangu, 2021). In IABs, economic and development objectives are assumed to be complementary as the private sector is assumed to create opportunities for smallholder farmers and other 'base-of-the-pyramid' groups to benefit from economic growth (German *et al.*, 2020; Schoneveld, 2020). IABs are thus conceived as a model for the private sector and development community to work together towards inclusive growth. The private sector can profit from large commercial opportunities in agri-value chains, and development actors can focus on attaining the SDGs through improving access to capital, information, infrastructure, technology, markets, and value chain linkages – including access to global value chains – for marginalized value chain actors (FAO, 2015; IFC, 2023; Schoneveld, 2020; Woodhill, 2016; Wangu *et al.*, 2021). Within inclusive growth approaches, profit-driven businesses are preferred over traditional aid and charity approaches as it is assumed they can scale up at a speed and to a level unattainable by traditional development interventions (Wangu *et al.*, 2021).

Inclusive growth narratives have been widely promoted in development programs for some time now (Schoneveld & Zoomers, 2015), even though they have been criticized for failing to take into account planetary boundaries (Spash, 2020). Despite the term 'green growth' being introduced as a response to this criticism, it is similar to inclusive growth as it assumes that economic growth "ultimately leads to more welfare and can decouple from ecological impacts with appropriate technologies" (Gerber, 2020, p. 236). Questioning these particular neoliberal and capitalist assumptions of inclusive and green growth, Hickel and Kallis (2020) conclude that "green growth is likely to be a misguided objective" (p. 1) and "staying within planetary boundaries may require a de-growth of production and consumption in high-consuming nations and a shift away from the narrow growth focused development agenda in the global South" (p. 15).

In theory, this is in line with the concept of ‘inclusive development,’ which asserts that economic growth needs to be de-emphasized to effectively balance trade-offs between economic growth, multi-dimensional well-being and the environment (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016; Schoneveld, 2020). In practice, however, few development organizations – including those that promote IAB-inspired development programs – prioritize inclusive development in their programs (Schoneveld, 2022). Instead, they mainly focus on ‘economic growth’ and ‘scale’, i.e., integrating as many low-income or marginalized people as possible into the value chain; and they seek to monitor the anticipated ‘growth’ by means of the design of particular ‘business metrics’, focusing on profitability, business growth, and productivity (Chamberlain & Anseeuw, 2019; Schoneveld, 2022). This focus is concerning since it “*sidelines businesses that may differently perceive their societal contributions*” (Schoneveld, 2022, p. 6). In other words, “*IAB business models and growth/scaling strategies risk becoming products of external values, performance metrics, outcome targets and funding cycles. This could result in business model lock-in and undesirable upscaling pressures*” (Schoneveld, 2022, p. 11). In light of these pressures, the potential friction between African agri-business entrepreneurs’ experiences in successful entrepreneurship and the IAB approaches of development programs requires more in-depth investigation.

This article aims to contribute to the ‘agri-business for development’ debate by scrutinizing the experiences and lived realities of agri-business entrepreneurs in Kenya in the contemporary aid and donor landscape. Through online and offline qualitative methods, it zooms in on the interactions between Northern donor-funded IAB programs and the lived experiences of both Kenyan agri-business women and men entrepreneurs. The article shows that development actors implementing IAB approaches only very partially consider the realities and lived experiences of Kenyan agri-business entrepreneurs themselves, and how those experiences are shaped by dominant gender norms in Kenya.

This article continues with the main theoretical discussions around agri-business for development, followed by the methodological approach used in this research. Subsequently, the article provides empirical insights into the Kenyan agri-business support landscape and compares them to the lived experiences of Kenyan agri-business entrepreneurs. This article concludes with reflections on how Northern development actors could integrate the realities and lived experiences of both Kenyan agri-business women and men entrepreneurs in the design of their IAB approaches. In doing so, this article provides input for the design of alternative, more diverse approaches in donor-funded development programs that aim to support the agri-business sector in Africa.

II. AGRI-BUSINESS FOR DEVELOPMENT

The centrality of economic growth in development is part of a paradigm shift in which traditional donors – and by extension non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – have shifted focus from poverty alleviation to economic growth and aid for trade (Hearn, 2007; Savelli *et al.*, 2019). This practically means that the poverty reduction-era strategies such as land titling, markets for the poor, microfinance and support to small and medium-sized enterprises have been extended by the establishment of large-scale public-private partnerships and donor support for major commercial investments (Mawdsley, 2015). This paradigm shift in development thinking – in combination with the 2008 food price crisis – has led Northern governments to engage more significantly than before with the private sector in their agricultural programming in Africa (Woodhill, 2016). Consequently, however, due to this increased focus on the private sector, transnational corporations and foreign investors have started competing for natural resources with local populations in already food-insecure countries, jeopardizing their livelihoods and food security (Zoomers, 2010). This realization, in turn, led to a call among donors for more responsible or ‘inclusive’ agri-business approaches in which smallholder farmers and other marginalized groups – especially women – could benefit from business outcomes, participate in the business models of the private sector themselves, and therefore, contribute to economic growth (Wangu, 2021). Here, the thinking is that women could be included in the IABs or – when empowered – act as IABs themselves (FAO, 2015; Woodhill, 2016). This means that Northern development actors assume that women’s perceived deficits in development, in terms of skills, behaviors and willingness compared to the male standard (Serrano-Pascual & Carretero-García, 2022) could be ‘fixed’, and that their self-actualization could lead to positive social outcomes and economic growth (Ahl & Marlow, 2019; Marlow, 2020). Feminist scholars have expressed skepticism about it. They point out that this particular neoliberal narrative of economic growth and women empowerment in development risks reformulating structural gender discrimination into individual problems by placing the responsibility for solutions with the individual woman entrepreneur (Clark Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2016; Marlow, 2020). It ignores, they argue, how gender as a social and historical construct (Henry *et al.*, 2016) creates both enabling and constraining spaces for women and men to operate their agri-businesses.

To date, international and local NGOs follow these particular neoliberal narratives in aligning themselves with the aid for agricultural trade agenda. At least, we observe that NGOs – being dependent on the funding

of Northern donors – have become the main implementers of donor-supported policies (Parashar & Schulz, 2021; Sakue-Collins, 2021). In Kenya, almost 88 percent of Kenyan NGOs relied on foreign funding at the end of 2019, mostly from North America and Europe (Sakue-Collins, 2021). Post-colonial scholars argue that African states such as Kenya have thus forfeited their sovereignty to the international aid agencies (Hearn, 2007; Parashar & Schulz, 2021). In particular, NGOs have been “*exposed to the vagaries of market, where ‘competition’ for funding compels them to function as executioners of the neoliberal agenda rather than as agents of development*” (Sakue-Collins, 2021, p. 990). Such dependencies on Northern donors result in NGOs in Africa often ignoring or even enforcing structural imbalances in the international trade between Northern and Southern countries in their development programs (Hickel *et al.*, 2022). For example, in aid for trade programs, African entrepreneurs are requested to trade and compete in the domestic and international markets with international players while economic imbalances are left intact. These economic imbalances stem from a historical process in which colonial actors used coercion to promote export crops at the expense of local food production (Amanor, 2019), and in which post-colonial actors actively lower the price of labor and raw materials in the South through unequal trade relationships to meet the needs of Northern economies (Hickel *et al.*, 2022). It is in this context that we investigate Kenyan women’s and men’s lived experiences in successful agri-business entrepreneurship while Northern donor-funded NGO programs try to recruit and work with them as key actors in their development agendas.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

According to Kenya’s official business census of 2016, 2,100 formally registered enterprises are active in agriculture (KNBS, 2016). Out of these enterprises, 85 percent are categorized by the government as micro entrepreneurs (fewer than ten employees), 14.6 percent are small entrepreneurs (10-49 employees) and only 0.3 percent are medium-sized entrepreneurs (50-99 employees). In addition, according to the census, 38,120 formally registered enterprises are active in the manufacturing of food products (with 96.6 percent being micro entrepreneurs, 2.1 percent small entrepreneurs and only 1.3 percent medium-sized entrepreneurs) (KNBS, 2016). Although the gender distribution (men, women) within these sector-specific enterprises is not given in the census, women-owned enterprises that fall in the category of so-called micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) make up approximately 32 percent of total registered MSMEs in Kenya (KNBS, 2016). Compared to men, women in Kenya are disproportionately concentrated in unlicensed businesses that are mostly micro and informal in nature and are active in production and post-harvest processing (KNBS, 2016; IFC, 2016).¹ In addition, women generally are underrepresented in the most profitable portions of the value chain, such as transportation, marketing and sales (IFC, 2016). This is also the case in the horticulture, dairy and staple food value chains in Kenya (FAO, 2014; Kathothya, 2017; McCulloch & Ota, 2002). Recognizing women’s underrepresentation in licensed enterprises, in larger enterprises, and in profitable value chains, several Northern-funded programs focusing on these sectors, have started aiming to increase women’s access to (international) markets (Kinyanjui & Kimemiah, 2014).

This research focuses on agri-business entrepreneurs who are a Kenyan (co-) founder or (co-) director of a licensed company, active in processing, transportation, marketing and/or sales in the staple crops, horticulture and/or dairy value chains and target low-income populations as suppliers, employees and/or customers. Overall, twenty women and ten men were selected through online platforms such as Value4Her, Google searches, the lead author’s professional network through working as a development practitioner for Bopinc and snowball sampling. Table I shows an overview of both the women and men entrepreneurs included in the research. All of these entrepreneurs can be considered as part of the middle- to high-class of Kenyan society, as the majority of the entrepreneurs are part of the 3.5 percent of the Kenyan population who have completed university-level degrees (KNBS, 2019). After completing their degrees in topics such as business, economics, agriculture, food science or finance, a few younger (mostly men) agri-business entrepreneurs started their business straight away, whereas the majority first gained direct experience in paid employment, often in the agricultural sector with Northern donor-funded NGOs or companies.

Data collection for this article was conducted from July 2020 to December 2022. The first round of data collection was conducted online due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions. The experiences of the entrepreneurs in successful entrepreneurship, the role of gender in agri-entrepreneurship and the different types of external support received were explored through online semi-structured interviews conducted in English via Zoom or WhatsApp. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and assigned to the entrepreneurs’ individual cases in Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software.

¹ Here, unlicensed means that businesses are operated ‘informally’, without being registered and licensed by the Government of Kenya, under the Companies Act of 2015.

TABLE I: SUMMARY OF CHARACTERISTICS OF ENTREPRENEURS IN THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

Characteristics	Women (n=20)	Men (n=10)	Total (n=30)	
Age of entrepreneur (years)	21-30	2	5	7
	31-40	4	4	8
	41-50	5	1	6
	50+	9	0	9
Sector	Dairy	3	2	5
	Fruits and vegetables	12	3	15
	Staple crops	4	3	7
	Mix	1	2	3
Management profile	Family business	13	5	18
	Partner business	3	3	6
	Solo business	4	2	6
Business size	Micro	4	4	8
	Small	9	5	14
	Medium	3	1	4
	Large	4	0	4
Firm age (years)	Less than 2	4	5	9
	2-5	4	3	7
	6-10	6	1	7
	10+	6	1	7

To further situate these findings in the specific context of the entrepreneurs, the lead author organized two rounds of participatory reflection sessions (Guyer *et al.*, 2021), which provided an opportunity for the research participants to verify and validate the preliminary findings, thus enabling them to contribute to more nuanced and better-grounded conclusions. In the second round of data collection, face-to-face interviews were conducted in Kenya during the last quarter of 2022, in which the experiences of participating in Northern donor-funded programs were discussed. All interactions were again recorded, transcribed, and added to Nvivo. In addition, data about the external support received by the entrepreneurs – as reported by the entrepreneurs themselves – were triangulated with data from other online sources such as company websites of the entrepreneurs, news articles, videos and websites from NGOs, association, and Northern donors. After a new round of analysis, this led to the final findings presented in this article.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Landscape of Agri-Business Support

Kenyan agri-business entrepreneurs are supported by four groups of actors, namely government organizations, NGOs, private sector entities and membership organizations (see Table II). These actors provide support to entrepreneurs individually or come together in consortia in the context of Northern donor-funded programs. All entrepreneurs included in this research received some form of external support in running their agri-businesses, the majority (24 entrepreneurs) from different types of donor-funded programs (32 different programs). These donor-funded programs used a variety of selection criteria at the level of the (1) entrepreneur (gender, age, nationality, time available for program); (2) product/service (innovativeness, focus on low-income consumer, potential to export); (3) business (women-/youth-owned, role in the value chain, being formally registered, business-stage of enterprise, years of operation, number of female and youth employees, profitability); and (4) potential for future impact (potential for scalability, replicability and growth, job creating capacity for women and youth, linkages to smallholder women and youth farmers, nutritional impact). As can be surmised, most selection criteria demonstrate a special focus on age and gender, meaning that close to half of the programs focused exclusively on women- and/or youth-owned enterprises, and the others typically mentioning it as a special focus in their program. This is the case because the programs frame women and youth as marginalized groups that – when empowered by the entrepreneurship programs – could offer pathways to both economic and inclusive growth. For example, SheTrades stated:

Given that women account for a disproportionately large share of the world's poor and that women spend more of their incomes than men do on health and education, thriving women-owned businesses would make a large contribution to sustainable and inclusive growth (ITC, 2019).

In the same vein, Farm Africa stated that the Youth Empowerment in Sustainable Agriculture program “is encouraging the youth to become job creators rather than jobseekers, in agri-business, and thus turning them into drivers of economic growth for Kenya” (Farm Africa, 2015). By framing entrepreneurship as a route to self-actualization and personal reward for individual women and youths, these programs follow a particular neoliberal narrative of economic development and inclusion in which entrepreneurship is considered as the main contributor to positive social outcomes and economic growth.

In the context of this frame, the programs generally treat Kenyan women and youth as homogeneous groups with undifferentiated entrepreneurial needs. The programs typically ‘bundle’ a focus on women and youth, be it female or male youth, offering the same type of intervention to both groups. In addition, in the practice of monitoring, the desired program outcomes of gender and age equality are typically ‘reduced’ by counting the number of women and youths included in the program or business model. In doing so, structural gender inequalities in Kenya, say among women of different classes or ethnic groups, or among men for that matter, are only very partially acknowledged in the design and implementation of the programs.

There are roughly two types of programs in Kenya, both of which offer Kenyan agri-business entrepreneurs technical assistance (training, mentorship, expert consultations) and in some cases access to external finance in the form of grants, asset provision, or introductions to banks for debt finance or investors for equity finance. Grants are often linked to winning a pitching competition or based on a business-assessment. The budgets provided to such programs – based on the programs that publicly reported their numbers – range from roughly 0.1 to 100 million USD depending on the number of entrepreneurs that the program is targeting. On the entrepreneur side, the grants given directly to individual agri-businesses are much smaller and range from roughly 2,000 USD to 25,000 USD. The first type of programs are so-called accelerator programs that aim to ‘accelerate inclusive agri-business growth’ and thus mainly focus on cohorts of (potential) IABs. Examples of these programs are, for instance, the AGLEAD business idea competition, AgriBiz program, E4Impact accelerator, and the SUN pitch competition. At the end of such programs, success is often measured by (a) the number of (women/youth-led) businesses that received support; (b) the increase in sales in both volume and revenue for the individual businesses; (c) the number of direct and indirect jobs created (for women/youth), and (d) the level of external debt and equity finance received by how many businesses. The second type of program in Kenya aims to achieve ‘inclusive market transformation’ and focuses on individual actors in different parts of the value chain and the connections between them. Here, examples are, for instance, 2SCALE, Kenya Market-led Dairy Programme, and SheTrades. These programs may include both the sourcing side – commercializing smallholders and linking them to the agri-business entrepreneurs – and the marketing side, namely supporting the agri-business entrepreneurs to develop and sell nutritious products to low-income consumers in the domestic market and programs that support agri-business entrepreneurs to export their products to international markets. In programs focusing on sourcing, success is measured at the farmer level as (a) the number of (women/youth) farmers trained and/or certified; (b) the number of farmer groups created; (c) the increase in productivity and/or sales, and (d) the number of market linkages made to agri-businesses. At the agri-business level in these programs, on top of the success indicators measured for accelerator programs (see above), success is also measured by the increase in raw produce uptake from smallholders. On the marketing side in these programs, success is measured by the number of new products brought to market and the increase in sales to new (export) markets. Overall, the programs mainly define success in terms of newly created business linkages and products, increase of productivity, external finance and sales, and job creation.

Overall, the narratives of the two types of programs are thus similar. Even though an accelerator program only focuses on the individual IABs and not necessarily on the connection with other actors, they often still claim to contribute to ‘sector transformation’ or ‘systems change.’ All of the program narratives share in common an emphasis on private sector involvement leading to economic growth. All of the programs frame economic growth as the ultimate positive outcome by focusing on inclusive or green growth in their narratives, albeit without providing concrete definitions of what this entails. Among the relatively few programs claiming climate-related objectives (six out of 32 programs) through promoting circular or agro-ecological practices, only a few programs add additional success indicators such as the reduction in water consumption and tons of CO₂ emission, or for instance, hectares of land under eco-efficient management practices, or the number of farmers adopting climate-smart or circular technologies and practices. Characteristically, indicators are designed to measure success in terms of economic growth (new business linkages created, products developed, increased sales, job creation) rather than in terms of inclusive development, say in terms of less livelihood risks, environmental care, or quality of jobs. In summary, the programs provide a very particular perspective on successful IABs, prioritizing economic growth, which – as we elaborate in the next section – does only very partially provide space to incorporate the experiences of successful Kenyan agri-entrepreneurs themselves.

B. The Lived Experiences of Kenyan Agri-Business Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurs reported diverse experiences about their interactions with the Northern donor-funded programs, their selection criteria and narratives. On the one hand, the programs provided them with useful networks, information, financial support, and reduced costs when training and organizing farmer groups for them. On the other hand, the programs evoked frustration and cynicism among them as they were seen by them as inefficiently implemented and patronizing.

TABLE II: ACTORS WHO SUPPORT KENYAN AGRIBUSINESS ENTREPRENEURS

Group	Type	Organizations mentioned by entrepreneurs
Government entities	Intergovernmental organizations	European Union, African Union, UNDP, UNEP, UNOPS, FAO, IFAD, ILRI, World Food Program, World Trade Organization
	Ministries of foreign affairs and their affiliated development agencies	BMZ, DANIDA, DGID, GIZ, Global Affairs Canada, Italian Agency for Development, Irish Aid, Norad, Sida, UKAID, USAID
	National/county government bodies and funds	Kenya Industrial Research and Development Institute, Nyamira Constituency Development Fund, Women Enterprise Fund
	Public universities	Egerton University, Jomo Kenyatta University
NGOs	Private company foundations	IKEA Foundation, Mastercard Foundation
	Foundations/NGOs	Bopinc, E4Impact Foundation, Farm Africa, GAIN, Hivos, IFDC, Netherlands Food Partnership, SNV, TechnoServe, Tony Elumelu Foundation, Solidaridad, TradeMark East Africa
Private sector companies	Banks	African Development Bank, Equity Bank, SBM
	Impact investors	DOB Equity, Mercy Corps Ventures, Truvalu, Village Capital
	Private incubators and accelerators	Kenya Climate Innovation Center, Lake Hub Incubation, Merime Solutions, Vijana Reloaded
	(Trans)national companies	Bio.SoilZ, Promaco, Transnational Agri Projects
Membership organizations	Different types of members (i.e. women, youth, value chain, management style)	African Women Agribusiness Network, Association of Family Business Enterprise, Emerging Leaders Foundation, Fresh Produce Exporters Association of Kenya, International nut & dried fruit council, Kenya National Chambers of Commerce and Industry, United Success

As we show in this section, the agri-business entrepreneurs felt that the programs tend to insufficiently acknowledge what it means to run an agri-business in Kenya, and they also experienced that the programs primarily are geared towards achieving ‘quick win’ numbers in order to be accountable to donors and the wider public rather than to them.

1) Interactions with donor-funded programs

Prior to starting their businesses, several of the entrepreneurs implemented agricultural programs for Northern donor-funded NGOs. They shared their experiences that agricultural NGO programs in their view are inefficiently implemented, which prompted them to start a business on their own and operate in the agricultural sector differently. One agri-businessman, who quit his job working for an NGO to start his own company aggregating fruits and vegetables from smallholder farmers commented, for instance:

Seeing how much money is spent and the little results and the impact that is gotten [in donor-supported agricultural programs], sometimes you feel a bit ashamed of what has been achieved (...) when I go back [to the project sites], people are still living in those shanty houses. Farmers are still complaining they are not getting the markets (...) If you are given 100 million USD [by donors for the program], honestly, I expect that village, their trade would have gone probably to about \$500 million. But that doesn't happen. So (...) let's say, if it's FAO who funded that village [and] once FAO closes, they [the villagers] wait for, for example (...) the UN to come and fund again. The cycle continues (Interview agri-businessman, 19 August, 2021).

For this group of agri-business entrepreneurs, starting their businesses offers a way to ‘do something real’ and bring long-term solutions to farmers and small-scale traders. The experience of donor-funded programs being inefficiently implemented was shared by the wider group of entrepreneurs. Nonetheless, some of the program support focusing on private sector development in agriculture was appreciated by them. Most programs gave small grants, which proved very useful for the younger entrepreneurs who had only recently started their businesses. The small grants enabled them to hire their first staff or start renting a processing facility. The more established entrepreneurs appreciated how programs provide aid with national or international certification procedures, and grouped and trained farmers so that it is easier to source good quality and quantity raw produce from them and get access to new (international) customers. At the same time, however, many senior entrepreneurs felt frustrated about the type of finance that these programs provide and the selection criteria that they use.

Entrepreneurs experienced that donor-funded programs are looking for quick wins instead of ‘walking the journey’ with them in becoming successful in the context of changing markets. In their view, programs are often looking for companies that are already earning a (small) profit, sourcing from smallholder farmers and/or selling to low-income consumers. Such a strategy for selection automatically excludes, in their view, those entrepreneurs who deliberately source from mid-sized farmers, and take the extra effort of exporting their products.

For them, creating impact and success means providing long-term employment or promoting African crops internationally (as we further discuss in the next section). However, these types of impact were not captured in the programs' conceptualization and measurement of success. Entrepreneurs claimed that programs do not take into account how much money was already invested by entrepreneurs themselves, and that the programs fail to provide the necessary large-scale investments to materialize their long-term strategies. Instead, they experienced, the programs provide small grants to companies while taking credit for the growth achieved by the entrepreneurs themselves. One of the women entrepreneurs, who participated in a development program that focused on providing access to finance to agri-businesses, commented:

these people [NGOs that run IABs programs] don't have a system for evaluating projects to really select projects that can work. They want simple things whereby the cake is three-quarters baked. They come in with a small grant and then publish a lot of how they have helped Africa or Kenya for that matter (Interview November 29, 2022).

Entrepreneurs were aware of the large budgets provided for agri-business programs in Africa (up to 100 million USD), and they expressed frustration that they are requested by the programs to participate in lengthy training sessions and pitching competitions in which only the winner is granted a relatively small amount of 'prize money' (up to 25,000 USD). Meanwhile, they reported, they are seeing some of the (foreign) NGO workers – who are paid by the same program budgets – driving luxurious cars and living in upper class neighborhoods in Nairobi. Agri-business entrepreneurs felt that the majority of the budget of agri-business programs is 'eaten up' by NGOs themselves, and that it hardly compares to the direct funding and support that they can receive from such programs. They conceived it as unfair.

The established entrepreneurs agreed that they need 'patient' capital and long-term company-specific handholding rather than generalized training and small grants. Entrepreneurs explained patient capital as capital provided by an organization that understands their lived (economic) reality and therefore would allow renegotiations and extensions of repayment time based on the specific circumstance of the business. However, donor-funded programs often run between one and five years, and the entrepreneurs expressed, it is difficult for program staff to adopt a long-term vision. Several of the senior entrepreneurs reported that they no longer participated in accelerator-type programs as the pitching competitions 'feel like an insult' for them. An agri-businesswoman who participated in several accelerator programs explained:

They're [Northern-funded NGOs] only doing accelerator programs (...). [But] we know what to do. We know how to, we know when to do it. We don't want to do your capacity building. Just give us the results [funding] because we know what to do [with it]" (Interview 25 October, 2022).

Entrepreneurs thus urged donor-funded programs to offer company-specific long-term support while being more transparent about the type of businesses that they are targeting. By claiming that young entrepreneurs who have only recently started their business have the same needs as more established entrepreneurs, development programs underestimate senior entrepreneurs' risk of giving their time in lengthy application procedures and training programs.

The focus on youth and women in programs evoked irritation especially among senior women and men entrepreneurs as they felt disadvantaged. An agri-businessman, who started his dairy company while studying agriculture at Egerton University, shared:

There are organizations that are just targeting women, and those organizations, they don't allow for example, men to apply for their competitions or such and such (...). We don't have an organization that just focuses on men. So a woman, for example, can apply in their competition and still apply in these other competitions that are general for us. So that's the disadvantage that we [men] have (Interview 23 July, 2021).

For the men involved in family businesses, the focus in selection on women however was easy to navigate as they often manage their business with 'their' wives, which meant they would put the wife's name on the application form. In contrast, some younger women also felt disadvantaged by the special focus on women as they feared being seen as someone who needs to 'be given free rides.' They experienced it as social pressure in terms of having to "show how capable I am, so that instead of you thinking of me as a woman, think of what I can do, what I can bring to the table" (Interview 2 October, 2020). More generally, the focus on women in programs is a much-debated topic in Kenya in the media, with some arguing that 'the boy child' is being forgotten (Pike, 2020). The entrepreneurs who agreed with the focus on women highlighted the different ways in which women are marginalized compared to men and thus need help to overcome gender inequality challenges in Kenyan society. Other entrepreneurs, including many (senior) women, were not in favor of a focus on women in entrepreneurship programs. They highlighted how gender issues are embedded in social relationships and how 'exposing' men can lead to a better position of women in the family and therefore, increased well-being of women entrepreneurs. In the next section, we examine how gender norms in Kenya shape the experiences of both women and men in successful agri-business entrepreneurship.

2) Gender and Kenyans' experiences in successful agri-business entrepreneurship

Agri-business entrepreneurs held diverse perspectives when describing successful entrepreneurship, and their experiences in success often change over time depending on crises such as COVID-19 or the growth of the business (see also Brouwer, 2022). For agri-businesswomen, successful entrepreneurship was described by them in terms of acting upon a deep personal passion for agriculture, being optimistic about the future and holding the belief that they can overcome any type of challenge. In contrast, the men described success in terms of a focus on reducing costs and making money out of their entrepreneurial activities. Both the women and men wanted to be recognized as successful entrepreneurs by others, although it was mentioned relatively more by the men. An agri-businesswoman, who runs a fruits and vegetables export firm together with her husband, explained the subtle difference by stating:

We are always told, even in [Christian] religion, that the man is the head and they say behind every successful man is a woman. So the man always wants to be the one to be seen out there to be doing it. But the woman is always in the background taking care of all other things [in the private sphere]. But the man wants to be able to sit at the gate and to be seen and to be noticed [in the public sphere] (Reflection session, 11 February 2022).

Such dominant gender norms can be traced to Kenya's colonial history: Kenyans experienced the globalization of gender norms that were introduced under British rule and reinforced by the Christian church (Lutomia *et al.*, 2016). This resulted in women's limited participation in socio-economic and political affairs – in the public sphere. The traditional role of women was increasingly circumscribed as being responsible for the unpaid care work, designating to them the career role of housekeeper, mother, wife, child bearer and food provider – in the private sphere (Lock & Smith, 2016). These gender norms found expression in social norms that the man owns the land, being the main decision-maker, and taking on the breadwinner role in the family. These masculine gender roles continue to be embedded in family and community relations in Kenya, albeit in different ways.

Saliently, the role of family and community relations is often overlooked in entrepreneurship programs. Most entrepreneurs – both women and men – considered the ability to take care of their families in both the short term (paying for family needs) and long term (building a business that can be passed down to the children and grandchildren) as key to successful entrepreneurship. The desire to live up to these goals places social pressure on both women and men entrepreneurs, especially at the start of the business, albeit in slightly different ways. An agri-businessman, who is processing and selling peanuts and beans to Kenyan supermarkets and shops, explained:

for men, when they're going for businesses, they're also going to look at whether [it] is (...) exposing the family too much because they still need to cater for the family in terms of revenue. Once you look at our women, it's, more or less whether they're going to be able to handle also children as they are doing the businesses (Reflection session, 4 February 2022).

In line with dominant gender norms in Kenya, where men are expected to financially support their wife and children as well as their parents, siblings and other family members, the agri-businessmen felt that they need to fulfill their breadwinner identity. When starting their agri-businesses, men shared stories of how their families were worried about 'their' reduced income. Especially those men who had left their jobs with Northern NGOs faced considerable backlash from their family members, as working for such NGOs was considered to be a prestigious and financially attractive job. In contrast, women in agri-business felt compelled to juggle their carer identity. They are expected to take on the unpaid care duties and supervision for the children and the household, which is generally seen as a stronger priority for women over running a business. Agri-businesswomen, however, expressed a desire to provide a good life for their family in a breadwinner capacity, not only in the form of unpaid care. This two-fold goal can cause social tensions, as an agri-businesswoman explained:

When you're a woman and you tend to make it [in agri-business], they [family and community members] look at you and they're like she has now grown horns because she's having money. [...] A woman is not supposed to be richer than her man (Interview 4 November, 2022).

To navigate these social tensions and expectations, women stressed how building a good family support network – especially involving the husband – is essential for successful entrepreneurship (see also Brouwer *et al.*, to be published). Without such family support, without the (tacit) support of the husband, it would be more difficult for women to operate and grow an agri-business.

The key business indicators in donor programs – such as growth in terms of profit, volumes, external finance and employees – are also an important component of the way in which agri-businesswomen and men perceived success. Agri-business entrepreneurs, be they women or men, want to grow in terms of production volumes, external finance obtained, and the number of employees employed. Interestingly, they indicated that they do not necessarily aspire growth in terms of increased profit and revenues but rather, in terms of social impact. When asked to reflect on the importance of profit versus impact, an agri-

businesswoman, who runs a large agri-businesses that sources fruits and vegetables from approximately 1000 farmers and employs over 250 people, summarized the group discussion by stating:

Yes, you want to make money (...). If it [the agri-business] comes with good profits, of course you're happy. But you have to be a very selfish kind of person to only want to benefit yourself and nobody else. Because at the end of the day, entrepreneurship is not about making money (Reflection session, 23 April 2021).

Both agri-business women and men were mainly motivated by providing income opportunities to others and seeing the positive impact in the individual lives of their low-income suppliers, their staff and their customers. Whereas donor-funded programs describe such social impacts on low-income populations rather narrowly, in terms of the number of people integrated, the increase in productivity and the increase in income at a certain moment in time, the entrepreneurs described it more broadly as 'fixing dysfunctional markets' and contributing to the quality of life. An agri-businesswoman who was sourcing sweet potatoes and soya beans from about 300 farmers shared how the market;

is dysfunctional in the sense that primary producers are disadvantaged, because middlemen offtake the produce at very low price, therefore when we have done a market value chain analysis, you find that beneficiaries of the sweet potato value chain are the traders and the transporters. And the farmers are price takers so they earn nothing (Interview 15 December, 2020).

Traders and middlemen had a negative reputation among the entrepreneurs as they were described to visit farmers at the farmgate and offer instant cash for the produce, enticing them to accept lower prices. Several agri-business entrepreneurs aimed to offer farmers a better price and circumvent these middlemen. By starting their own processing company, they tried to deal directly with farmer groups or act as a 'fair' trader. They described the success of this approach not only in terms of farmers reached, from which they bought produce, but also in terms of an improved quality of life. For example, one man entrepreneur described his business success by sharing how one of his farmers used to be;

a drunkard in the village. He is a retired teacher, but because of frustrations and everything like that, he got into drinking. But when we picked him and put him in our supply chain for supplying us fruit and he used to get his money on a weekly basis, he took me to a house that he had done. He had already built a permanent house and he had also put electricity in his house (Interview 19 August, 2021).

As can be surmised, this particular agri-business entrepreneur associated the ability to build a permanent house and get electricity with an improved quality of life. Another often-mentioned, practice of success was the ability to help farmers or employees to pay for their children's school fees. Entrepreneurs thus described success as knowing "that somebody has moved from one level from the time we employed them to another level" (Interview 13 November, 2020). In addition, entrepreneurs want to reduce hunger through offering nutritious and affordable products, and several of them shared stories of customers no longer feeling sick after consuming their products.

Successful agri-business entrepreneurship, Kenyan entrepreneurs explained, cannot be limited to the income that it provides to others. An agri-businesswoman summarized this by saying:

My business model really is not just a matter of selling. It is selling and what does the person do with that income? I expose them [farmers] to other opportunities to improve their overall well-being, their environment (Interview 15 December, 2020).

This entrepreneur introduced the farmers with whom she worked to clean cooking solutions to improve the indoor air quality of low-income households and reduce respiratory diseases. Another woman entrepreneur who processed dried fruits and vegetables designed her own solar dryers, which she distributed to her fruits and vegetables smallholders through selling them to NGOs. She then bought the dried fruits and vegetables from the farmers, acting as a wholesaler and exporter by selling the dried products to Kenyan supermarkets and large distributors in Sudan and Europe. This woman entrepreneur had thus experience in successful entrepreneurship in terms of having a positive environmental impact stemming from reduced food waste and the reduced use of fossil fuels in the supply chain of her agri-business. Generally, both women and men mentioned they want to improve people's quality of life, but they also stated that it is especially women entrepreneurs who are expected in the community to show this attitude. For example, an agri-business entrepreneur who runs a dairy company selling mainly micronutrient-fortified yogurt to Kenyan schools explained, women in the community "come a lot to a woman entrepreneur asking for support for food, asking for support for school fees, things like that" (Reflection session, 4 February 2022). Here, dominant gender norms in Kenya, that women have special caring capabilities, can be seen to create particular social pressure for women entrepreneurs.

Finally, successful agri-business entrepreneurship in Kenya was framed by interviewees as defying foreign influences by promoting Kenyan entrepreneurship over foreign forms of entrepreneurship, replacing imported agro-food products with Kenyan-made products and promoting African eating habits versus Northern eating habits, both nationally and internationally. For example, one agri-businessman created an e-commerce platform during the COVID-19 pandemic to support the business of micro-retailers

called ‘Mama Mbogas’ (Swahili for ‘Mother of Vegetables’) and create an opportunity for them to compete with formal retail shops that are often owned by foreigners. Mama Mbogas are informal street sellers who sit in open air markets; they are often women. Acting as a retailer himself, the agri-businessman bought the produce from Mama Mbogas and sold their collective produce to middle-income consumers and businesses in Nairobi. He described his success as enabling these women to;

compete effectively with some of these brick and mortar [shops] which are owned either by foreigners or by the Asian community here in Kenya. It's just a way of trying to open up the market for them (Interview 19 August, 2021).

To him, entrepreneurial success was about Kenyans being able to compete with either Kenyan Asians or foreigner-owned businesses.² Another example is a women entrepreneur who promoted Kenyan local crops over imported crops by selling a ‘superfood line’ with tortillas made out of millet, sweet potatoes and arrowroots. She explained:

We were brainwashed that when you are educated (...), you are developed. It's the whole Western brainwashing of Africans to think that what they eat is inferior. (...) we import almost 80% of wheat and the elites in Kenya, the people who [can] afford bread; actually, if they ate just one of 250 grams of sweet potato, they would be giving Kenyan farmers one billion every week (Interview 25 October, 2022).

Similarly, other entrepreneurs decided to sell indigenous vegetables and promote them as traditional eating habits. Several entrepreneurs tried to promote the idea of African cuisine by exporting to Europe for example, although they indicated that it is difficult because the European Union demands,

such high certification [standards] that will make my product uncompetitive. I need to [fulfill the standards of] ISO [international organization of standardization]. And I've been trained in it, my factory has the information, but I don't have the money to certify” (Reflection session, 23 April 2021).

This woman entrepreneur also tried to get her products on the shelves of the French supermarket chain Carrefour in Kenya. However, this proved too expensive as Carrefour asked for so-called listing fees, which cost approximately 350 USD per product item, and she had eleven items. Saliently, the competition tribunal in Kenya later ruled that such listing fees are illustrative of Carrefour abusing buying power in Kenya (Wafula, 2021). Such experiences with Northern companies and governments deepen the frustration among Kenyan agri-business entrepreneurs, that Northern donor-funded development programs are not providing large-scale long-term investments, and that they are not really there for them. The entrepreneurs asserted how difficult it was to compete with the imported products of European companies, and they expressed that it is seen as successful agri-business entrepreneurship when a Kenyan entrepreneur succeeds in replacing European imports by selling Kenyan products. For example, a woman dairy entrepreneur managed to replace European imports by selling her portioned cheeses to Kenyan airlines. Kenyan agri-business entrepreneurs have thus diverse experiences in successful agri-business entrepreneurship, and these were only very partially conceived by Northern donor-funded programs.

V. DISCUSSION

Starting from the lived experiences of Kenyan agri-business entrepreneurs, this article makes three contributions to the existing literature on agri-business in development. First, it has demonstrated that the increased focus of Northern donor-funded development programs on IABs is built on a narrow and homogeneous perspective on successful entrepreneurship. Even though Kenyan agri-business entrepreneurs agreed with the by now prevailing assumption in development that profit-driven businesses are more efficient than aid and charity approaches, they generally have much more diverse experiences in successful agri-business entrepreneurship compared with the programs that support them. Current development programs generally prioritize economic objectives (making agri-businesses profitable, bringing them up to scale), based on the assumption that economic growth is a prerequisite for achieving social (including low-income populations in value chains) and environmental objectives (more efficient use of resources). This is reflected in the design of particular indicators and business metrics, focusing on newly created business linkages and products; productivity and sales, and job creation; and how they are used by development programs to monitor and quantify progress and success. In contrast, Kenyan agri-business entrepreneurs tend to prioritize impact in broader terms. They perceived successful businesses in terms of well-being for themselves (being passionate and receiving recognition), their family members (building businesses for future generations) and their community members, farmers, employees and customers (paying school fees, building a house, affording electricity, reducing respiratory diseases, reducing food waste). Furthermore, in contrast with donor-funded development programs’ optimism about the potential

² Kenyan Asians are citizens and residents of Kenya with ancestral roots in the Indian subcontinent. In 2017, Kenya officially recognized Kenyan nationals of Asian descent as the country’s 44th tribe, but they continue to face discrimination in society.

of international trade and economic growth, and the claim that the Kenyan economy can benefit from linkages between international and domestic markets, Kenyan agri-business entrepreneurs instead problematized trade relationships between Kenya and foreign governments and companies in both domestic and international markets by qualifying them as unequal. In their view, contemporary international trade relations lead to unfair forms of competition and dysfunctional markets.

Second, this article shows how several programs are focusing on women and youth as an undifferentiated group, framing them as ‘marginalized’ and assuming that they have similar ‘needs’. Indeed, young entrepreneurs who just started business operations can benefit from such an undifferentiated approach, typically consisting of short-term support in the form of small grants and introductory trainings. However, as we showed above, Kenyan entrepreneurs felt that their long-term visions and diverse lived experiences were hardly a priority in the programs, and that organizations involved in the implementation of the programs were mainly accountable to Northern donors and concerned with the creation of a positive image for the larger public. By treating women and youth in Kenya as a homogeneous group, long-term, large investments and company specific hand holding are overlooked.

Third, this article demonstrates that Northern donor-funded development programs typically think of ‘gender’ as something of ‘women’. This particular translation of gender is convenient for NGOs and other development organizations because it enables them to design relatively simple targeting approaches for women entrepreneurs. In doing so, however, the programs fail to acknowledge the broader significance of social relations and gender dynamics in Kenya and how they enable or constrain both women and men to undertake successful entrepreneurial activities. Embedded in Northern liberal feminist interpretations of gender inequality, the programs conceptualize women and men as rational individuals, and they conceive that women face more constraints than men. In program implementation, this conceptualization provides weight to an interpretation of gender that problematizes the gender of women as the ‘constraint’. To elaborate on this point, the concern of the programs typically is ‘how to reach women entrepreneurs’ and they are considered successful when they select and train individual women entrepreneurs. In this particular approach of ‘women empowerment’, of women becoming rational entrepreneurs as a route for individual self-improvement, Northern-funded donor programs end up validating, rather than challenging, existing gender hierarchies in Kenya. As we showed above, central to social relations and gender dynamics in Kenya, with their roots in the British colonial era, are the stereotypical expectations that women are supposed to focus on the family and the community – as caretakers and are thus more difficult to ‘reach’ in projects than men, who are supposed to focus on themselves and the business – as breadwinners. The idea of women-facing-more-constraints-than-men may be convenient for NGOs and other development organizations to make their programs work, but it fails to acknowledge, for instance, how women ‘use’ their husbands to initiative entrepreneurial activities. Nor does it consider, for instance, how men are ‘constrained’ in their business aspirations by prevailing gender and masculinity norms in Kenya.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article has scrutinized Kenyan agri-business women and men entrepreneurs’ experiences in agri-business in the contemporary aid and donor landscape. It has demonstrated the discrepancies between Northern donor-funded programs’ definitions, support mechanisms and measurements of successful IABs on the one hand, and the lived experiences of Kenyan agri-business women and men entrepreneurs on the other. In conclusion, three discrepancies stand out in particular:

- 1) Northern donor-funded programs conceive successful entrepreneurship primarily in terms of economic growth, which is measured in terms of new businesses linkages or products created, increased productivity or sales, and job creation. In contrast, Kenyan agri-business entrepreneurs conceive successful entrepreneurship more broadly by paying equal attention to economic impact (e.g. in terms of job creation) as social impacts (e.g. in terms of school fees for children).
- 2) Northern donor-funded programs primarily treat gender relations in Kenya as a constraint for successful entrepreneurship, especially for women entrepreneurs. In contrast, Kenyan agri-business entrepreneurs, women as well as men, describe gender relations as the social environment in which successful entrepreneurship can thrive; thus, gender norms can create social pressures, both for women and men, but it is also something that can be mobilized as a resource by women and men entrepreneurs.
- 3) Northern donor-funded programs conceive international trading relations as an opportunity for Kenyan agri-business entrepreneurs, and they define Kenyans’ capacity to produce and sell at international markets as the highest form of successful entrepreneurship. In contrast, Kenyan agri-business entrepreneurs associate international trading relations with a colonial history and they qualify them as deeply unequal that often negatively influence the function of Kenyan markets. In

their view, Northern donor-funded programs, first and foremost, are aligned with the promotion of trade agendas of Northern governments.

In this sense, the design of programs on agri-business entrepreneurship is a specific field of research that deserves special attention in studies on agriculture and development. Because the experiences of Kenyan entrepreneurs in successful businesses are only very partially reflected in program performance metrics, as we showed above, we especially identify the selection and definition of new indicators and metrics as a promising area for further research in agri-business entrepreneurship. We also suggest to pay more attention to the discrepancies between conceptualizations of Northern donors and the lived experiences of Kenyan agri-business entrepreneurs in the further design of programs on agri-business entrepreneurship. Concretely, we have three suggestions for Northern donor-funded programs. First, they could re-design indicators and business metrics with the objective of giving equal weight to economic and social considerations. Second, Northern donor-funded programs could consider experimenting with spending larger parts of program budgets on fewer IABs for a longer period of time, allowing them to ‘walk the journey’ and trying to materialize the long-term visions of more experienced agri-businesswomen and men. Finally, Northern donor-funded programs could consider designing alternative targeting approaches for women, men and youth entrepreneurs. This is important because the majority of agri-business entrepreneurs operate family businesses, meaning that entrepreneurship activities touch directly on personal, household and community spheres – on constraints and opportunities in both the private and the public domain.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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