



FEED THE FUTURE

The U.S. Government's Global Hunger & Food Security Initiative

Partnering for Innovation



WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP AWARDS: IMPACT & LESSONS LEARNED

February 2022



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For nearly a decade, the Feed the Future Partnering for Innovation (P4I) program has partnered with the private sector to deliver innovative products and services to smallholder farmers around the globe. Recognizing the important role women business owners play in emerging markets, and the fact that there remain systemic gender gaps in business performance when comparing women-owned businesses to their men-owned counterparts, P4I launched a series of women's entrepreneurship awards starting in 2018. These awards paired five women-owned enterprises with business development service (BDS) providers to deliver tailored, hands-on assistance to improve their capacity, scale their operations, and support long-term growth. This study seeks to understand the impact of these awards on the supported businesses as well as capture key lessons learned from supporting women entrepreneurs through business development support.

While analyzing traditional business metrics was difficult given the diverse nature of the women entrepreneurs' businesses, the impact of COVID-19, and the limited time that elapsed since the awards, this study found tangible improvements in the way the supported entrepreneurs operated and thought about their businesses. Overall, the supported entrepreneurs enthusiastically implemented the advice they received, which led to an improvement in business operations and capabilities. The awards also resulted in the improved leadership capacity of the awardees, which helped them to better run their businesses and manage their teams. Finally, this study found that the supported women entrepreneurs were given the tools they needed to think more strategically about their businesses and to adapt and transition to new growth strategies as a result of P4I support.

P4I's approach to supporting women entrepreneurs evolved over program implementation, highlighting important lessons learned for any project or donor looking to successfully engage women-owned businesses and BDS providers in emerging markets. This study outlines key takeaways, including:

1. Offering a **variety of tailored service options** to women entrepreneurs will help to reach women-led businesses at a range of growth stages who face unique constraints and needs.
2. There is a **growth stage "sweet spot"** when supporting women-owned businesses, where their needs can realistically be addressed through short-term, award-facilitated services.
3. When selecting BDS providers, **local presence and context** is key.
4. **Hands-on diagnostics and support** build trust and ownership throughout the award process.
5. Incorporating **opportunities for co-creation** will ensure that business development services successfully meet the challenges faced by women-led businesses.
6. **Pairing business development support with direct financial support** can scale and maximize impact.

As donors and development practitioners continue to look for ways to "even the playing field" and more successfully and profitably engage women-owned businesses in agricultural-led growth, the results and lessons learned outlined in this study provide insights that can guide discussions on how to structure support to women entrepreneurs to access the knowledge and skills they need to succeed.

I. INTRODUCTION

P4I drives growth and enhances food security in emerging markets by partnering with the private sector to provide access to improved technologies and services for smallholder farmers. Typical P4I partnerships take the form of financially-matched, pay-for-results grants to agribusinesses, whereby funding is disbursed upon the achievement of strategic milestones that represent aligned development and commercial goals. This approach has allowed P4I to work with 75 agribusiness partners in 24 countries since the program began in 2012.

To complement the program’s portfolio of global partnerships, P4I facilitated two women’s entrepreneurship award competitions between 2018 and 2021: the Accelerating Women Entrepreneurs (AWE) Award (2018) and the Growing Women’s Entrepreneurship (GroWE) Award (2019 and 2020). P4I specifically designed these awards to build the capacity of women-owned small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in sub-Saharan Africa to grow their businesses and increase their engagement with smallholder farmers. The awards provided women entrepreneurs with tailored packages of BDS delivered by qualified providers. In total, P4I awarded five entrepreneurship awards to women-led enterprises spanning Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, and Tanzania.

Overview of the P4I Women’s Entrepreneurship Awards

When conceptualizing the women’s entrepreneurship awards, P4I recognized that while women-owned or -operated businesses are essential to economic growth in emerging markets, they disproportionately lack opportunities to succeed. In addition, P4I’s existing partnership program had been gender-blind in selecting agribusinesses with which to partner, resulting in limited inclusion of women-led businesses in its portfolio. Through the women’s entrepreneurship awards, P4I sought to even the playing field by specifically targeting women-led businesses and building their capacity to successfully and profitably participate in agriculture-driven growth.

In tandem, P4I’s experience had shown that business development services were available in the sub-Saharan African market, however there remained limited awareness of their value among SMEs. Moreover, for many women-owned or -operated SMEs, even if they *did* recognize the value of these services, they often did not have the networks to identify appropriate services or the financial resources to pay for them. Through the awards, P4I aimed to reduce this supply-and-demand mismatch for a select number of women entrepreneurs. The program viewed the award as an investment in the capacities of promising women entrepreneurs, as well as in the surrounding ecosystems necessary for them to thrive.

“These are great, strong businesses that are growing [from the] ground up, led by people who have grown up in these countries and [who] understand the markets. And now we’re showing that these [business development services] exist that are specifically designed for these kinds of companies.”

– P4I Staff

The nature of each of the women’s entrepreneurship awards is summarized below. Figure 1 provides a high-level snapshot of the four women-owned enterprises included in this assessment and the unique award services they received.

Accelerating Women Entrepreneurs (AWE) Award – 2018

At the 2017 Global Entrepreneurship Summit, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) announced that the Feed the Future initiative would facilitate a new competition for women-led enterprises to help them access investment advice, business analysis, and other services. P4I supported this initiative by launching the AWE Award in 2018. The AWE Award was designed to provide women-led businesses in sub-Saharan Africa with technical assistance in the form of investor

“There is a huge opportunity out there to help women businesses better tell their story...and use that to attract gender lens investment. [...] Most investors these days have allocations towards women entrepreneurs, but often these investors don’t have the intel or don’t understand the story.”

– Open Capital Consultant

readiness support to help them access capital to scale their businesses. The two winners received investment readiness and investor matchmaking services.

AWE Award Recipients:

- Affiong Williams, ReelFruit, Nigeria
- Edith Wheatley, Rockland Farms, Ghana

Growing Women's Entrepreneurship (GroWE) Award – 2019 and 2020

In 2019, P4I launched the GroWE Award, granting it to two woman-owned companies in 2019 and one more in 2020. The design of the GroWE Award built on lessons learned from the AWE Award round. Instead of targeting companies in search of one unique service (investor readiness support), P4I asked applicants to identify their *own* business development and expansion needs in their applications, thereby attracting a more diverse pool of women-led enterprises. Once the winners were identified, P4I worked hand-in-hand with the entrepreneurs to select their preferred BDS provider from a shortlist of candidates, and co-create a customized package of technical assistance with the provider. Consequently, GroWE granted more decision-making power and ownership to the award winners themselves to identify and fulfill their unique business needs.

GroWE Award Recipients:

- Sylvia Natukunda, Farm Reap, Uganda (2019)
- Linnet Akol, Krystal Ice, Uganda (2019)
- Hadija Jabari, GBRI/Eat Fresh, Tanzania (2020)

Background: Women-led SMEs and Business Development Services in Sub-Saharan Africa

SMEs are a key driver of economic growth, accounting for two-thirds of all formal jobs in developing countries.¹ Moreover, SMEs can create a more diversified and resilient economy, enhance innovation, and support development goals related to food security, better health and education, and climate change mitigation.²

In sub-Saharan Africa, women are more likely than men to be entrepreneurs, making up 58 percent of the region's self-employed population.³ Despite their prominence, women-led SMEs continue to face disproportionate constraints compared to those led by men, including inadequate financing, lack of market information, and limited networks and business linkages.⁴ Consequently, it is no surprise that women-owned businesses consistently perform worse than those owned by men—a 2019 World Bank analysis of 14 sub-Saharan African countries revealed that women-owned enterprises have fewer employees and lower average sales, and capture less value-addition.⁵ Across the continent, policymakers and development practitioners are increasingly recognizing that further action must be taken to expand opportunities for women entrepreneurs and to elevate their role as agents of economic growth and job creation.

Existing evidence suggests that access to business development services can be an important lever of change, assisting entrepreneurs to run their businesses more effectively and access much-needed finance. Despite the proven benefits of these services, there continues to be low commercial uptake of BDS by SMEs due to issues such as accessibility, affordability, quality of services, and, in some contexts, the distortionary effects of donor-funded programs.⁶ Programs like P4I are addressing this underinvestment by supporting SMEs to access commercially-sourced, external support services.

Figure 1. Award Recipient Profiles

This assessment focused on four out of the five total award recipients.⁷

Award Recipient Profiles

ReelFruit is a dried fruits and nuts packaging and distribution business based in Lagos, Nigeria. Founder and owner **Affiong Williams** launched ReelFruit in 2012. The company is a major shareholder of a subsidiary farming business that supplies fresh mangoes sourced from smallholder farmers.



Award Services

AWE Award 2018

ReelFruit received investment readiness services from **Open Capital**, including support in developing and analyzing financial statements, preparing a pitch, and developing investment materials.

Farm Reap is a yogurt producer based in Kampala, Uganda that distributes its products throughout Kampala, Wakiso, and Mukono districts. Founder and CEO **Sylvia Natukunda** launched Farm Reap in 2013. The company purchases milk directly from two milk collection centers that source from smallholder farmers.



GroWE Award 2019

Farm Reap received marketing and distribution support from **Challenges Group** to facilitate its access to new supply sources and end markets and to bolster its packaging and branding abilities to better reach customers with its products.

Krystal Ice is a producer of natural fruit ice pops based in Kampala, Uganda. Founder and director **Linnet Akol** launched Krystal Ice in 2017. The company sources its fruit from smallholder farmer cooperatives.



GroWE Award 2019

Krystal Ice received marketing and distribution support from **Open Capital** to facilitate its access to new supply sources and end markets and to bolster its packaging and branding abilities to better reach customers with its products.

GBRI/Eat Fresh (GBRI) specializes in growing, processing, and exporting vegetables and fruits to target markets in Europe. Headquartered in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, founder and managing director **Hadija Jabiri** launched GBRI in 2013. The company works with contracted smallholder farmers in Iringa and Njombe regions.



GroWE Award 2020

GBRI received a market diversification plan from **Challenges Group** to identify potential markets and product lines. GBRI also received investment readiness services, including preparing a pitch and developing investment materials.

Study Methodology

This analysis of P4I's women's entrepreneurship awards combined a literature review with 17 in-depth interviews with award winners, BDS providers, and current and former P4I staff between December 2021 and January 2022. The study explored the awards' design, selection, and implementation processes to extract relevant lessons learned. To assess the impact of the awards on the recipient entrepreneurs and their firms, the study examined both changes in direct capabilities and company performance, as well as a number of precursors to growth, including non-financial operational indicators such as leadership capacity and diversification of growth strategies.

There are several limitations to this study:

- **Sample size.** The exercise only explored the experiences of a very specific subset of women-led agribusinesses in sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, takeaways are difficult to generalize to all women entrepreneurs in emerging markets. Where possible, the study supplemented primary data with evidence from relevant literature to substantiate the findings and recommendations and make them more widely applicable.
- **Assessment timeframe.** Due to the short timeframe of the assessment and limited availability of some of the women entrepreneurs, the study was not able to explore their reflections in great depth. As such, the study relied on the triangulation of other sources, including the entrepreneurs' previous communications with the P4I team and the perspectives of the BDS providers and current and past P4I staff.
- **COVID-19.** The GroWE Award winners received their BDS award packages during the COVID-19 pandemic, an event that has caused and continues to cause unprecedented challenges for businesses and the global economy. COVID-19 also disrupted the services provided to the GroWE Award recipients, as well as the enterprise-level outcomes these services were meant to engender. The study was unable to compare the assessment findings to a counterfactual scenario in which the COVID-19 pandemic did not occur.
- **Timeframe for outcomes.** This assessment was conducted within a short timeframe following the completion of GroWE Award services before full outcomes could materialize.
- **Input bias.** The study hypothesized that, since the entrepreneurs and the BDS providers benefitted from the women's entrepreneurship awards, they may be disinclined to provide honest opinions about the process. To promote balance, the team made sure to capture their recommendations on how women entrepreneurs could be better supported and how the award process could be improved.
- **Wider ecosystem.** The study acknowledges that BDS is only one means to improve enterprise performance. SME success is dependent on many factors, including a policy and operating environment conducive to competitiveness and access to finance—factors that were not included in the scope of this assessment.

II. AWARD IMPACT

This study worked to understand the tangible impact of the women’s entrepreneurship awards on the recipient firms’ business operations and success. While an analysis of financial performance would be the most compelling metric through which to measure impact, financial performance outcomes were difficult to detect and analyze given 1) the effects of COVID-19, 2) the short timeframe between award support and this study, and 3) the fact that some of the recipients were not able to wholly implement their recommendations and strategies due to various constraints discussed in the following sections. This study was, however, able to identify three levels of impact as a result of award implementation that the evidence base has shown to be positively associated with future financial performance:

- 1) **Support-specific capabilities**
- 2) **Leadership capacities**
- 3) **Ability to adapt and transition to new growth strategies**

Improved Support-specific Capabilities

The value of the award-facilitated business development services was evidenced by the entrepreneurs’ immediate take-up of the advice they received and the positive outcomes that resulted from those actions. For those entrepreneurs that received their award packages in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, services were particularly critical in bolstering resilience and adaptability.

Having received the full package of award deliverables, all of the supported businesses were keen to implement the tools and recommendations they had received.

Based on the market assessment conducted by Challenges Group, GBRI expanded beyond its headquarters in Dar es Salaam and established another operations facility in Iringa. Through this new facility, the company increased its number of vendors from 70 to 320 and is now sourcing bananas from additional smallholder farmers. While GBRI has yet to close any investment deals, Hadija Jabiri has used the investor readiness support she received to pitch her business to three investors and is hoping to close a deal by the end of 2022.

“Before [the support] [...] it was just us trying to talk to stakeholders out there and not having guiding materials to present the company in a professional way...at least now, with a pitch deck that [Challenges Group] helped to prepare, it’s easier for me to approach an investor and say, ‘Can I present? I have a pitch deck ready for you.’”

– Hadija Jabiri, GBRI Founder and Managing Director

Another success story in accessing finance, three years after her award, Affiong Williams of ReelFruit was able to raise an impressive US \$3 million in investment and has continued to engage with USAID. While she was able to raise this capital on her own, she attributes Open Capital’s support to helping her identify and fill information gaps in order to attract investors.

For Linnet Akol and Sylvia Natukunda, the support of their BDS providers was crucial in navigating the new reality ushered in by the COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged just weeks before their services began. In addition to the opportune business advice they received, both of the women expressed that the psychological support offered by their BDS providers was vital in maintaining a positive outlook during challenging times.

“As COVID hit, most of [Krystal Ice’s] clients stopped right away because she was selling to schools and events. [Ms. Akol] had to close the factory. And she was hit very hard. So she was at a temporary standstill, and just having somebody come alongside her to support her to think through what she needed to do to navigate this crazy COVID world... she was incredibly grateful for that.”

– Open Capital Consultant

“I attended many meetings where people were crying saying, ‘I don’t know what to do.’ I think I would have responded probably like them when the government announced a lockdown—I was folding my things to go home, sit and wait for re-opening. But then Challenges came saying, ‘No, no, no, you need to be planning and thinking about how you’re going to respond, how you’re going to continue selling and how you’re going to keep afloat while this happens.’ So, they helped me mentally and in terms of capacity.”

– Sylvia Natukunda, Farm Reap Founder and CEO

In Linnet Akol’s case, she was quick to organize herself and her team to prioritize the implementation of Krystal Ice’s new distribution and markets strategies, including by reducing her staffing and re-orienting the company’s marketing strategy to focus on online sales. Six months after operationalizing the recommendations she received, she was able to recoup her sales (which had dropped by 60–70 percent during COVID-19) and bring her full team back on board.

In order to respond to COVID-19, Challenges Group encouraged Sylvia Natukunda to launch an online sales channel and formalize her partnerships with supermarket clients to ensure sound and reliable business relationships. While COVID-19 initially resulted in a reduction in Farm Reap’s sales figures by 50 percent, the company reported a 12 percent *increase* in average sales only six months after the onset of the pandemic. Ms. Natukunda has also maintained communications with Challenges Group to discuss ideas for future funding opportunities, including through the Uganda Green Enterprise Finance Accelerator, which is backed by the European Union.

Mentorship & Networks

The appreciation expressed by those women that received their award services at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic alluded to women entrepreneurs’ need for mentors and networks. There is a well-documented body of literature that suggests the value of business networks and how “peer support can have [a] significant effect on women entrepreneurs’ ability to learn and apply new business skills”⁸ and “mentors and networks provide intangible benefits in terms of support and increased confidence.”⁹ Studies also show that women that are paired with mentors or given access to other women entrepreneurs “benefit from exposure to useful public, private, and peer resources.”¹⁰



Sylvia Natukunda at Farm Reap’s production facility

Strengthened Leadership Capacities

Award-facilitated business development services enhanced the individual leadership capacities of the women entrepreneurs, particularly their capacity to communicate effectively with their teams and delegate responsibilities.

For example, Affiong Williams reflected on how the award experience allowed her to better communicate her vision internally to her management team and involve them in defining the company’s strategic objectives. Linnet Akol felt that her increased knowledge and confidence to apply new marketing principles reinforced her leadership skills by facilitating better and more effective communication with her team. Both Sylvia Natukunda and Hadija Jabiri shared that Challenges Group helped them strategize around human resources and the delegation of responsibilities—as a result, Ms. Natukunda hired an accountant to share her workload and Ms. Jabiri worked with a team member to build their capacity to take on more responsibilities.

“[The] value the process brought me as a leader was being able to involve my management team in some strategic discussions, which was very helpful to them. So, the exercise did not just involve me providing data, but it included interviews with my management team, etc. And then I think that was valuable for me, because it helped me disseminate some of the strategic vision we had as a business to my managers and walk them through that process of trying to...define and communicate the strategic objectives of the business.”

– Affiong Williams, ReelFruit Founder and CEO

“When I started this company, it was a very small company...With GBRI growing, there was a point where it felt like things were getting out of control. I was no longer managing one or two people, I was managing 100...I felt like I needed help [...] The [consultants’] guidance was given to my team [including my operations manager]. Now it’s not only me doing everything 100 percent. There is another person in the organization who can take part in some of the responsibilities. It really helped GBRI, but on the personal level as well...it has changed me as a leader, to do the right thing for the growth of the company [...] The feeling of being overwhelmed is no longer there.”

– Hadija Jabiri, GBRI Founder and Managing Director

Capacity to Explore New Growth Strategies

The BDS experience gave entrepreneurs the space to envision multi-pronged and ambitious trajectories for the growth of their companies.

“Where we helped [Ms. Akol] the most was to think about her business completely differently—completely freeing her mind of past limitations and really thinking about what the opportunity is. She was a really good entrepreneur, but she had trouble because she had been doing this [business] for many years, and she was stuck in terms of running the business day to day, rather than stepping out and thinking of the big picture vision.”

– Open Capital Consultant

While the purpose of facilitating access to BDS was to assist the four women entrepreneurs in identifying tangible solutions to their unique constraints, the experience as a whole also helped them think more strategically and ambitiously about their companies’ growth and to pursue new avenues for achieving that growth.

For example, Open Capital believed that their support to Krystal Ice helped Linnet Akol take the time to consider all of her growth opportunities, rather than just trying to be better at what she was already doing. Similarly, the support encouraged Hadija Jabiri to envision greater opportunities for the growth of GBRI—not only through pursuing export markets, but also by increasing her company’s domestic base by expanding into new regions.

For the GroWE Award recipients, the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic was in some ways considered fortuitous in that it necessitated a new way of thinking about their business strategies. For Sylvia Natukunda, the

pandemic pressured her to approach Farm Reap’s business operations in a more integrated and holistic manner. Ms. Natukunda stated that prior to receiving business development services, Farm Reap had relied mainly on the affordable pricing of its products to penetrate the market—for example, the enterprise was among the first companies to cater to families by selling yogurt in large 2-liter and 5-liter containers. However, by the time Ms. Natukunda received the GroWE Award, new competitors in the market were pursuing this same strategy. Her experience with Challenges Group inspired her to think more creatively, and she now has plans to launch products that will appeal to new customer segments in new market spaces, including through online visibility.

“It’s probably one of the most well-timed [assignments] just because we had just entered COVID-19. [My team] and I were actually very glad that we were working with [Ms. Natukunda] at the time, because we helped her to shape the conversation—to think about how to link distribution and marketing to financials and profitability.”

– Challenges Group Consultant

Confronting Crises

Literature suggests certain firm attributes may be associated with growth post- and even during times of crisis. Research has demonstrated that adaptive behavior (i.e., changes to business models) and organizational change are important determinants of firms’ survival and performance during crises.^{11,12} Moreover, firms that tend to experience sales growth during a recession are those that exhibit an entrepreneurial orientation and strategic flexibility.¹³ Emerging literature on COVID-19 also suggests that while the pandemic has left many firms financially weaker, those that sustained research, development, and innovation during the crisis had better survival chances, stronger growth, and higher profitability.¹⁴



Affiong Williams with her team at ReelFruit

III. LESSONS LEARNED

The results of P4I’s women’s entrepreneurship awards informed important takeaways on how to best support women-owned businesses through tailored business development support. These lessons guided the evolution of P4I’s women’s entrepreneurship awards (from AWE to GroWE) over the life of the program and can inform discussion and program design for future activities seeking to build the capacity and success of women-owned businesses.

I. Offer a Range of Tailored Service Options

The P4I women’s entrepreneurship awards demonstrated that by asking women entrepreneurs to identify their own business needs and offering a diverse menu of services to choose from, the program was able to reach women-led businesses at a range of different growth stages and better tailor services to their unique constraints and needs.

P4I’s AWE Award specifically targeted women entrepreneurs who were seeking to grow their companies through external investment, but who found themselves at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts in articulating their business proposition and identifying and engaging with potential investors. The AWE Award provided recipients with investment readiness and investor match-making support, an important but niche service.

“We learned early on...that we don't know these businesses as well as the business owners do, and we should really let them drive a lot of the conversation.”

– Former P4I Staff

Following the AWE Award, there was growing recognition within P4I that not every promising woman-led business would fit the same growth model or be in a position to seek outside investment. In order to target and meet the needs of a more diverse range of women-owned SMEs at different growth stages, P4I would need to broaden its service offerings beyond investment assistance. Feedback from AWE Award recipients also influenced P4I’s decision to consider offering other types of support. During their exit interviews, AWE recipients recommended that additional types of assistance—for instance market assessments or human resources support—would be beneficial.

Consequently, for the GroWE Award P4I widened its menu of support services and asked applicants to *self-identify* the unique business challenges that they were facing and how those challenges could be addressed through tailored BDS. Structuring the award application process this way proved valuable in making the award process “open and not restrictive,” as one GroWE winner expressed. Asking the women to identify their own needs also served to jump-start the co-creation process, empowering award recipients with decision-making power from the start. For example, Linnet Akol identified Krystal Ice’s need for distribution and supply chain management services in order to diversify the company’s distribution channels and markets. Hadija Jabiri pinpointed GBRI’s need for a market assessment—with a focus on export opportunities—along with a strategy for accessing investment capital.



GBRI sources horticultural products from contracted smallholder farmers

While GroWE expanded the options for BDS support, it was not dismissive of investor readiness and aspects of this goal were incorporated into award services where appropriate. For example, given GBRI’s self-identified need for support in attracting investors, the company received investment readiness support, including through the co-development of a pitch deck. Services provided to Krystal Ice included an investor landscape analysis and recommendations on best practices in seeking financing. As a P4I team member noted, “even though investment readiness was not the primary or most important goal, it was still an end goal, and so including aspects of it was still important.”¹⁵

2. Identify “Right Fit” Businesses

One of the elements of the awards’ success was identifying women-led businesses that were at an appropriate growth stage (neither too early stage nor too advanced), whose challenges could realistically be addressed through award-facilitated services, and that were ready and willing to adopt the resulting business advice.

P4I’s competitive processes for selecting award recipients served as a crucial targeting exercise to identify women-led enterprises that were not only seeking the type of external advisory support that could be facilitated by the entrepreneurship awards, but that were also prepared to adopt and benefit from the resulting guidance and recommendations.

All four enterprises of study were established businesses that the P4I application review committees considered growth-oriented—in their applications, they expressed an ambition to scale their businesses and to reach external markets, but indicated that they did not have the required internal capacity or resources to take their businesses to the next level. While the review committees assessed the applicants based on a

number of pre-defined selection criteria (e.g., strength of business model, smallholder farmer impact potential, organizational capacity), equally important was identifying firms in the “sweet spot”¹⁶ where award services would be able to help unlock the next phase of growth.

For example, ReelFruit was prioritized as an award recipient against other “high-capacity” firms because the company demonstrated that it was at a point where external capital was necessary to start scaling the business, including by investing in improved processing facilities and using working capital to manage fruit drying and packaging.¹⁷ ReelFruit’s challenge was that the owner did not have prior experience pitching to larger-scale investors, a constraint that the award was well-positioned to address. ReelFruit—along with the other award recipients—struck the balance between appropriate growth phase, good fit for the available services, and readiness and willingness to bring changes into fruition.

“We caught [ReelFruit] at just the right stage to really add tremendous amounts of value with investment readiness support. [...] I think engaging with an entrepreneur when they’re just at the right points of the trajectory inflection can actually be really powerful.”

– Open Capital Consultant

“The number one requirement for BDS to be successful is for the businesses to actually want the support [...] [For these awards], I think the biggest thing is that these women-owned businesses came to us and said, ‘We know this is a barrier to our growth, this is something we want support with, can you help us with that process?’”

– P4I Staff

“I started [a] business without involving consultants because I didn't have the money to do that. So, everything I was doing, I was just using the knowledge [I had] acquired, I was just on my own. But as business started growing, I started getting different trainings here and there. And I just realized that I cannot continue doing business like this, I needed to start engaging experts. For example [...] I realized that I needed to have a marketing strategy, something that would guide me on how to expand.”

– Linnet Akol, Krystal Ice Founder and Director



Linnet Akol with her team at Krystal Ice

3. Use Professional Service Providers with Deep Local Knowledge

Facilitating BDS through a provider with relevant and localized expertise, and including women entrepreneurs in the provider selection process, helped to ensure that award services met the needs and expectations of the award recipients.

P4I’s process for selecting BDS providers to deliver services to the award recipients evolved between the AWE and GroWE Award rounds. Under the AWE Award, P4I competitively *pre-selected* the consulting company Open Capital to provide investment readiness support—when ReelFruit and Rockland Farms were selected as award recipients, by default they received services from Open Capital. However, as with the evolution of support services provided between AWE and GroWE, P4I adopted a co-creation approach under GroWE to ensure that the women entrepreneurs were the decision-makers in terms of both the *types* of support they received and *who* provided this support.

“Sometimes [some entrepreneurs] want grant money, like, ‘I can get my own consultant.’ But for me, I have really appreciated that the consultants...were [presented to us]. I believe if I was to get consultants here in Uganda [myself], they would not have gone through the [same] recruitment process and I would not have gotten as good a consultant as Open Capital.”

– Linnet Akol, Krystal Ice Founder and Director

Under the GroWE Award, P4I first facilitated an open call for Expressions of Interest (EOIs) from BDS providers across the continent of Africa, receiving 127 EOIs in total from providers offering a range of skills and services. Once the GroWE Award recipients were selected, P4I then vetted and shortlisted suitable BDS providers from its roster based on a series of criteria, including having a local presence in the award recipient’s country of operations, previous experience working with women-owned enterprises, strong technical expertise in the agribusiness market, and a history of facilitating high-quality co-creation and diagnostics processes.¹⁸ Shortlisted providers were invited to submit proposals articulating their capabilities and approach to delivering the requested services. P4I then worked with the women entrepreneurs to review the proposals and select a provider with the requisite technical expertise and knowledge.

Therefore, moving from AWE to GroWE, P4I’s role became one of a BDS “matchmaker” between supply (pre-vetted BDS providers) and demand (women-led enterprises), a process in which P4I found it critical to involve

the award recipients themselves. It is interesting to note that the women entrepreneurs were encouraged to submit their own suggested BDS providers to include in this process, but none chose or were able to do so, emphasizing the value P4I added by bringing a roster of vetted, proven service providers.

This additional layer of targeting allowed P4I and the award winners to identify BDS providers that were most qualified to meet the award recipients' unique needs. In selecting the providers, P4I and the GroWE recipients prioritized technical knowledge and local expertise, as well as a history of supporting agri-SMEs working with smallholder farmers on the continent.^{19,20} Specialized knowledge was a critical criterion—the importance of this is supported by experience from Eastern and Southern Africa suggesting that SMEs' wariness of BDS often stems from a history of receiving generalized knowledge from these services, which entrepreneurs believe lacks usefulness and relevance to their individual needs.^{21,22} Local knowledge was also incredibly important to the award recipients—one winner commented that only a BDS provider that is embedded within the local environment of the enterprise can bring the tacit knowledge and intuition necessary to successfully support an entrepreneur.

Ultimately, both AWE and GroWE recipients appreciated the tailored expertise and local understanding that the BDS providers brought to the assignment. GroWE recipients also valued that they were included in the process of selecting the service providers most equipped to address their needs.

“I would say [a big value add was] their expertise working with companies like mine. They are very agribusiness-focused. They've done consulting work with agribusinesses across the continent that came to bear. We got experienced, senior, very competent staff to work on [the award].”

– Affiong Williams, ReelFruit Founder and CEO

“Local consultants understand the business environment. They understand the challenges [that] are there. So, when they're coming to you, they're not learning new things, but rather, they already have the baseline, they know the challenges. But if you are having external people who maybe are not as familiar, they Google some of the challenges or they hear from third parties.”

– Hadija Jabiri, GBRI Founder and Managing Director

4. Incorporate Hands-on Diagnostics and Support

A combination of data-driven diagnostics and a transparent and hands-on approach created a sense of trust and ownership of the service provision process, allowing P4I award recipients to not only co-create their award, but to co-manage it as well.

Diagnostics

A strong diagnostics phase during the inception period of each of the awards was critical to wholly understand and dissect each enterprise's constraints, as well as to build a tailored scope of work that balanced ambition with reality. All four companies received an initial diagnostics package as part of their services, and the BDS providers invested significant up-front time in understanding their clients' businesses, needs, and ambitions.

With ReelFruit, Open Capital spent three to four weeks assessing the business, its growth strategy, its likelihood of raising capital, and what type of support would be most relevant, including conducting a trip to Nigeria. Krystal Ice also benefited from Open Capital's early-stage focus on data-driven diagnostics, enabling meaningful analysis that led to key insights and recommendations.

“[Having] built-in time for a bit of deep dive analysis into an organization...is going to produce better value and a better buy-in for any implementation activities, any advice, any changes that are going to happen. I think that the up-front, making-the-time-to-get-to-know-each-other [effort] is vitally important.”

– Challenges Group Consultant

Challenges Group utilized its extensive diagnostics toolkit to support both Farm Reap and GBRI. Farm Reap's diagnostics included a comprehensive marketing and distribution study that collected over 150 relevant datapoints. This was followed by an audit to assess the strength of Farm Reap's brand, including its online visibility, packaging, and brand promises, as well as supermarket and customer perceptions. When the pandemic hit, Challenges Group absorbed the information generated by these initial tools into a COVID-19 resilience framework that was used to further assess Farm Reap's positioning.

With GBRI, Challenges Group utilized six different tools, including a training needs assessment, the previously-mentioned COVID-19 resilience framework, and an enterprise workbook to capture information on the company's leadership and management team skill set, structure, strategic planning, and financial position, as well as an understanding of market demand and customer focus and the company's economic, social, and environmental impacts.²³ These diagnostic processes and analysis were important for defining problems, setting expectations, and managing the ambitions of the entrepreneurs.



Hadija Jabiri with some of GBRI's fresh vegetable products

“You want to have the data and the traction to help them make the best decision [...] but you need to have a CEO that has realistic expectations around what their growth ambitions should be. And more importantly, as the BDS provider, how do you get them to that place? And realistically, how long is it going to take?”

– Challenges Group Consultant

Hands-on Service Delivery

Following these initial diagnostics, the BDS providers used a structured and hands-on approach to guide their clients through implementation, ensuring transparency and co-ownership of the delivery of strategic objectives. All four of the award winners highly appreciated this engaged approach. For example, Linnet Akol valued that Open Capital set up meetings with her to walk through each implementation stage and ensure that she had a solid understanding of how to implement her new marketing strategy. Challenges Group noted that getting the buy-in and active participation of the women entrepreneurs was critical to a successful delivery.

For the GroWE Award recipients, while COVID-19 curtailed in-person interaction, the BDS providers and entrepreneurs still found ways to connect frequently. For instance, Challenges Group and Sylvia Natukunda met virtually once a week from September–December 2020 and were able to meet a few times in person to discuss specific implementation areas.²⁴ That said, all of the GroWE Award recipients shared that corresponding with their BDS providers primarily through virtual communications, as opposed to in-person engagements,

“One thing that I really appreciated with [Open Capital] was that they were hands-on. They really kept on asking questions. [And] what they produced was really, really tailored to Krystal Ice.”

– Linnet Akol, Krystal Ice Founder and Director

ultimately weakened the overall experience. The women conveyed that in-person interactions would have simplified service delivery and made it more meaningful.

“I think [the experience] was really good, it was more hands-on compared to [my previous BDS experience]. The support was also problem-specific because we were focusing on marketing and distribution [...] It was not this top-down approach, but more like a consultation and checking with each other.”

– Sylvia Natukunda, Farm Reap Founder and CEO

“Getting to meet each other, getting them to meet stakeholders—that was missing. There is some information that is easier to get when you’re speaking to a person face-to-face, unlike when you’re having a phone conversation. They could have probed and gotten more details from farmers, from vendors, from other stakeholders [in person].”

– Hadija Jabiri, GBRI Founder and Managing Director

5. Facilitate Co-creation at All Stages of Support

Incorporating opportunities for co-creation throughout the award cycle—from proposal through service provision—ensured that business development services met the challenges faced by the women-led businesses.

The design and management of P4I’s core partnerships is guided by the program’s co-creation approach, which seeks to meet private sector companies where they are at and deliberately align and achieve shared development and commercial objectives.²⁵ As already evinced in the preceding sections, P4I incorporated these same elements of co-creation wherever possible in the entrepreneurship awards. While co-creation was less of a focus in the AWE Award, P4I emphasized it heavily in the GroWE Award, where recipients were intimately involved in 1) self-identifying their own challenges and constraints, 2) selecting a BDS provider most suited to their needs, 3) defining and designing the BDS deliverables, and 4) working closely with the BDS providers to drive the exercise and ensure services met their needs.

P4I, the award recipients, and the BDS providers agreed that this co-creation approach created the right conditions that enabled a successful partnership between women entrepreneurs and their BDS providers.



Sylvia Nutukunda outside a milk collection center that Farm Reap sources from

“Our goal was to uncover what the problems were but to let [Farm Reap] decide on the course of action. I think the biggest success point was [this] co-creation and the fact that there was ownership from the CEO. She led on everything, and we worked together to prioritize what was really important.”

– Challenges Group Consultant

“In comparison to many other consultants that we have had in the past, I feel like in this particular assignment there was co-creating. I was engaged 100 percent in everything, starting from selecting a consultant. [P4I and I] had a very long interview trying to assess my needs, we came up with the areas where the award could support me...in terms of technical [assistance], we selected consultants together, the profiles [of the shortlisted BDS providers] were also sent to me [...] I felt like this was more engaging [than my previous experiences] [...] I would want that specific theme to continue, because it helps SMEs to get results, because they have participated [in] designing a solution.”

– Hadija Jabiri, GBRI Founder and Managing Director

6. Add Financing Options to Ensure the Operationalization of Strategic Guidance

Without a direct financial assistance component to the award, some entrepreneurs faced challenges in implementing their new strategies and realizing the full potential of the business development services.

For companies like Farm Reap and Krystal Ice, which are smaller in scale than ReelFruit or GBRI, the technical assistance was highly valuable but insufficient to overcome their identified constraints. Sylvia Natukunda and Linnet Akol both stated that they did not have the internal financial resources necessary to implement all of the strategic recommendations provided by their BDS consultants. From both entrepreneurs’ perspectives, they felt that either receiving support to raise capital or directly receiving a tranche of funding in addition to BDS would have helped them operationalize their new strategies.

“If the support is divided between BDS and the other part goes directly into the company, then one will probably see bigger results. Otherwise, the implementation part becomes weak because there are financial constraints. If there is a way to go further [...]—not a grant, it could actually be a loan—I think it could go a long way to support women to implement the ideas and to launch them. So, for me, the space for financing would actually help.”

– Sylvia Natukunda, Farm Reap Founder and CEO

Indeed, while providing business development services can result in some gains, evidence has shown that these interventions can be “strengthened if dovetailed with access to finance initiatives.”²⁶ Given that access to capital remains an ongoing constraint for women-led enterprises, studies have shown that large cash grants (tied to business plan competitions) can trigger hiring and increases in sales and profits.²⁷



Linnet Akol outside Krystal Ice’s production facility

IV. CONCLUSION

P4I's experience has shown that providing women entrepreneurs with co-designed, tailored, locally-led business development support offers an opportunity to help them expand their management skills and grow their businesses. The entrepreneurs supported through the program's AWE and GroWE Awards learned skills that improved their capacity to run their businesses effectively and accessed the tools they needed to scale operations, access financing, and make informed and strategic decisions.

In Nigeria, Affiong Williams of ReelFruit received investment readiness services, including support in preparing a pitch deck and developing investment materials, which helped her better explain her company's value to investors and secure financing. In Uganda, Sylvia Natukunda of Farm Reap and Linnet Akol of Krystal Ice received marketing and distribution support that helped them access new end markets and pivot in response to COVID-19. In Tanzania, Hadija Jabiri of GBRI received support to diversify her markets and product lines and prepare for external investment.

Lessons learned from P4I's award support to these entrepreneurs highlight important takeaways on how donors and development practitioners can best meet the needs of growth-oriented women-led SMEs. This includes offering a range of service options to reach more women with services tailored to their unique constraints. P4I also found that there is a growth stage "sweet spot" to supporting women-owned businesses where their needs can realistically be addressed through short-term, award-facilitated services. Identifying this "sweet spot" and using it to target the companies best-positioned for support will help ensure the success of award programming. When identifying BDS providers to work with women entrepreneurs, local presence and context is key—hiring BDS providers with extensive experience and located in the same country brings an innate sense of trust and understanding, while also allowing for more hands-on support. Engaging in co-creation of award scopes with the recipient entrepreneurs ensures that the business development services provided appropriately meet the challenges faced by women-led businesses. Finally, pairing business development support with direct financial assistance can help to further scale and maximize impact.

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