



Voices from the Field

STORIES OF SMALLHOLDER STRENGTH AND
AGRICULTURAL PROGRESS

AGFINANCE 2025



Driving Change

What has always struck me about rural farming communities is the unwavering faith they carry – faith that a handful of seeds, planted in dry earth, will feed a family, fund an education, and sustain hope for a better future. Across sub-Saharan Africa, smallholder farmers are using agricultural finance to transform the trajectory of their farms and families.

Farmers choose to work with Opportunity's network of Financial Institutions because they want to grow more, earn more, and build resilient households.

With access to capital, training, and support, they are creating sustainable opportunities for themselves and strengthening local food systems. These are not stories of dependency but of agency: where farmers and rural entrepreneurs are empowered to build flourishing communities from the ground up.

We believe that when farmers thrive, communities thrive. Our mission is to help farmers grow more and earn more, and we do this by forming partnerships that increase both agricultural productivity and rural incomes.

The closer we get to ending extreme poverty, the clearer our path becomes: Farmers are not only key to food security – they are key to prosperity. By investing in them, we sow the seeds of a more inclusive and abundant future for all.

Warmly,



Tim Strong
Head of Opportunity AgFinance



*Supporting farmers to
grow more and earn more*



Jeanne D'Arc, 41, grows rice, raises livestock, and leads her savings group alongside her husband, Twagirimana, on their thriving farm in Rwanda. With Opportunity International AgFinance's support, she was able to expand their land, increase yields, improve their home, and drive her community toward financial independence.

AgFinance by the Numbers

\$570 million+
in capital deployed

1,000,000+
loans disbursed



1.7 million+
farmers reached

3,583
Farmer Support
Agents



***A member of the Rural Graduation Program
outside her home in Malawi***

Thriving Rural Communities: An Integrated Approach to Growing, Earning, and Learning

In rural Uganda, agriculture and education are deeply connected. When farms thrive, families can afford school fees; when schools succeed, they become hubs for community development. The Thriving Rural Communities Project, led by Opportunity International, brings these sectors together to tackle poverty at its roots.

One of the project pilots is in Central Uganda, where agriculture finance and education finance are integrated to boost livelihoods and expand access to quality education. At its core is the Farmer Support Agent (FSA) model – local farmers trained to deliver peer-to-peer coaching in good agricultural practices, and regenerative agriculture, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship.

FSAs work through school-based demonstration plots, where farmers and parents learn regenerative techniques like mulching, crop rotation, and composting – while students gain hands-on agricultural skills. To date and in Uganda alone, 35 FSAs have been onboarded and over 5,250 farmers/parents reached, with 16 schools already hosting active demo gardens.

Financial access is critical to this model. The project works in partnership with Opportunity's financial services partners – Opportunity Bank Uganda Limited (OBUL), UGAFODE, and Stanbic Bank Uganda Limited – to offer tailored agriculture and education loans that align with seasonal needs. It also supports schools to accept farm produce as partial payment of fees, offering a practical solution grounded in local realities. Schools also receive training in business management, leadership, and digital learning to operate as sustainable enterprises.

By aligning AgFinance and EduFinance, and promoting regenerative agriculture, the project initially aims to pilot with 12,000 farmers who are parents across 150 school communities – transforming schools into engines of rural resilience.

Thriving Rural Communities is building a future where growing, earning, and learning go hand in hand – ensuring rural families can withstand shocks, increase incomes, and invest in their children’s education for generations to come.



Pupils/learners at Maanyi Parents Primary school managing the vegetables garden after classes.





Patricia, Malawi, stands by her grocery business



Patricia, a smallholder farmer from Malawi, begins each day at 5 a.m., walking to her farm where she grows maize, sugarcane, and pigeon peas. After working the land, she returns to restock and run her small grocery business. She supports eight children, four of her own and four from her late sister, and works tirelessly to meet their needs despite limited income and frequent food insecurity. Floods from Cyclone Freddy devastated her maize fields, but Patricia responded by building ridges to capture soil moisture and protect her farm from future damage. Her land remains vulnerable to flooding, so she hopes to purchase elevated farmland in the future.

With training from Opportunity International AgFinance, Patricia now uses techniques like intercropping and crop rotation. She also joined a savings group in 2021 and was elected their secretary. She saves up to 2,000 Kwacha weekly and has used group loans to buy a bicycle, livestock, and cement for her home.

Patricia recently became a mentor, guiding six women through farming and business challenges. She regularly meets with them and finds fulfillment in their success. Her goals are clear: grow her farming business, invest in dairy cows, improve her home, and ensure all her children receive a quality education.

Guaranteeing Rural Opportunities for Women (GROW)

Empowering Women, Transforming Agriculture

“Women farmers play a decisive role in rural communities and contribute to a more sustainable and foodsecure world.”

Qu Dongyu, FAO Director-General



The Problem:

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, closing the gap in farm labor, productivity, and wages between men and women could increase global GDP by nearly \$1 trillion and reduce the number of foodinsecure people by 45 million. This is especially critical given the rising levels of global hunger.

Yet, in Africa, women own only 1% of land, receive only 7% of agricultural extension services, and are granted less than 10% of small-scale farmer credit.

Across the board, women face systemic and engrained challenges that limit their ability to qualify for loans, own land, make money, and manage their businesses. These challenges are cyclical in nature, deriving from power, resource, and system obstacles.

Because of this, Opportunity International has been working to establish a comprehensive approach to address the challenges faced by female farmers.

GROW's Strategy:

We aim to empower women by:

Building Climate Resilience – GROW helps women strengthens their ability to mitigate losses and adopt alternative livelihoods.

Enhancing Agricultural Productivity – With 79% of women in low-income countries engaged in agriculture, GROW equips them with climate-smart practices and regenerative agriculture tools.

Empowering Women in Farm Management – Promoting farming as a family business, ensuring women have equal decision-making power.

Expanding Economic Opportunities – Increasing the number of women Farmer Support Agents (FSAs) to provide income while enabling them to train and support their communities.

Addressing Household Burdens – Supporting childcare and domestic burden alleviation solutions, allowing women to focus on income diversification.



Bertha Kaliasi, 45, is a mother of four from Kumbani village in rural Malawi. A farmer by upbringing, Bertha runs two small businesses: selling doughnuts and trading milled rice at the local center. Though the rice business is profitable, it requires significant investment, and transport costs eat into her earnings, as she no longer owns a bicycle and must hire transport.

As chairperson of her savings group, Bertha leads a group of 35 members who meet weekly to save, lend, and support each other. She plays a key role in coordinating meetings, resolving conflicts, and guiding financial decisions. The group has improved local access to finance, allowing members to save consistently and invest in their businesses.

Through mentorship, Bertha has learned valuable business skills, including market analysis, quick decision-making, and bulk purchasing. She hopes to mentor others and help women become financially independent and resilient.



A women's digital savings group meeting in Malawi.



Joselyne, 44, on her farm in Rwanda. With the support of her savings group, she has been able to expand her tomato and vegetable farms and buy goats and pigs.



The FSA trainings and savings group have helped Joselyne be able to pay for health insurance for herself and her children.

Reaching Women Farmers Where They Are: Jaress AgFinance's Approach

In rural Nigeria, Jaress AgFinance Ltd. is tailoring financial services to meet the needs of women farmers. Founded by Dr. Asongo Abraham, Jaress has introduced more flexible loan terms to remove common barriers to access. Equity requirements are as low as 10%, and in some cases are waived entirely. Repayment schedules are aligned with the realities of the farming cycle, with grace periods of up to five months and additional flexibility for women caring for young children.

Trust is at the heart of Jaress' model. Loans are delivered through group-based lending, supported by trained community agents – often the daughters or sons of local clients – who coordinate meetings and act as a bridge between clients and staff. This community-rooted approach fosters accountability and long-term relationships.

Before receiving a loan, all clients complete a training series in good agricultural practices, group dynamics, financial literacy, and regenerative agriculture techniques such as intercropping, crop rotation, and water conservation through trenching. Weekly SMS messages in local languages reinforce learning with practical, timely advice on weather and crop care.

For Jaress, women aren't just clients – they're the foundation of resilient, thriving rural communities.

Empowering Women Entrepreneurs in DRC: The Visa Women Thrive Project

The Visa Women Thrive project “Accelerating the Growth of Women-Owned Enterprises and jobs for Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)”, implemented by Equity BCDC and Opportunity International, has demonstrated the transformative power of financial literacy, business support, and agricultural training for women entrepreneurs. Operating in regions like Kinshasa, Katanga, Kasai, Kongo Central and south Kivu, the initiative was designed to tackle persistent gender inequalities and the systemic barriers women face in accessing finance, building businesses, and generating sustainable livelihoods.

One powerful example of impact is Didine Cikut, a micro-entrepreneur running a small yogurt production business. Before the program, Didine produced just 50 liters of yogurt a day. With training in family business and entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and agricultural best practices from Equity BCDC and Opportunity, Didine scaled her operations to an impressive 300 liters per day. This sixfold increase is not just a testament to her determination, but a clear signal of what targeted support can unlock. And if this is what training alone can do—imagine what Didine could achieve with access to working capital or tailored agricultural loans.

Across the program, Equity BCDC trained over 3,200 women-owned small and medium businesses (SMBs)—exceeding their initial target of 525—and supported 23,536 women to open bank accounts. Opportunity complemented this by training 90 Field Support Agents (FSAs) and more than 6,000 Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA) members in financial literacy and agronomic techniques. In Kasai, they also digitized 150 VSLAs using the Dream Save platform to improve transparency and ease the logistical burden on rural women.

The project culminated in a powerful closing event on July 18, 2025, drawing enthusiastic participation from women entrepreneurs, financial institutions, and civil society. The overwhelming response made it clear: this is just the beginning. Stakeholders called passionately for a second phase – a scaled-up effort to bring lending, infrastructure, and investment to more women like Didine.



Didine Cikut, a participant in the Women Thrive project, at the closing event in Lubumbashi in July 2025



A smallholder farmer on her farm in Rwanda

Where We Work

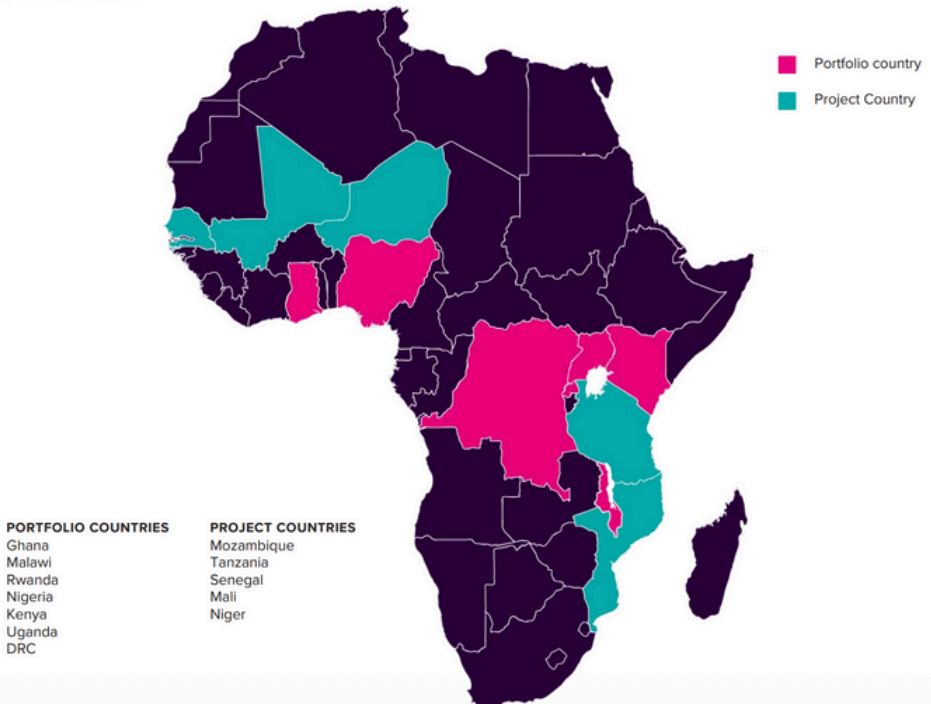
“The fastest way to end the intergenerational transfer of poverty is by investing in rural economies.”

– AKINWUMI ADESINA

President, African Development Bank & Director Rockefeller Foundation

Today, over 80% of Africa's farms are smallholder-owned – and these farms operate at only 20-30% of their potential yields. The current market assessment reveals a staggering \$200 billion annual financing gap, presenting both a challenge and a substantial market opportunity. To close this gap, the AgFinance program builds on Opportunity International's 50-year history of innovation and financial services for those living in poverty.

OUTREACH





Before connecting with Opportunity International, Felicia relied solely on her husband's income to support their family. After joining a VSLA, she gained access to loans and began saving for the first time. With this support, she launched her own farming business, raising animals and growing crops. Now, she contributes significantly to her household income and provides for her family independently.

Felicia also serves as president of her savings group, where she leads by example and teaches other members about financial management. Through her leadership, she empowers others in her community to take control of their finances and invest in their futures. Felicia continues to build her farm in Rwanda and grow her influence, proud of the independence and stability she's worked hard to achieve.



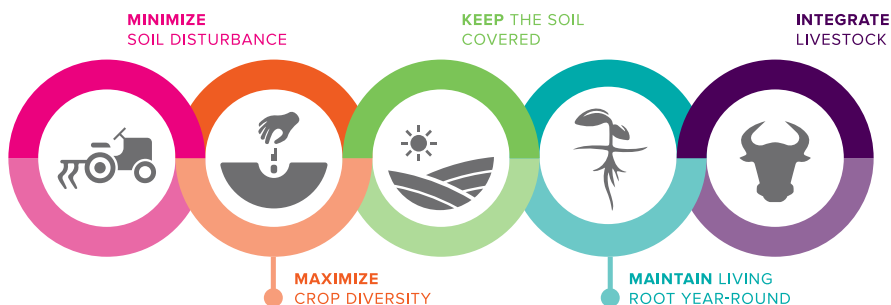
Regenerative Agriculture

Opportunity's RegenAg pilot in Rwanda is an initiative with the potential for profound impact on farmers and crop yields. Operating with a straightforward structure, the pilot program divides plots into halves, implementing conventional agricultural practices on one side while introducing regenerative practices on the other.

The RegenAg program is designed to be adopted gradually, one principle at a time, with the maximum benefit coming from the combined use of all of them. When adopted, these practices can help improve the resilience of farmer's lands and crops to weather volatility and pests, and reduce the dependence on external inputs, namely chemical/inorganic fertilizer.

RegenAg works by prioritizing five key strategies: minimizing soil disturbance, maximizing crop diversity, covering the soil, maintaining plant roots, and integrating livestock into farming practices.

Striking a balance between adoption and profitability, as well as promoting locally relevant practices, RegenAg emerges as a holistic solution, promising not only increased harvests but also more nutritious crops and sustained growth for smallholder farmers.







Christina, a mother of four in Malawi's Blantyre District, used to struggle to feed her family and keep her children in school. Her farm, once her only income source, lacked fertilizer, seeds, and inputs, and stress created distance within her household. "Before, the stress divided us," she shared. "Now, we build together."

In March 2023, Christina joined Opportunity International AgFinance's Rural Graduation Model and received four goats, a monthly stipend, and a business grant. She took part in training in financial literacy, business, WASH, and savings. With her capital, she started selling tomatoes, allowing her to buy food and send her children to school.

She joined a VSLA and began saving weekly. Within a year, she expanded her tomato business, bought fertilizer, and helped her husband improve their irrigation farming. Together, they built a brick-walled home and stabilized their income. Her goat herd grew to nine, and she sold two to buy fertilizer in a dry season.

Christina now serves as a trusted leader in her savings group and uses a personal "vision map" to plan her future. "I now know where I am going," she says. Her goals include roofing her house with iron sheets and starting a poultry business. "I am no longer lost. I have a map, and I am moving."

Green Finance in Practice: Lessons from FSPs in Uganda and Rwanda

As climate variability change intensifies, financial service providers (FSPs) are feeling the impact. Unpredictable weather and degraded land are making it harder for farmers to succeed –and harder for lenders to manage risk. To stay relevant and sustainable, FSPs need to shift toward more climate-resilient agricultural lending.

Two AgFinance partners – Opportunity Bank Uganda Limited (OBUL) and Inkunga Finance in Rwanda – are already making that shift. Their experiences show how green finance can work in practice.

OBUL: Making Green Lending Part of the Everyday

Instead of launching a brand-new green loan, OBUL focused on building climate-smart practices into its existing agricultural products. For instance, they linked concessional rates under Uganda’s Agricultural Credit Facility to sustainable practices.

One of their innovations was their climate-proofing tool, developed under the now-closed Biodiversity Financing Facility (BFF). It helped farmers set and meet sustainability targets – like planting trees or switching to better inputs – in return for better loan terms. Even after the closure of the BFF, the tool still continues to inform how green practices are embedded into OBUL’s portfolio.

Behind the scenes, OBUL invested in staff training and upgraded its systems to track green activities – helping the bank stay consistent and use data to guide its decisions.

Inkunga: Designing Loans That Fit Farmers' Lives

In Rwanda, Inkunga Finance PLC designed green loan products that match the day-to-day realities of smallholder farmers. The Kundigiti loan supports a shift away from poorly managed eucalyptus plantations, offering terms of up to eight years and grace periods to give trees time to grow. The Ongerigiti loan promotes agroforestry by encouraging farmers to plant trees alongside staple crops like beans, maize, and potatoes. In return, borrowers benefit from reduced interest rates – supporting both short-term income and long-term resilience.

Inkunga's experience shows that climate-smart lending can work when products are grounded in the real needs of farmers – and when FSPs are willing to innovate and adapt.



