



Utrecht
University

Orange Corners Research Conference 2026

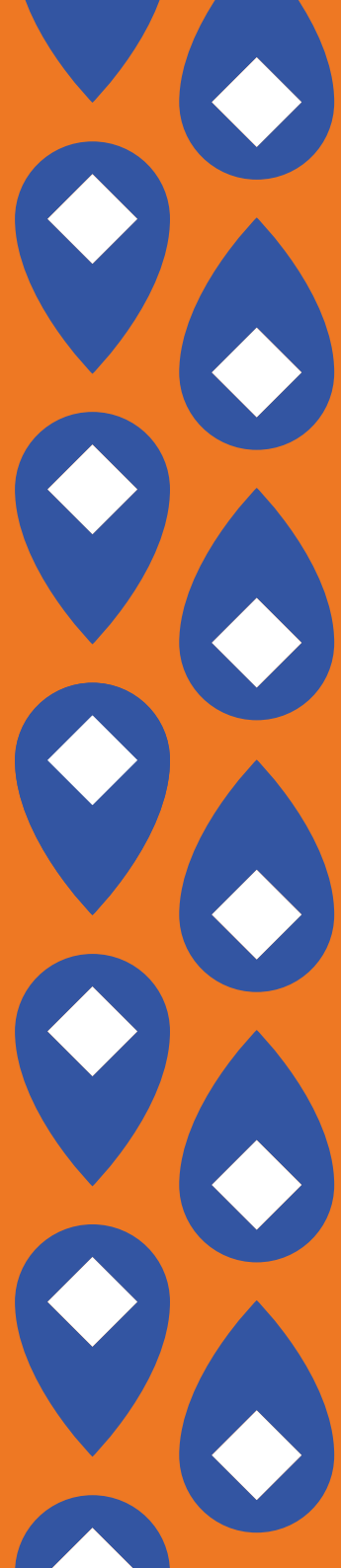
Data-driven insights for impactful
entrepreneurship support in low-
and middle-income countries

14 April 2026
The Hague, the Netherlands





ORANGE CORNERS





When I joined Orange Corners in late 2022, I was thrilled to hear that they wanted to do more research with the data they had been collecting. At that point, I was wrapping up my part-time PhD, so I knew firsthand how important it is to link theory with practice and policy. But what really blew me away was the volume of data Orange Corners had collected. Pre- and post-surveys, and follow-ups a year later from 21 countries; nearly 2,000 data points each year. On top of that, quarterly review forms from local implementing partners, entrepreneurial ecosystem mapping and in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs. As a pracademic, I was honestly in awe of all these data. Most researchers would love to have (access to) this set of data!

There was just one challenge: we had limited budget to finance research activities, and we had to set everything up from scratch. But I thought, "No problem, I can do this!" And so, we embarked on an incredible journey. We started by developing a research agenda, prioritising what Orange Corners and our local implementing partners wanted to explore. We developed a strategy for partnering with universities through a joint in-kind contribution. Universities, from full professors to PhD students, offered their time and knowledge in exchange for access to data and network. Collaborative research became real, with all of us learning and improving together, while also bringing the implementing partners into the process. What an experience!

What I did not anticipate is how long (academic) research actually takes. While we kicked off the first projects in 2024, it is only now, in 2026, that we have the results of our first batch of nine research projects. Three of them have already led to significant changes in the Orange Corners programming, and all three are currently under review in academic journals.

And perhaps an unexpected, but rewarding, side effect is the value it brings to my colleagues. It is not just the researchers and the implementing partners who are involved in research. Each research project involves at least one Programme Advisor from the Orange Corners headquarters. In their own words: "With the research agenda, we have really taken Orange Corners to the next level... the results show that academic and practical relevance do not just coexist, they complement each other!"

We are excited to share our journey and the insights we have gained with you today. We hope this does not only provide you with valuable takeaways to improving entrepreneurship support, but also inspires you to embrace research and theory structurally in your own activities. As we continue this journey, we look forward to also continue learning together and strengthening our collective impact on the field of entrepreneurship support in low- and middle-income countries.



Dr. Ir. Milou Derks - Research Coordinator



Over the next decade, 1.2 billion young people across low- and middle-income countries will reach working age. Yet only 400 million jobs are expected to be created. That is where Orange Corners comes in, to create jobs and impact through entrepreneurship.

Orange Corners supports young entrepreneurs in Africa, Asia and the Middle East by providing training, mentorship, networks and funding to help them launch and scale their businesses.

To ensure these businesses can thrive, we also focus on strengthening the entrepreneurial ecosystems in the 21 countries in which we operate, through a variety of projects tailored to each local context. Working with a wide coalition of national and international partners, we strive to stimulate the adoption of new rules and regulations that enable the growth of startups, to help knowledge institutes integrate entrepreneurship into education and to empower financiers to fund early-stage businesses.

Orange Corners currently has implementing partners in Algeria, Angola, Bangladesh, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ghana, Iraq (Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region), Jordan, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique, Nigeria, the Palestinian Territories, Senegal, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan and Tunisia. Since 2017, these implementing partners have trained over 4,300 entrepreneurs and supported over 15,000 jobs. Moreover, working with Dutch and international incubators, NGOs, governments and private partners enables us to unleash the immense power of entrepreneurship to create a more sustainable, inclusive and prosperous society. In this way, we actively contribute to SDGs such as Gender Equality (5), Decent Work and Economic Growth (8), Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure (9) and Partnerships for the Goals (17).

Orange Corners is an initiative of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and managed by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO).





Through our monitoring, evaluation and learning system, we collect a large amount of data on the Orange Corners entrepreneurship training programmes in 20 low- and middle-income countries. We not only use insights from these data to structurally improve our own programmes, but we also actively share our learnings with both academia and the wider entrepreneurship support community. Our goal is to contribute to and influence entrepreneurship support theory and practice.

As Orange Corners, we have prioritised four research areas and two cross-cutting themes where we focus our research efforts on:

- Entrepreneurial ecosystem development
- Scaling businesses in low- and middle-income countries
- Entrepreneurship in fragile contexts
- Agripreneurship

Gender and digitalisation act as cross-cutting themes, influencing every research line.

The Orange Corners research agenda helps us assess the efficiency of our programmes and identify areas for improvement. By collaborating with universities and professors, we ensure that our research goes beyond merely sharing best practices and that we generate fact-based, evidence-driven conclusions.

These insights not only help us refine and improve our own programmes, but also contribute to the broader field of entrepreneurship support. By addressing critical knowledge gaps and sharing our findings, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of effective strategies and interventions and provide valuable lessons, helping policymakers, development partners, implementing organisations, NGOs and others design and execute more impactful programmes for young entrepreneurs. Ultimately fostering entrepreneurship in low- and middle-income countries.

Moreover, we seek to publish our research findings in top-level academic journals. In this way, we impact the academic debate on entrepreneurship support and ecosystem development in low- and middle-income countries, further advancing the theoretical frameworks in this field.



Morning Programme

08:45 - 09:15 | **Walk-in and registration**

09:15 - 09:45 | **Joint opening**

10:00 - 12:00 | **3 parallel sessions**

1. Strengthening Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

- Africa Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Index
- Entrepreneurial Ecosystems in Accelerating Sustainability Transitions
- Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Interventions

2. Supporting Growth

- Preventing Mission Drift
- Stimulating Growth of Digital Enterprises
- Growth of Deliberate Informality

3. Tailoring Support to Diverse Entrepreneurial Needs

- Entrepreneurship Support amid Crisis and Fragility
- Entrepreneurs' Response to Climate Change
- Start-Ups and SMEs

12:00 - 13:00 | **Lunch break**

Afternoon Programme

13:00 | **Joint opening**

Welcome and opening remarks from the Netherlands Enterprise Agency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Utrecht University.

13:20 | **The Orange Corners research approach**

A short introduction of the Orange Corners research approach, why this approach matters for practice and policy, and how organisations can engage in research themselves.

13:30 | **Guest speaker**

An inspiring keynote offering fresh perspectives on entrepreneurship support and impact, by Dr. Adeyinka Adewale.

14:00 | **Research spotlight**

A closer look at one key research project, Growing through resourcefulness: lessons from Africa's digital entrepreneurs, by Dr. Francesca Ciulli and Adenike Adeyemi.

14:45 | **Break**

15:00 | **High-level panel discussion**

A lively conversation between policymakers, researchers and practitioners on how research can better support entrepreneurship in practice. With Prof. Dr. Erik Stam, Marije Balt, Adenike Adeyemi and Dr. Ismaeel Tharwat.

15:45 | **Closing remarks**

Key takeaways from the day and what comes next.

16:00 - 18:00 | **Poster presentation and networking reception**

Wrap up of the day with informal networking and poster presentations. Research posters will be displayed throughout the venue, allowing participants to walk around, explore the different studies and engage with those who conducted the research.



Strengthening Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

Researchers: Prof. Dr. Erik Stam (Utrecht University), Scott Walker (Systemic Innovation) and Tim Gelissen (i4Policy)
Countries/regions: 54 African countries
Year started: 2023

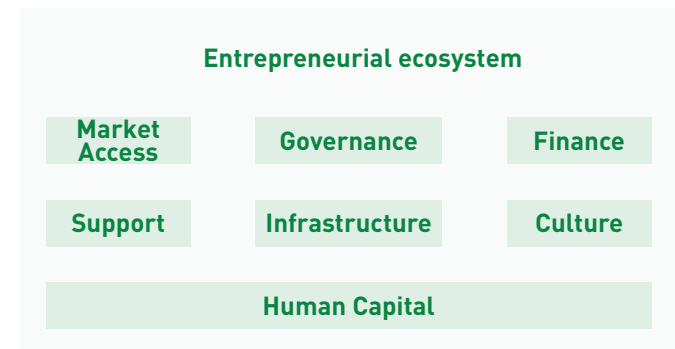
The Africa Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Index (AEEI) has been initiated to increase understanding of entrepreneurial ecosystems in Africa and to deliver actionable knowledge for improving them. An entrepreneurial ecosystem is a set of interdependent actors and factors governed in such a way that they enable productive entrepreneurship in a particular territory. The entrepreneurial ecosystem approach provides a framework for analysis and action.

Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

Sustainable Development



Productive Entrepreneurship





The AEEI has been co-developed by researchers from Utrecht University, Stellenbosch University and policy experts of the Innovation for Policy Foundation (i4Policy) to fill the data and knowledge gaps on the quality of entrepreneurial ecosystems in Africa. We have pursued a scientifically rigorous (transparent database construction) and societally relevant (informing policy and investments) approach. The AEEI covers the seven dimensions of the African entrepreneurial ecosystem model, which are based on 21 indicators.

In this session we present the AEEI, including the scientific background, and its use by entrepreneurial ecosystem stakeholders and scholars across Africa.



Governance:
Rule of Law, Control of Corruption,
Business Registration



Culture:
Trust in Others.



Support: Professional Social Media
Networks (LinkedIn), Innovation
Hubs (Afrilabs).



Finance: Domestic Credit to Private
Sector, Venture Capital, Stock
Market Capitalization



Infrastructure: Access to
Electricity, Road Network, Internet
Penetration.



Market Access: Household Income
per Capita, GDP, Population, Import/
Export share.



Human Capital: Life Expectancy,
Literacy Rate, Tertiary Enrollment,
R&D Expenditures.



Researchers: Dr. Ir. Milou Derks (Orange Corners - RVO & Utrecht University), Dr. Francesca Ciulli (Tilburg University) and Prof. Dr. Erik Stam (Utrecht University)
Countries/regions: Kenya · Mozambique · Senegal
Year started: 2025

Across Africa, billions of development dollars flow each year into entrepreneurship support: training programmes, incubator and accelerator support, impact investment funds and ecosystem-building initiatives. The underlying assumption is straightforward: support entrepreneurs, strengthen the ecosystem around them, and sustainability transitions will follow. But is this assumption correct? And if not, what needs to change?

This is the central question driving our research. Over the past two years, we conducted more than 200 interviews across Kenya, Senegal and Mozambique. We spoke with entrepreneurs, investors, entrepreneurship support organisations (ESOs), donors, government officials and policymakers to understand whether and how entrepreneurial ecosystems actually accelerate the deep, systemic change that sustainability transitions require.

This research builds on transition theory, which tells us that moving from “business as usual” to sustainable systems requires three things to happen:

- Innovations need to be shielded: protected from premature market exposure while they develop.
- Innovations need to be nurtured: supported through learning, network-building and shared vision.
- Innovations need to be empowered: actively helped to compete with and ultimately displace incumbent systems.



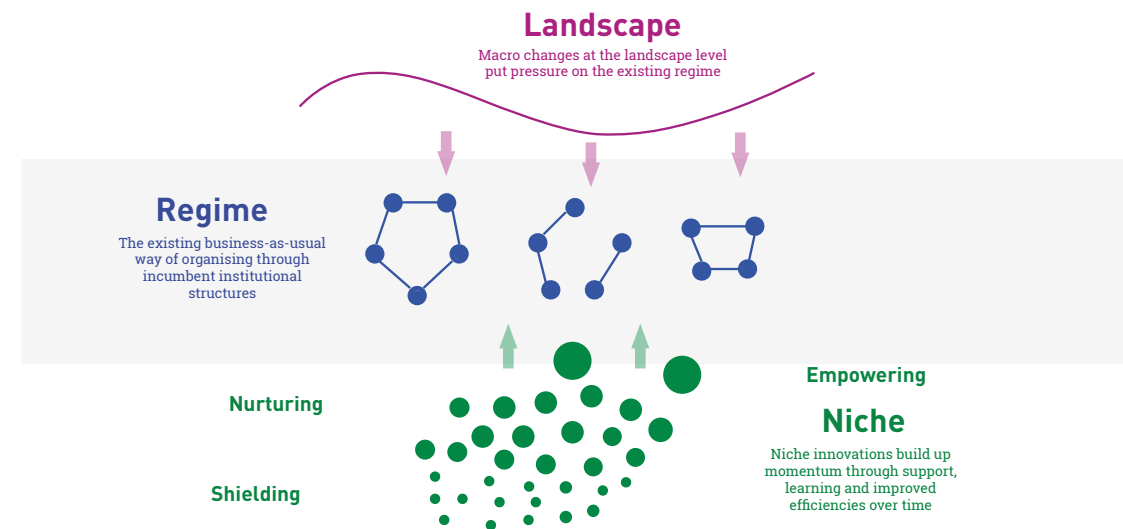
Our findings reveal a striking pattern across all three countries. Nascent entrepreneurial ecosystems are reasonably good at nurturing, mediocre at shielding and very weak at empowering. The result is predictable and visible everywhere. Hundreds of innovative, sustainability-oriented businesses emerge, in clean energy, waste, agriculture, electric mobility and so on, but very few grow large enough to shift their sector. Africa has an abundance of entrepreneurial activity and a shortage of entrepreneurial transformation.

The gaps are specific and consequential. Shielding is undermined by a chronic missing-middle financing gap. Small grants exist, large equity tickets exist, but the \$50,000–\$250,000 in patient debt that most sustainability SMEs actually need to grow is not available. Nurturing is plentiful in volume but thin in depth. Programmes are generic, short-term and driven by donor output targets rather than what entrepreneurs actually need to scale. And empowering is nearly absent. There is little systematic investment in demand creation, innovation-specific policy, preferential procurement, standards development, or the kind of lobbying that could shift the playing field away from incumbents.

The practical implication is clear. ESOs and development partners need to rebalance their portfolios. That means:

1. Financing instruments that bridge the missing middle.
2. Longer, more specialised support that goes beyond pitch training.
3. Invest in empowering activities, such as market creation, awareness and innovation-specific policy, that make sustainable alternatives genuinely cheaper, more reliable and easier to use than the unsustainable business-as-usual options they are trying to replace.

Without that last and third step, the ecosystem will keep producing emergence without ever producing transformation.





Researchers: Dr. Ir. Milou Derks (Orange Corners - RVO & Utrecht University) and Dr. Christina Bidmon (Utrecht University)
Countries/regions: North Mozambique · Burundi · Côte d'Ivoire · Upper Egypt
Year started: 2024

Entrepreneurship support programmes in Africa often apply the same model everywhere, but reality on the ground varies enormously. This study examined entrepreneurial ecosystems in four low-income regions and found that while all regions face challenges across six entrepreneurial ecosystem elements (physical infrastructure, access to finance, policy, market access, knowledge and culture), the nature and root causes of those challenges differ significantly.

The research identifies three challenge-root cause constellations, each illustrated by a concrete example:

- 1. Similar challenges with similar root causes.** Across all four regions, women entrepreneurs face the same structural barriers: unequal domestic burdens, limited mobility, restricted access to finance and entrenched gender norms. The challenge and its cause are consistent, making it possible to replicate a proven support model across contexts.
- 2. Similar challenges driven by different root causes.** Across all four regions, many entrepreneurs avoid registering their businesses, but the reasons differ significantly. In Upper Egypt, registration disqualifies entrepreneurs from social protection programmes like pensions. In Burundi, it is fear of government interference and informal payments to officials that keeps businesses unregistered. In Mozambique, the burden of social security obligations for employees deters new businesses from formalising too early, while in Côte d'Ivoire, high taxes and complex compliance costs are the main reasons. The same surface-level problem (low registration rates) requires four fundamentally different interventions. Interventions

thus need to be contextualised.

- 3. Challenges entirely unique to a specific region.** In Burundi, some entrepreneurs actively avoid entrepreneurship support programmes out of fear that they might be affiliated with specific identity groups or political parties. This mistrust is specific to the Burundi context, and cannot be addressed by adapting a standard outreach or training model, but should be designed specifically for Burundi.

Based on these three constellations, the research proposes a practical decision framework to guide development partners and entrepreneurship support organisations (ESOs). Two questions determine the right approach: Is this challenge unique to this region? And is its root cause unique?

When the answer to both is no: replicate. Proven solutions, such as mentorship programmes for women entrepreneurs paired with financial literacy training, can be scaled directly across contexts with minimal adaptation.

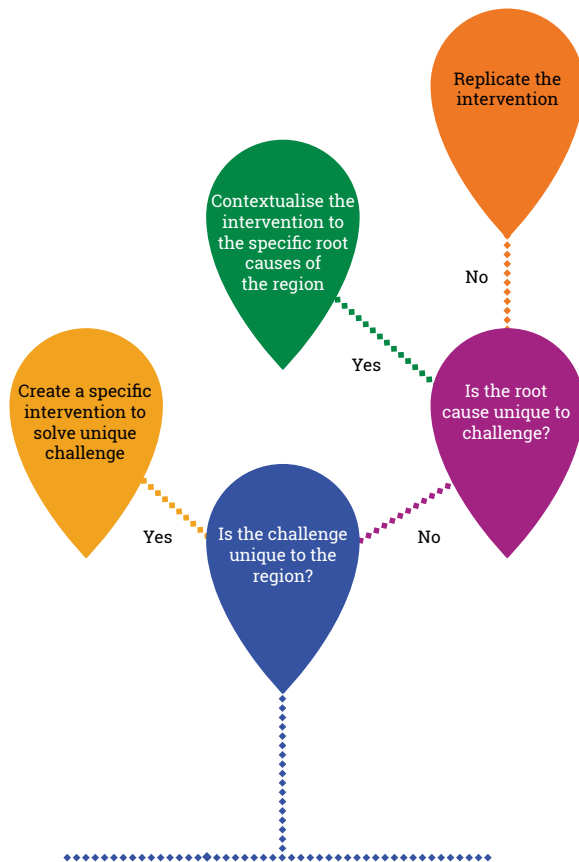
When the challenge is shared, but root causes differ: contextualise. Addressing low business registration rates requires different responses depending on the root cause. For example, in Upper Egypt policies could allow formal registration without losing social protection benefits, in Burundi reforms could reduce government interference and simplify registration processes while in Mozambique, a gradual transition into formalisation with reduced initial tax obligations would better fit the reality on the ground. The same surface-level problem, but three different solutions.

When both the challenge and its cause are unique: create. In Burundi, rebuilding trust requires a carefully designed approach: delivering programmes through neutral channels, communicating via the media and platforms entrepreneurs already use, and prominently showcasing success stories of entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds. Getting this wrong by inadvertently appearing to favour one group could deepen mistrust rather than resolve it.

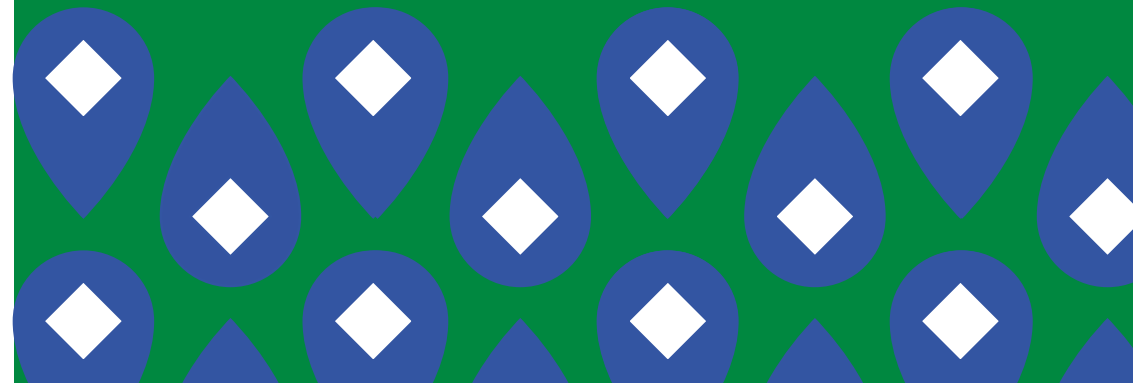


Applying this framework demands investment in understanding local ecosystems: talking to entrepreneurs, engaging implementing partners and involving community voices. It calls for flexible Terms of References that give ESOs room to adapt, and the courage to challenge pre-packaged solutions. Without this, even well-funded programmes risk missing their objectives entirely.

Decision path for determining entrepreneurship support intervention type.



Supporting Growth





Researchers: Dr. Marijn Faling (Erasmus University Rotterdam - ISS), Dr. Ir. Milou Derks (Orange Corners - RVO & Utrecht University), Ward Karssemeijer and Maria Tamara Lozano (both Orange Corners - RVO)

Countries/regions: Mali · Angola · Egypt · Algeria

Year started: 2024

Across Africa, many entrepreneurs aim to deliver on multiple objectives at once: generating income, creating jobs and advancing social or environmental goals. Orange Corners specifically supports entrepreneurs with this kind of dual or triple mission. But pursuing these objectives simultaneously creates tension and there is growing evidence that economic pressures tend to crowd out social and environmental ambitions over time. This process is known as mission drift.

Most of what we know about mission drift comes from research conducted in Europe and North America. This study investigates whether those insights hold in African contexts, where formal institutions are weaker, access to capital is more limited and entrepreneurs often operate under different logics. Examining 71 entrepreneurs across Mali, Angola, Egypt and Algeria, this is the first study to systematically investigate mission drift among African entrepreneurs. The researchers used Qualitative Comparative Analysis, a method designed to identify which combinations of conditions, rather than single factors, lead to drift.

The analysis tested six conditions drawn from existing literature:

- Whether the entrepreneur is scaling
- The nature of the funding of the enterprise
- Whether customers and beneficiaries overlap
- How compatible the multiple goals of the enterprise are
- How central the social mission is to core activities
- Whether spaces exist to discuss mission-related tensions

Scaling emerged as the only condition that somewhat appears necessary for mission drift to occur. In other words: growth ambitions are usually present when drift happens. However, no single combination of conditions

reliably explains when and why drift occurs, suggesting that mission drift in African contexts is more complex and context-dependent than existing theory predicts, and might be caused by completely different factors than in Europe and North America.

The most striking findings came from the qualitative analysis. Two patterns that existing literature does not capture stood out as potential protections against drift. First, community embeddedness: entrepreneurs who described their business as a social and moral obligation to their community, not just a market opportunity, were far less likely to report mission drift. Community expectations function as an informal, but powerful accountability structure. As one Angolan entrepreneur put it, the business “would be impossible to think of without putting social benefits at the center of our decisions.” Second, institutional substitution: entrepreneurs whose businesses directly fill gaps left by absent public services in education, healthcare, energy or infrastructure, described their mission not as one objective among several, but as the reason their business exists at all. Abandoning it would mean abandoning the people who have nowhere else to turn.

A third pattern points in the opposite direction. Across all four countries, entrepreneurs described macro-level shocks (such as inflation, currency devaluation, political instability and climate disruptions) as forcing financial prioritisation not out of strategic choice, but out of survival. This hints at a form of drift that existing theory does not yet account for. It is not a gradual strategic slide, but a defensive response to existential pressure.

For development partners and entrepreneurship support organisations (ESOs) these findings carry a direct implication: supporting dual-mission entrepreneurs requires more than good governance structures. Community embeddedness and a clear sense of social purpose appear to be powerful stabilisers and programmes can actively nurture these. Equally, when entrepreneurs operating in volatile environments are forced to prioritise financial survival, this should not automatically be read as mission failure. Hence, the conditions that produce drift in Africa may be categorically different from those in high-income settings, and support models need to reflect that.



Researchers: Dr. Francesca Ciulli (Tilburg University), Dr. Ir. Milou Derks (Orange Corners - RVO & Utrecht University) and Adenike Adeyemi (FATE Foundation)
Countries/regions: Nigeria · Senegal · Kenya
Year started: 2025

Across Africa, a growing number of entrepreneurs are building businesses around digital technology (such as platforms that connect farmers to markets, apps that manage waste collection and tools that give smallholders access to credit). These are not just tech companies; they are enterprises trying to create real social and environmental impact in some of the world's most resource-constrained environments. But if they cannot grow, their chances of survival and their potential for positive impact are severely diminished.

This study asks a deceptively simple question: how do these enterprises manage to grow? The answer, it turns out, lies in resourcefulness. Rather than waiting for ideal conditions, African digital enterprises creatively mobilise the resources they have and, moreover, the resources others have to expand their business. The research examined eight digitally-enabled enterprises across Nigeria, Senegal and Kenya through repeated interviews over time, capturing how their strategies evolved.

The findings show that enterprises focus on three core growth strategies:

- Expanding and strengthening their supply side
- Attracting new demand
- Diversifying their offer

To realise these strategies, they deploy two types of resourceful practices. The first is resourceful resource orchestration: creatively managing physical, digital and social resources. For example, one enterprise repurposed data it had already collected to assess the creditworthiness

of suppliers, unlocking access to finance that would otherwise have been unavailable. The second is resourceful network orchestration: creatively building and managing connections with other actors, from local agents and community groups to international partners.

Crucially, these two dimensions are deeply intertwined. Managing resources is often aimed at strengthening a network, and building a network is often about accessing resources. And while the digital dimension of these businesses enables practices that would simply be impossible for traditional enterprises (data repurposing being one clear example) the non-digital dimension turns out to be equally critical. Physical infrastructure, human relationships and local presence remain central to how these businesses function and grow.

For entrepreneurship support organisations (ESOs) and development partners the implication is clear: supporting digital enterprises is not just about strengthening their technology. It requires understanding the full picture: how they manage resources and networks creatively under pressure, where resourcefulness helps and where it has limits. Programmes that treat digital entrepreneurs as purely tech ventures risk missing what actually drives their growth. The most effective support helps them orchestrate both their digital and non-digital assets strategically, and build the networks that make scaling possible.



Researchers: Prof. Dr. Jennifer J. Griffin (Loyola University Chicago), Dr. Ir. Milou Derks (Orange Corners - RVO & Utrecht University), Dr. Sadek Showkat (Loyola University Chicago) and Mike Sips

Countries/regions: Angola · Burundi · Egypt · Ghana · Iraq · Côte d'Ivoire · Morocco · Nigeria · Senegal · South Africa

Year started: 2026

Across low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), entrepreneurship rarely follows the formal pathways often assumed in mainstream economic thinking. Instead, a large share of entrepreneurial activity takes place informally outside official registration systems, regulatory frameworks and taxation structures. This “informal entrepreneurship” is a central engine of economic life across Africa and the Middle East, where it sustains livelihoods, fuels innovation and supports entire communities. Yet despite its prevalence and importance, informality is still widely treated as a problem to be solved rather than a reality to be understood. This research challenges that assumption.

Traditional perspectives suggest that formalisation is necessary for scaling: granting access to finance, government support and formal markets. Emerging insights point to a different reality. Many entrepreneurs actively choose to remain informal. Not because they are excluded, but because formalisation can introduce significant financial, administrative and even social costs. These include high registration fees, complex bureaucratic procedures and the potential loss of access to essential social support systems.

This research project invites entrepreneurs, policymakers and researchers to rethink a deeply embedded assumption: that formalisation is always the optimal path to growth and to contribute, from their different perspectives, to refining how this question is studied.

Early observations suggest that informal entrepreneurs are not simply constrained actors operating at the margins. Instead, they are strategic decision-makers navigating complex institutional environments. Even

without formal recognition, many build innovative, resilient businesses that are deeply embedded in their communities. They rely on alternative mechanisms (such as trust-based networks, informal credit systems and local legitimacy) to access resources and grow, challenging conventional definitions of what it means to be a “legitimate” or “successful” business.

At the heart of this research project is the idea that informality can, in some contexts, be a rational, necessary and even advantageous choice and that understanding this requires closer collaboration between research and practice.

This research project combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitatively, it analyses growth in revenue and employment among entrepreneurs participating in Orange Corners programmes, comparing formal and informal businesses across contexts. Qualitatively, interviews and focus groups will explore the lived experiences behind these choices. Why do entrepreneurs remain informal, what are the risks they associate with formalisation, and how do they mobilise resources outside formal systems?

This session creates space for dialogue and co-creation. At its core is the above ongoing multi-country research project embedded within the Orange Corners ecosystem. Rather than presenting finalised results, this session opens the research process itself, inviting participants to actively engage with and help shape the study. Together, we explore a critical and underexamined question: how does intentional informality shape entrepreneurial growth?

This session will surface early ideas and invite contributions toward more inclusive, context-sensitive approaches: when should formalisation be encouraged, when might alternatives be more appropriate, and what structural changes are needed to make formal systems more accessible and beneficial? Hence, the session not only explores but also co-creates insights on how embracing, rather than erasing, informality can unlock new pathways for entrepreneurial growth and sustainable development.

Tailoring Support to Diverse Entrepreneurial Needs

Entrepreneurship Support amid Crisis and Fragility



| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Researchers: | Anette Hoffman (Clingendael Institute), Dr. Holly Ritchie (Erasmus University Rotterdam - ISS), Dr. Ir. Milou Derks (Orange Corners - RVO & Utrecht University), Geerten Schuring, Yohana Wondimu (both Orange Corners – RVO) |
| Countries/regions: | Burundi · Palestinian Territories · Sudan |
| Year started: | 2025 |

Entrepreneurship support is frequently framed as a means to promote job creation and economic opportunities in fragile and conflict-affected settings. In practice, entrepreneurship support organisations (ESOs) aim to strengthen entrepreneurs' skills, networks and access to finance. Yet in contexts characterised by instability and overlapping fragility drivers, such interventions might not operate independently from their environment. This study examines how entrepreneurship support interacts with fragility, and under what conditions it may either contribute to resilience or unintentionally reinforce existing vulnerabilities. Drawing on evidence from Burundi, the Palestinian Territories and Sudan, the research moves beyond an individual entrepreneur-level perspective to consider the broader systems in which entrepreneurs operate.

The research centers around fragility as a multidimensional concept. Fragility arises from the interaction of economic, social, governance-related and regional dynamics, which together shape the capacity of a system to cope with stress. While these dynamics manifest differently across contexts, similar underlying drivers can be observed. The study therefore focuses on three questions: what drives fragility in different settings, how do these drivers interact with entrepreneurship and its support structures, and how can interventions be designed in ways that take these dynamics into account? To address these questions, the research combines an analytical framework with qualitative evidence, including desk research, case studies and more than 50 semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs and ecosystem actors.



The findings suggest that entrepreneurship support can, under certain conditions, exacerbate fragility. Interventions that prioritise enterprise-level outcomes such as income generation or job creation may overlook structural inequalities and existing divisions. In doing so, they risk reinforcing patterns of exclusion rather than addressing them. In addition, forms of support that rely heavily on external inputs or models that are not grounded in local conditions can contribute to dependency, increasing vulnerability to economic shocks. Entrepreneurship support programmes themselves are not immune to contextual pressures, including financial instability linked to exchange rate fluctuations.

Patterns of access to support are also uneven. Entrepreneurs who are easier to reach tend to benefit disproportionately, while marginalised groups such as women, youth and ethnic minorities are less likely to be included. This can deepen existing inequalities. Moreover, participation in support programmes may increase the visibility of entrepreneurs in ways that expose them to additional risks, including extortion or external interference. In highly fragile contexts, there is also a risk that entrepreneurship support programmes are shaped or influenced by powerful actors, with implications for how resources are distributed.

Additionally, the study points to ways in which entrepreneurship support can contribute to resilience when these dynamics are taken into account. This involves moving beyond a narrow focus on individual businesses and engaging more directly with the surrounding ecosystem. In practice, this includes strengthening risk awareness and due diligence, adopting more participatory approaches and engaging a broader range of stakeholders. It also requires deliberate efforts to address inequalities, for example by including marginalised groups, supporting value addition and enabling diversification of markets and income sources. Initiatives that encourage cooperation and foster a sense of shared purpose can further contribute to social cohesion, while recognising the need for psychological support in highly volatile environments.

Overall, the findings highlight that fragility is not simply a backdrop to entrepreneurship, but an active force that shapes both opportunities and risks. As such, entrepreneurship support needs to be designed with greater attention to context. Approaches that are short term or inflexible are unlikely to respond effectively to changing conditions. For donors and ESOs, this implies the need for longer-term engagement, greater flexibility and more adaptive programme design. When fragility dynamics are explicitly considered, entrepreneurship support has the potential not only to support businesses, but also to contribute to more resilient and inclusive systems.



Researchers: Lonneke Weterings (Erasmus University Rotterdam), Dr. Ir. Milou Derks (Orange Corners - RVO & Utrecht University), Dr. Caroline Witte (Erasmus University Rotterdam), Rachel van der Pol and Yohana Wondimu (both Orange Corners – RVO)
Countries/regions: Côte d'Ivoire · Ghana · Nigeria
Year started: 2025

Entrepreneurs across Africa are increasingly confronted with the realities of climate change. Rising temperatures, irregular rainfall and prolonged droughts are disrupting agricultural production, reducing product quality and threatening business stability. In contexts where livelihoods are closely tied to natural resources, these environmental changes are not a distant risk but an immediate challenge. Additionally, entrepreneurs are expected to adapt their businesses to these shifting conditions, often with limited resources and institutional support.

While climate change adaptation is widely recognised as essential for reducing vulnerability, much of the existing research treats adaptation as a set of individual practices or as a single strategy. However, adaptation is rarely straightforward. Businesses often engage in multiple, sometimes conflicting practices and, in some cases, well-intended adaptation efforts may even increase vulnerability. Moreover, most existing insights stem from research conducted in high-income contexts, leaving a limited understanding of how adaptation unfolds in low- and middle income countries.

This study examines how agricultural entrepreneurs in West Africa respond to climate change and how these responses shape their vulnerability. Drawing on 44 interviews with entrepreneurs in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria, the study applies Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), a method designed to identify how combinations of conditions, rather than single factors, lead to particular outcomes. The analysis focuses on five key conditions: adaptation activities, climate impact, climate understanding, personal knowledge and engagement in local communities.

The findings show that vulnerability is not determined by adaptation activities alone, but by configurations of multiple conditions. Entrepreneurs facing similar climate impacts can experience very different levels of vulnerability depending on how these factors interact. In line with QCA logic, multiple pathways lead to similar outcomes, meaning there is no single best strategy for reducing vulnerability. Notably, having more adaptation practices does not necessarily result in lower vulnerability.

Two patterns stand out as particularly important. First, knowledge plays a key role: entrepreneurs drawing on personal or indigenous knowledge are often better able to navigate changing environmental conditions. Second, community engagement strengthens resilience by enabling access to shared resources, support and locally relevant solutions. These factors highlight that adaptation is not only a technical process but also a social and contextual one.

The findings also suggest that adaptation can be complex and even counterproductive. In some cases, entrepreneurs with multiple adaptation practices still report high vulnerability, pointing to the possibility of maladaptive strategies or mismatches between practices and context. This reinforces the idea that adaptation strategies cannot be understood in isolation but must be analysed in relation to broader environmental and social conditions.

For development partners and entrepreneurship support organisations, these findings carry important implications. Supporting climate adaptation requires more than raising awareness or promoting generic solutions. Instead, development programmes should focus on enabling tailored, context-specific strategies, strengthening local knowledge systems and fostering community networks. Encouraging experimentation and facilitating access to resources for climate-resilient practices can further enhance entrepreneurs' ability to respond effectively to climate change.



Researchers: Dr. Abel Diaz-Gonzalez (Maastricht University),
Dr. Ir. Milou Derks (Orange Corners – RVO & Utrecht University) and Prof. Dr. Dev Dutta (University of New Hampshire)
Countries/regions: Burundi · Nigeria · Palestinian Territories
Year started: 2025

In entrepreneurship support “start-up” and “SME” are often used interchangeably, or worse, treated as the same thing. They are not. A start-up is not simply a business that is just getting started. Start-ups are digitally-driven businesses pursuing rapid, often externally financed growth. They prototype, pivot, seek investors and aim to scale. Innovative SMEs are established, locally embedded businesses that introduce a new product or service and are focused on operational reliability and incremental improvement. Their success depends on sound bookkeeping, supply chains and customer relationships, not pitch decks.

This distinction matters enormously for support design, yet most donor-funded programmes enrol both venture types into the same cohort, with the same curriculum, pacing and mentoring. This study examines what happens when they do, tracking the same entrepreneurs before and after six-month training programmes in Burundi, Nigeria and the Palestinian Territories.

The findings reveal that start-ups and SMEs follow fundamentally different learning paths. Start-ups acquire knowledge fast and externally. They engage most in activities focused on investment readiness, network-building and market validation and often skip regulatory or compliance sessions entirely. SMEs learn slower and internally. They embed new knowledge into daily routines, recording transactions, improving storage, formalising processes. Both are legitimate forms of progress, but they are not the same.

Crucially, programme effectiveness was highest when the curriculum matched the dominant venture type. In Burundi, where the programme focused on SMEs and the ecosystem has no real start-up scene, SMEs consistently outperformed start-ups across all learning dimensions. In the Palestinian Territories, where the programme was built around digital start-ups, start-ups thrived. Nigeria, which attempted a mixed curriculum for both, produced mixed results across the board.

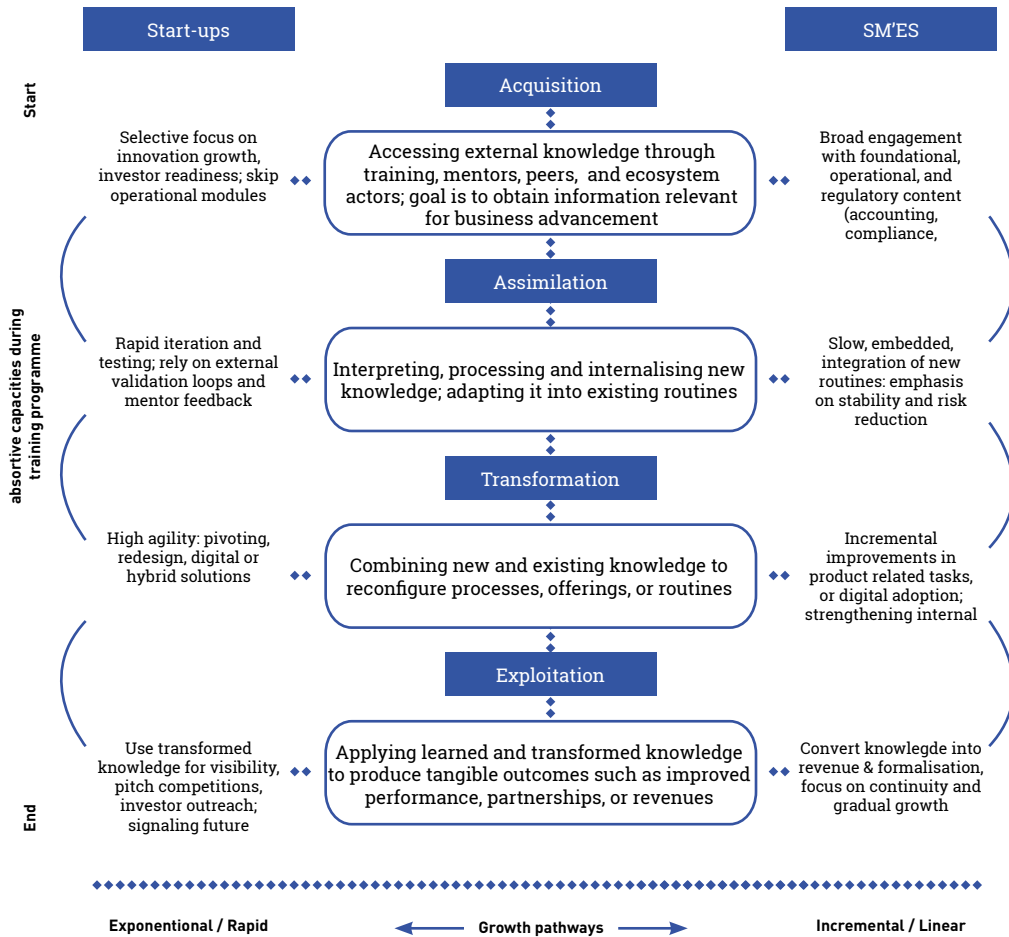
The clearest takeaway is structural: do not put start-ups and SMEs in the same room with the same content and expect both to benefit equally. Programmes must differentiate content tracks. Start-ups need modules on validation, investment readiness and pivoting. SMEs need sessions on bookkeeping, compliance and operational resilience. As one accelerator manager put it bluntly: “If you teach the same to all, you lose both.”

Evaluation frameworks must also reflect these different trajectories. Revenue growth is a meaningful metric for SMEs; for start-ups investor engagement and prototype development may signal stronger progress at an early stage. Treating one metric as universal obscures what is actually working and for whom.

The study is thus a call to be precise: know who you are supporting, design accordingly, and measure what actually matters for that venture type!



Conceptual model.



Researchers:

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Countries/regions:

Burundi

Year started:

2024

Smallholder farmers across Africa are under growing pressure. Climate change, volatile markets and limited access to finance are pushing many to seek income beyond farming. Entrepreneurship training has become a popular response, but is it actually working?

This research first mapped what good agri-entrepreneurship training should look like, distilling fragmented guidance from decades of NGO reports, development manuals and academic literature into eleven design principles. These span training content (is it relevant and skills-focused?), process (is it practice-based and inclusive?) and governance (are incentives aligned with real outcomes?). These principles were tested against reality through qualitative fieldwork in Burundi. Interviews were held with entrepreneurs, entrepreneurship support organisations (ESOs), development partners and focus groups with farmers and cooperative leaders.

The gap between principle and practice turned out to be large. Training in Burundi is typically short (one to two days), supply-driven and focused on management and business plan writing rather than on practical entrepreneurial skills (like opportunity recognition, market orientation or problem-solving). As one farmer put it: “nobody came to ask us what we wanted.” When training is bundled with loan access, the combination often backfires: farmers receive finance without the guidance to use it well, leading to wasted resources or debt. For example, one cooperative received a maize flour machine that could only run three days a year because volumes were too low.

Good Practices vs. Reality in Agri-Entrepreneurship Training



Group-based training, one of the few principles partially reflected in practice, is undermined by its own implementation. Rather than training all farmers, programmes typically target cooperative leaders and assume knowledge will cascade down. It rarely does. Leaders lack teaching skills, members distrust them, and existing inequalities within cooperatives are reinforced rather than addressed.

What it means for entrepreneurship support to smallholder farmers is that the problems are not just about training design, they run deeper, into the relationship between development partners and ESOs. ESOs operate in a highly constrained environment, compelled to follow rigid donor frameworks that prioritise easy-to-measure outputs (number of farmers trained) over meaningful outcomes (improved livelihoods). As one ESO noted: “development partners are high, we are low in the minds of donors.” This hierarchical dynamic leaves little room for adaptation to local realities.

The research calls for a fundamental shift: development partners should move away from short, standardised training towards holistic support packages that combine coaching, market access and finance, designed around farmers’ actual needs and stages of development. And crucially, ESOs need the flexibility and trust to make those calls themselves.

Poster only

Eleven design principles for effective agri-entrepreneurship training.

Delivered from literature synthesis and fieldwork in Burundi. Principles 10-11 are new contributions from this study.

| CONTENT | PROCESS | GOVERNANCE |
|---|---|--|
| <p>1 NEEDS ASSESSMENT Conduct pre-training contextual and needs assessments to align training with farmers’ realities</p> <p>2 CLEAR OUTCOMES Develop training with a clear outcome in mind and a realistic pathway from content to impact</p> <p>3 ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS Combine technical farming skills with managerial skills: initiative taking, market orientation, opportunity recognition, and financial skills</p> <p>4 TAILORED TO STAGE & TYPE Align training with stage of business development and entrepreneurial type (survivalist vs. growth-oriented)</p> <p>5 HOLISTIC SUPPORT Combine supply-side (skills, training) and demand-side (market access, finance interventions through coordinated value chain engagement)</p> | <p>6 SELF-SELECTION Allow farmers to self-select into training programmes based on motivation and fit, rather than top-down assignment</p> <p>7 PRACTICE BASED DELIVERY Deliver contextually grounded training through role models, peer learning, learning-by-doing, and on-the-ground coaching</p> <p>8 GROUP ENTREPRENEURSHIP Encourage group-based entrepreneurship including peer learning, group management, financial literacy, and market skills</p> | <p>9 OUTCOME-ALIGNED INCENTIVES Align performance incentives with livelihood outcomes, not training outputs - measure sustained socio-economic impact</p> <p>10 INCLUSIVE IMPLEMENTATION Avoid over-reliance on cooperative leaders as knowledge brokers: actively include marginalised smallholders and address selection bias</p> <p>11 ESO EMBEDDEDNESS Improve ESO embeddedness in the broader donor and policy community to align performance incentives with meaningful livelihood impact</p> |



The Orange Corners Research Conference 2026 is organised by Orange Corners in close collaboration with Utrecht University.

The research presented at this conference has been made possible through the ongoing cooperation and invaluable contributions of all Orange Corners implementing partners. We are deeply grateful to all our Orange Corners and Orange Corners Innovation Fund (OCIF) partners for providing the essential MEL data used across our research projects.

In particular, we would like to extend our sincere thanks to the following Orange Corners hubs for their support in facilitating interviews, providing crucial insights and conducting field research: Angola (Acelera), Burundi (3Hi Africa), the Democratic Republic of Congo (Ingenious City), Egypt (Outreach Egypt), Ghana (GrowthAfrica), Côte d'Ivoire (ES Partners CDI), Mali (DoniLab), Mozambique (Ideialab), Nigeria (FATE Foundation), the Palestinian Territories (Flow Accelerator), Senegal (Haské Ventures), Sudan (249 Startups) and the Orange Corners Innovation Fund partners in Côte d'Ivoire (ES Partners CDI), Ghana (Fidelity), Nigeria (FATE Foundation), Senegal (Haské Ventures).

We also wish to acknowledge the valuable contributions of academic partners and knowledge institutions that supported the research presented at the conference. These include researchers from Maastricht University, ES Partners CDI, Clingendael Institute, International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Tilburg University, Utrecht University, University of Burundi, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Loyola University Chicago, University of Technology Eindhoven and FATE Foundation.

Together, these collaborations reflect the core of the Orange Corners research approach: working directly with practitioners and researchers to ensure that research is grounded in real programme experience and responds to concrete policy and implementation questions. By collaborating with implementing partners, knowledge institutions and policymakers throughout the research process, Orange Corners links empirical insights to programme design and decision-making. This helps to ensure that findings are not only academically sound, but also usable in practice.



Two years of research have sharpened our understanding of what works in entrepreneurship support and surfaced questions we have not yet answered. In 2026–2027, Orange Corners intends to deepen its research across at least these four priority areas.

Entrepreneurial ecosystem interventions

We know that ecosystems differ and that support must be tailored accordingly. We have less knowledge on which specific interventions are most effective at building ecosystems that not just produce short-term outputs, but genuinely flourish over time. Our next research cycle will focus on identifying the ecosystem-level changes that have lasting impact, and what it takes to get there.

Scaling businesses

Most entrepreneurship programmes are good at helping businesses survive. Far fewer succeed in helping them scale. We will investigate which programme adjustments, in content, pacing, mentoring structures and follow-on support, are most effective at moving entrepreneurs from stability to growth, and moving from innovation to transformation, and what role the broader ecosystem plays in enabling or blocking this.

Entrepreneurship in fragile contexts

Entrepreneurs in fragile and conflict-affected settings face a fundamentally different reality than other entrepreneurs: supply chains collapse overnight, currencies destabilise, institutions fail and social trust erodes. Yet entrepreneurship can also be a force for reducing fragility by creating livelihoods, rebuilding networks, and strengthening community resilience. We will continue to investigate how entrepreneurs in fragile contexts adapt to shocks, what support models are most effective under these conditions, and how entrepreneurship programmes can actively contribute to reduce the drivers of fragility rather than simply working around them (or, in worst case, exacerbate them).



Agri-entrepreneurship

Many Orange Corners entrepreneurs operate in agricultural value chains, not as farmers, but as processors, traders, input suppliers, distributors and service providers. This segment faces specific barriers and has training needs that generic programmes rarely address: navigating complex value chains, accessing consistent supply, meeting quality standards and building market linkages. We will develop a stronger evidence base for what effective support looks like for agri-entrepreneurs in these roles.

Cross-cutting themes

Across all the above priority areas, gender remains a critical cross-cutting focus, not an afterthought. We are committed to deepening our understanding of what genuinely works for women entrepreneurs, beyond surface-level inclusion.

In addition to gender, digitalisation and AI play an important part in all of our research. AI is rapidly changing what is possible in entrepreneurship support, for funders, entrepreneurship support organisations (ESOs) and entrepreneurs alike. We will examine how to harness it effectively, how to mitigate its risks, and what it means for entrepreneurs in low-resource environments.

If any of these topics resonate with your work, we would love to explore collaboration. Please turn to the next chapter for more information on how to get involved. And if you see a topic that is missing but feels essential, we would really like to hear from you.



At Orange Corners, we believe in the power of collaboration to bridge the gap between theory, practice and policy. We have developed a collaborative approach to research, with the aim of deepening our understanding of entrepreneurship support and its effectiveness in low- and middle-income countries. Through partnerships with universities, research consultants and knowledge institutes, we are able to enhance the impact of entrepreneurship support programmes – including our own – while contributing to the broader academic and practical discourse. In addition, through collaborations with policymakers and other entrepreneurship support organisations and programmes, we want to ensure findings can actually be put into practice.

Our research is usually conducted on an in-kind basis, meaning that we do not provide direct funding for research initiatives. Instead, we offer access to our extensive data, networks and expertise, allowing researchers to explore meaningful questions aligned with our priority research areas. These areas include entrepreneurial ecosystem development, scaling businesses in low- and middle-income countries, entrepreneurship in fragile contexts and agripreneurship, with cross-cutting themes of gender and digitalisation (including AI).

If you have great ideas for research that could contribute to our understanding of entrepreneurship and improve programmes including Orange Corners, we would love to collaborate with you. If you are interested in partnering with us, whether it is through data sharing, joint research or learning more about our approach, please do not hesitate to reach out to our research coordinator, Dr. Ir. Milou Derks (milou.derks@rvo.nl). Please also get in touch if you want to discuss approaches to doing research or have questions about any of the findings generated.

Let's strengthen the connection between theory, practice and policy together, and ensure that research truly serves improvement of the support that we offer to entrepreneurs around the world.

