

Agri-entrepreneurship training in Africa: Good practices versus reality in entrepreneurship training for African smallholders

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► **INTRODUCTION**

Smallholder farmers in Africa face serious and growing challenges. Climate change, declining soil quality, volatile markets dominated by a small number of powerful actors, and inadequate infrastructure threaten the livelihoods of the farming families who produce the majority of Africa's food supply. In response, a widely promoted strategy has been to support entrepreneurial activity among smallholders: encouraging value addition, income diversification, and the development of the managerial and market-facing competencies that allow farmers to participate more effectively in agricultural value chains.

Over the past two decades, entrepreneurship training programmes for smallholders have proliferated across the continent, supported by development partners, NGOs, governments, and entrepreneurship support organizations (ESOs). The intention is sound. The evidence of effectiveness, however, is considerably more uncertain. A consistent pattern emerges from evaluations and field studies: training frequently fails to produce the livelihood improvements it promises, not because the concept of agri-entrepreneurship training is flawed, but because the design and delivery of programmes diverge significantly from what the accumulated evidence on effective training actually recommends.

This paper draws together what that evidence says. It derives eleven design principles for effective agri-entrepreneurship training from practitioner literature, NGO reports, training manuals, and development programme evaluations, organized across training content, process, and governance. It then applies these principles to a case study of agri-entrepreneurship training practices in Burundi, a heavily aid-dependent country where development partners and local actors invest substantially in smallholder support, and where the gap between design principles and practice turns out to be wide.

The aim is not primarily to critique what is happening in Burundi specifically, but to use it as a grounded illustration of a broader pattern: the conditions under which training is most likely to fail, and by implication the conditions under which it is most likely to succeed. The practical implications are directed at development partners and ESOs who design, fund, and implement agri-entrepreneurship support in Africa.

¹ This whitepaper is based on an academic article titled 'When lessons do not land: good practices versus reality in agri-entrepreneurship training for African smallholders', which is currently under review.

Entrepreneurship training for smallholders in Africa frequently fails not because the concept is wrong, but because the design diverges from what the evidence recommends.

► **DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE AGRI-ENTREPRENEURSHIP TRAINING**

The literature on agri-entrepreneurship training is largely scattered across grey literature: NGO reports, development programme evaluations, FAO manuals, and practitioner guides. Academic engagement with the topic is limited. What this body of knowledge offers, however, is a substantial accumulation of field experience on what works, what does not, and why. From this material, eleven design principles can be derived, organized across three categories: training content, training process, and training governance. Two of these principles emerged from original fieldwork in Burundi and are marked accordingly.

The eleven principles are not independent of each other. Training content principles establish what needs to be taught and to whom; process principles govern how it is taught and who participates; governance principles address the institutional conditions that determine whether well-designed training can actually be delivered. A programme that attends carefully to content but neglects governance will be constrained by the institutional environment in which it operates. The principles are therefore most useful when applied together rather than selectively.

Three themes run through all three categories. The first is context-specificity: effective training cannot be transferred wholesale from one setting to another but must be grounded in an understanding of the specific realities, constraints, and aspirations of the farmers it serves. The second is integration: training delivered in isolation from access to finance, markets, and ongoing coaching rarely translates into improved livelihoods. The third is equity: programmes that reach only the most commercially viable or best-resourced farmers reproduce existing inequalities rather than addressing the structural challenges facing the majority of smallholders.

Category	Principle	Description
Training Content	1. Needs assessment	Conduct pre-training contextual and needs assessments to align training with farmers' realities.
	2. Outcome logic	Ensure training is developed with a clear outcome in mind, analysing the realism of the pathway from content and delivery to outcomes.
	3. Entrepreneurial skills	Focus on technical farming skills as well as managerial and entrepreneurial skills, including initiative-taking, market orientation, opportunity recognition, and financial skills.
	4. Tailored approach	Align training with stage of business development (starting, incubating, consolidating, upscaling) and entrepreneurial type (survivalist versus growth-oriented).
	5. Integrated support	Focus on both supply-side (skills, training) and demand-side (market access, finance) interventions, requiring coordinated engagement of diverse value chain stakeholders.
	6. Self-selection	Allow for self-selection and group formation based on similarities to ensure relevance, motivation, and better learning outcomes.
	7. Practice-based delivery	Deliver contextually grounded, practice-based training that integrates real-world entrepreneurial experiences through role models, peer learning, learning-by-doing, and on-the-ground coaching.

Category	Principle	Description
Training Process	8. Group entrepreneurship	Encourage group-based entrepreneurship for farmers unable to start businesses independently, including peer learning, group management, financial literacy, and market skills.
	9. Inclusive group implementation *	Ensure inclusive and equitable implementation of group-based training by avoiding over-reliance on cooperative leaders as knowledge brokers, addressing biases in government-led selection processes, and actively including marginalized smallholders.
Training Governance	10. Outcome-based incentives	Align performance incentives with livelihood outcomes rather than training outputs, ensuring that evaluations measure sustained socio-economic impact.
	11. ESO embeddedness *	Improve the embeddedness of implementing organisations in the broader policy and development partner community to ensure closer alignment between the performance incentives they face and meaningful livelihood impact.

** Principles 9 and 11 were added on the basis of fieldwork in Burundi and are not derived from the existing literature.*

► RESEARCH APPROACH

To assess the extent to which the design principles are reflected in practice, the study draws on a qualitative case study of agri-entrepreneurship training in Burundi. Burundi was selected for three reasons. It is heavily aid-dependent, with foreign assistance representing approximately 20 percent of Gross National Income, and smallholder entrepreneurship support constitutes a major development intervention. Over 80 percent of Burundians rely on agriculture for their livelihoods, yet struggle to generate sufficient income from farming alone, making income diversification a pressing necessity rather than a strategic choice. Burundi is also significantly under-represented in academic research, which itself limits the feedback loops through which practice might be improved.

Data were collected across multiple visits between 2023 and 2024. The primary data source was fieldwork conducted in November 2023 across six villages in four provinces, combining focus group discussions with individual farmers and cooperative leaders, and semi-structured interviews with ESOs, development partners, government agencies, and financial institutions. All interviews and focus groups were conducted in collaboration with local researchers and assistants. The design principles derived from the literature served as the organizing framework for a deductive coding process applied to the field data, allowing a systematic assessment of alignment and deviation across all eleven principles.

► **APPLICATION OF THE DESIGN PRINCIPLES: EVIDENCE FROM BURUNDI**

The evidence from Burundi shows that current training practice diverges from the design principles across almost all eleven dimensions. Of the eleven principles, only the broad orientation toward group-based training is reflected in practice, and even there the manner of implementation generates its own problems around inclusion and equity, as discussed below. The table summarizes, for each principle, what happens in practice when it is not followed.

Principle	What happens when it is not followed: Evidence from Burundi
1. Needs assessment	Training is supply-driven and poorly aligned with local priorities. Farmers repeatedly reported that their input was never sought, with several stating explicitly that nobody came to ask us what we wanted. Cooperative leaders are occasionally consulted as a proxy, but their interests frequently diverge from those of ordinary members, reinforcing rather than correcting the misalignment.
2. Outcome logic	Most sessions are one to two days long, structured around cooperative management and business plan writing for loan applications rather than skill-building or mindset change. The pathway from training content to income improvement is rarely articulated. One cooperative described how they faced unresolved challenges after their training ended, with no follow-up available: we had to do that on our own.
3. Entrepreneurial skills	Administrative and financial literacy, specifically business plan writing and loan processes, dominate the curriculum. Critical entrepreneurial competencies such as opportunity recognition, initiative-taking, problem-solving, and market orientation are largely absent. Trainers and participants alike agree that the ability to draft a business plan is insufficient preparation for running a viable business.

Principle	What happens when it is not followed: Evidence from Burundi
4. Tailored approach	Programs assume that participants are, or can readily become, growth-oriented entrepreneurs. Most participants are survivalist farmers whose immediate priority is household food security, not commercial expansion. There is little empirical evidence that training of this kind produces transitions from subsistence to commercial orientation among smallholders in Africa, and the assumption that it does generates a fundamental misalignment between program design and farmer reality.
5. Integrated support	Finance and training are frequently bundled, but rarely integrated in a meaningful way. Loans arrive without guidance on how to use them effectively. Equipment provided for value addition is often mismatched with local production realities: one cooperative described a maize flour machine that could only be operated three days per year given local volumes. Barriers to market access, including harvest cycle misalignment, lack of storage, and limited price negotiation capacity, remain unaddressed.
6. Self-selection	Participants are identified by commune officials rather than through open calls or self-selection. Most joined training passively, often motivated by travel allowances rather than perceived relevance to their situation. Reliance on local authorities also introduces social and political bias, with certain groups systematically excluded from training opportunities.
7. Practice-based delivery	Almost all training takes the form of brief, classroom-style workshops following standardized curricula. Experiential components such as peer learning, learning-by-doing, or on-the-ground coaching are rarely present. Follow-up after training is virtually nonexistent, even for programs linked to loan disbursement. A notable exception is one ESO using simulation-based negotiation methods, but this remains highly unusual.
8. Group entrepreneurship	Group-based entrepreneurship is promoted as the primary support channel, but cooperative formation is typically externally driven by local authorities rather than arising from grassroots interest. Many farmers report little sense of ownership and few tangible income benefits. Monthly contributions are experienced as burdensome, and expectations of collective improvement go unmet due to poor coordination, market limitations, or internal mismanagement.

Principle	What happens when it is not followed: Evidence from Burundi
9. Inclusive group implementation *	Training is directed at cooperative leaders rather than members, on the assumption that knowledge will cascade downward. In practice, this rarely occurs: some leaders request compensation to share what they have learned, others lack the capacity to train effectively, and many members distrust their leaders. The approach reinforces existing inequalities within cooperatives and systematically excludes the most marginalized smallholders.
10. Outcome-based incentives	Reporting obligations reinforce a focus on simple, quantifiable outputs such as the number of farmers trained. ESOs, operating under contractual performance indicators, prioritize efficient delivery of short standalone sessions over the coaching and aftercare necessary to translate training into livelihood improvement. In several cases, implementing organizations conduct their own project evaluations, raising further questions about accountability and the reliability of reported outcomes.
11. ESO embeddedness *	Development partner and ESO relations are deeply hierarchical, with local organizations having little influence over program content or strategic direction. As one ESO described it, development partners are high, we are low in their mind. The space to adapt programs to farmer realities is severely constrained. Another ESO put the central problem plainly: farmers are expected to adapt to the support, but why is the support not adapted to the farmer?

What the Burundi data show, taken together, is not a series of separate problems but the same underlying problem expressed across different dimensions of training design and delivery. In each area, training is designed and delivered to meet the requirements of the implementing system, specifically the reporting obligations, efficiency targets, and institutional preferences of development partners and the government agencies through which they operate, rather than the needs, capacities, and realities of the farmers the training is intended to serve. Short, supply-driven, classroom-based sessions focused on business plan writing and cooperative management are not accidental features of current practice. They are the predictable output of an incentive structure that rewards measurable outputs over meaningful outcomes.

The problem is not that good practices are unknown. It is that the institutional conditions under which training is delivered make it structurally difficult to apply them.

Two governance dynamics that are not well captured in the existing literature emerged from the Burundi fieldwork and warranted the addition of the two new principles. The first concerns the way in which group-based training, despite being broadly aligned with principle 8, consistently reproduces inequality through its exclusive focus on cooperative leaders as knowledge brokers. The assumption that knowledge cascades from leaders to members rarely holds in practice, and the approach effectively excludes the most marginal farmers from the benefits of training. The second concerns the relationship between ESOs and development partners. ESOs in Burundi operate within deeply hierarchical structures that leave them little room to adapt programmes to farmer realities. They are accountable upward, to development partner requirements, rather than downward, to the farmers they serve. This structural condition underlies many of the specific failures documented against the individual principles.

► **CONCLUSIONS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this study point to a difficult conclusion for the development sector: the knowledge necessary to design effective agri-entrepreneurship training for smallholders in Africa largely exists. The eleven design principles presented in this paper are not new discoveries but a drawing together of lessons that practitioners and researchers have been articulating for decades. The problem is not a lack of knowledge about what good training looks like. The problem is that the institutional conditions under which training is designed, funded, and delivered work against its application.

Addressing this requires changes at multiple levels. At the level of programme content and process, development partners and ESOs need to invest seriously in pre-training needs assessments that genuinely involve farmers, rather than treating them as a procedural formality. Training must be designed with a credible theory of change: a realistic account of how specific content and delivery methods produce specific livelihood improvements. Curricula must go beyond cooperative management and business plan writing to address the entrepreneurial competencies that actually determine whether farmers can identify and act on market opportunities. And training must be embedded in broader support packages that address the demand-side barriers, access to finance, market linkages, input availability, that prevent skills from translating into income.

At the level of governance, the more difficult changes are required. Performance metrics must shift away from training outputs toward livelihood outcomes, which means tolerating the longer time horizons and messier measurement challenges that genuine impact evaluation entails. Development partners need to create genuine space for ESOs to adapt programmes to local realities, which in turn requires a different kind of relationship between funders and implementers: one grounded in trust, shared accountability, and a willingness to learn from what is not working. Inclusive design processes that involve farmers, local experts, and community voices in programme development are not optional enhancements. They are the mechanism through which context-specific, impactful training is built.

The eleven design principles presented here are intended as a practical tool for both programme designers and evaluators. Applied together, they offer a benchmark against which current practice can be assessed and improved, and a framework for identifying where and why interventions fall short. The evidence from Burundi suggests that the gap between principle and practice is wide, but it also suggests that the gap is not inevitable. It is the product of specific institutional arrangements that can, with sufficient commitment and appropriate incentive structures, be changed.

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