

Growing women into flourishing farmers

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Practical partnerships - this was the principal theme that emerged at the recent roundtable discussion on women farmers, hosted by the Gordon Institute of Business Science's (GIBS) Entrepreneurship Development Academy (EDA), in partnership with global agricultural company, Corteva Agriscience. The roundtable conversation, Flourishing Farmers - Harvesting a Future in Farming, was aimed at finding solutions to building leadership and transforming the landscape for women farmers in Africa.

Susanne Wasson, President of Corteva Agriscience's Crop Protection Business Platform, said in her introduction, "We need partnerships and long-term commitment to bring more women into leadership roles in agriculture."

Miranda Hosking, managing executive for Social Education at GIBS, added that agriculture remains and continues to be a growth sector. "There's a lot of hope placed in agriculture. The National Development Plan as an example, states that the sector is supposed to produce and contribute large numbers of jobs to the economy by 2030. It is impossible for us to do that without us partnering with partners like Corteva, but also with entrepreneurs who are literally getting their hands dirty to grow the agriculture sector and to grow the economy through the sector, and to facilitate the job creation that is essential for our country and our future."

Government, the private sector, and farmers themselves need to work in tandem to create an environment that is conducive to sustainable farming. But the solutions proffered in the discussion were certainly not academic. There was a tangible focus on practical ways to help women flourish in the sector.

The panel, made up of experts with hands-on experience in the industry, included Wasson, together with keynote speaker, Lydia Sasu, Executive director for the Development Action Association in Ghana; and panellists: Yewande Kazeem, founder of Wandieville Media in Nigeria, Eric Mauwane, owner of Oneo Farms in South Africa; Patience Koku, CEO of Replenish Farms in Nigeria; and Andre van Rensburg, category lead for Agriculture at South Africa's Tiger Brands. Understanding the challenges farmers face, the panellists shared some of their thoughts on how to create a better future for women in farming.

Working as a collective

Partnerships extend beyond those with government and the private sector. The African proverb, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together," cannot be more applicable. The panellists agreed that for farmers to succeed they need to work together with everyone in the agricultural value chain.

Sasu stressed the need for the creation of agricultural associations for women, especially smallholder farmers. Associations allow women to pool land and resources, jointly sell their products, and gain greater access to markets. Strong associations, she said, not only give women a voice, but they can ensure that women farmers, as a collective, are involved in adding value to the sector. Kazeem went a step further when she said women should not only work together, but they must also be advocates for each other in the sector. She said, "As women we face challenges. We can think of 10 reasons why we can't do something, rather than all of the reasons that we can."

Van Rensburg spoke about the value of economies of scale. By working together as a collective, he believed women would be better positioned to operate in the formal agricultural sector by supplying commercial agro-processing businesses. The collective could then also utilise their land and resources more efficiently, through employing sustainable farming practices. Economies of scale would also allow women to have access to better pricing on bulk purchases of seeds, pesticides, fertilisers, and equipment, making them more competitive in the market and able to see higher returns on their investments.

Farming enterprise supplier development (ESD) initiatives were mentioned as another partnership that would go a long way to help small-scale farmers learn and gain market access. Many of South Africa's large corporate agricultural businesses, including Corteva and Tiger Brands, offer programmes to help small scale farmers, by giving them education, advice, support, and a guaranteed markets for their goods.

Holistic education

Under the umbrella of a sound partnership, came the theme of education. It was a golden thread that ran through the afternoon's conversation. Again, it was stressed that women farmers need to have easy access to a holistic overview of the farming ecosystem. Sustainable farming practices, finance, the agricultural value chain, and legal and regulatory frameworks impacting their sector are all subjects that are critical if we want to open the doors to their increased success.

Policy and regulation:

Sasu noted that it is critical for women farmers to understand laws, policies and regulations around farming and food production. Land ownership, environmental policies and food quality standards are just some of the issues that impact farmers on a day-to-day basis. In addition, it was noted, that as farmers expand their operations into the export market or specialised niche sectors, like organic farming, they then also have to be cognisant of additional rules and regulations at play, like the use of pesticides and chemicals, packaging, and food quality.

Finance and business skills:

Access to finance was also raised as a significant challenge for women farmers. Without finance, women are unable to buy equipment, seeds, fertilizers, chemicals, and other inputs required to get stock to market. Finance, however, is more than just having access to money. It was noted by Koku that bookkeeping and financial management skills are vital to any farmer. Without a strong set of accounts, no farmer, she said, can expect to get access to formal finance. If women expect to become leaders in the sector, they need exposure to a wider range of financial and business education. One of Corteva's key initiatives has been to sponsor 30 women to attend a GIBS EDA course specifically designed to educate women on the business of farming.

Value chains:

Exposure to the entire value chain formed part of a multi-faceted discussion. Women in agriculture go beyond women working the land. The agricultural value chain offers women a range of opportunities to make a difference through a myriad of different professions within the sector. An understanding of value chains also means that women can better understand the best alternatives when it comes to accessing markets. They are better positioned to decide whether they can sell their produce at markets, supply corporate food producers like Tiger Brands, or add value to their crops through agro-processing, for example, by turning tomatoes into pasta sauce, or producing fish fingers from part of their daily catch.

Agricultural focus:

Koku and Mauwane, both grassroots farmers, urged women to become experts in one, maybe two products. This way they could focus and hone their expertise to grow a single crop well. The key to successful farming was to increase yields, produce consistently and ensure the quality demanded by commercial buyers. Koku spoke specifically about improving yields. She said small scale farmers will never compete in the commercial sector if their yields are significantly smaller than those of commercial farms, which brought the discussion back to education and learning how to maximise outputs through improved farming methods.

The value of storytelling:

The best education any farmer can get is through talking to fellow farmers, said Mauwane. Farmers entering the sector will only succeed through trial and error. It is for this reason that Mauwane urged farmers to talk about, and listen to, the holistic farming experience. He said there are school fees to be paid. Both Koku and Mauwane urged farmers to be resilient

because things do get better. But story telling goes the other way too. Kazeem urged women farmers to find their voice and tell people what they are doing. Through sharing their stories, women farmers are better able to connect to people in the agriculture ecosystem who can become an invaluable network of support and mentorship.

A practical conclusion

The Q&A session at the end of the discussion revealed a deep need by women, and men, for practical tips and strategies to make their ventures succeed. And perhaps the tip of the day was a simple one. Experience is the only way to learn, start small, volunteer, and get a feel for the business before you invest your life savings. You cannot be a flourishing tomato farmer until you have mulched up a few rotten tomatoes.

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Panelists confirmed:

- Thabiso Malahleha - head of strategy, SANRAL;
- Vivek Mittal - CEO, Africa Infrastructure Development Association (AfIDA); and
- Miriam Altman - commissioner, national planning commission; economist; strategist; and change catalyst.

Date: Thursday, 30 September 2021
Time: 12h00 – 13h00

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