

ESP women and youth-led business incubator

Mekdes Tamrat and Rahwa Yemane



This experience brief highlights lessons learned from ESP+'s women and youth-led business incubator aimed at fostering the development of start-up and early stage women-led companies in the seed sector

Introduction

Women and youth entrepreneurs in Ethiopia face persistent barriers, including limited access to markets, finance, and tailored business support. Under the Ethiopian Seed Partnership *plus* (ESP+) private sector development activities, a target was set for 30% of participating companies to be women-owned. This target was not achieved due to the very limited number of women-owned seed companies at entry level, pointing to deeper structural constraints in the sector.

To better understand this gap, a gender analysis was conducted. The findings showed that many women-led businesses lacked the technical and business capacity required to qualify for ESP+'s accelerator programs. In response, ESP+ established the Women-Led Business Incubator to support the growth of start-up and early stage women-led companies in the seed sector. Initially focused on women to address gender-specific barriers, the program later expanded to include young men in its third cohort, creating a more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem while maintaining a strong emphasis on women's economic empowerment.

As of August 2026, the program has supported 26 businesses led by women and young men, contributing to improvements such as business formalization and the development of market linkages.

This paper presents the design and implementation of the incubator, followed by key results and lessons learned. Its conclusions are built on the findings of evaluations that were carried out among the Incubator participants.

Key messages

- **An integrated incubation model works:** combining group training, tailored one-to-one coaching, practical exposure visits, and pitching opportunities helped early-stage women- and youth-led agribusinesses turn knowledge into concrete business improvements.
- **Adaptive, needs-based support drives stronger results:** the program used diagnostics, participant feedback, and cohort experience to tailor finance, technical, and productivity support to different business maturity levels and participant needs.
- **The incubator strengthened both business capability and market participation:** across three cohorts, 26 businesses improved planning, financial management, record-keeping, pitching confidence, customer engagement, formalization, and access to market linkages, suppliers, mentors, and business opportunities.
- **Sustained impact requires stronger follow-through and partnerships:** future programs should expand access to finance, strengthen post-incubation mentoring and alumni networks, maintain flexible and accessible delivery, and connect graduates with buyers, suppliers, investors, financial institutions, and development partners.

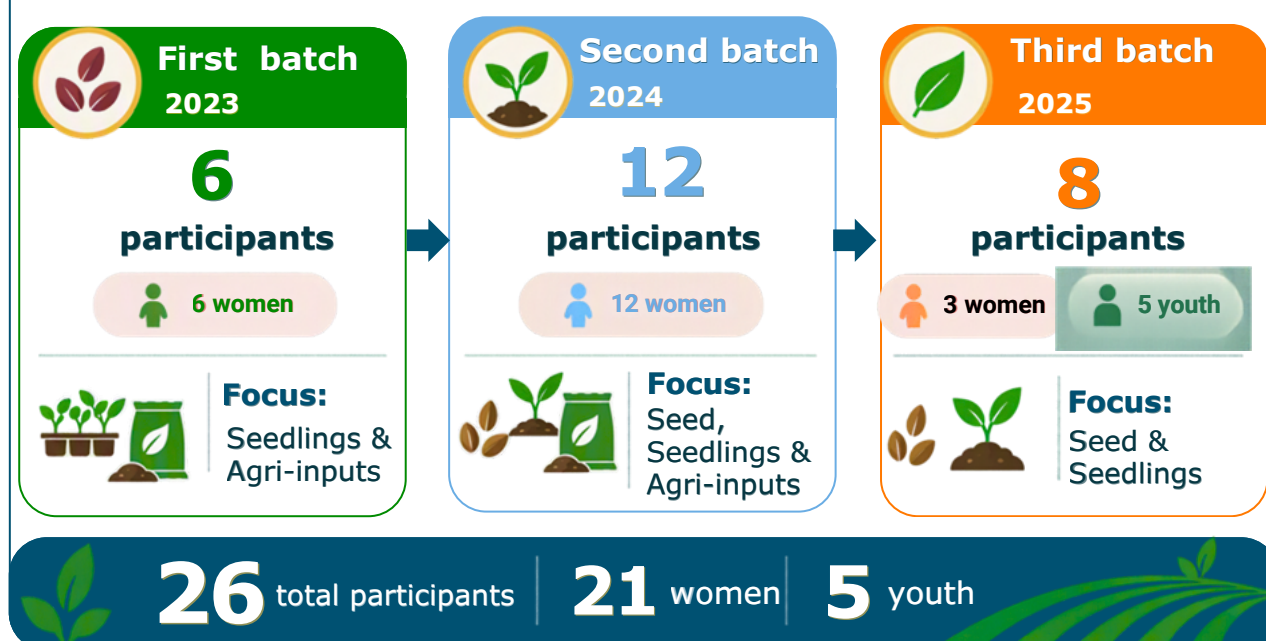
*Mekdes Tamrat works at RSLNC Consultancy PLC Ethiopia. She currently serving as an Agribusiness consultant and Communication support.
Rahwa Yemane works at RSLNC Consultancy PLC Ethiopia, as agribusiness consultant.*

Business incubator program overview

The ESP+ Business Incubator was designed based on a 2022 gender analysis, which shaped both the target group and the program's delivery approach. The Business Incubator program has so far been rolled out in three batches, with each cohort informing improvements in the next. The first batch engaged six women entrepreneurs in seedling and agri-input businesses. The second batch expanded to twelve women participants. In the third batch, the program also included young men, forming a cohort of eight entrepreneurs (five men and three women), while refining its technical focus on seed and seedling production.

largely of businesses still working through documentation and licensing receive more attention on those practical requirements, while more established businesses move further into financing options. Module 4 was similarly adapted when the third batch expanded to include young men. Originally designed for an all-women cohort, the module included a session on women's productivity. With the inclusion of young men in Batch 3, a corresponding session on men's productivity was added to address their specific needs.

ESP+ women and youth-led business incubator: Three cohorts at a glance



The incubator program consisted of four interconnected components: group training sessions, individualized coaching, experience-sharing visits, and a pitching competition – described in the next sections. Together, these components provided a structured yet flexible support system that combined knowledge development, practical application, and performance incentives.

A defining feature of the program was its adaptive design. Training content and delivery methods were continuously refined based on participant feedback and observed gaps, ensuring the incubator remained responsive to the evolving needs of participating businesses. The finance module, for instance, is tailored to each cohort according to how far the participating businesses have developed. The core components remain constant across batches, including financial statements and access to loans, but the emphasis shifts, cohorts made up

Group trainings

Group training served as the foundation of the incubator, providing participants with essential business knowledge while having peer learning and collaboration. The group setting enabled entrepreneurs to share experiences, discuss challenges, and learn from each other, strengthening both individual and collective capacity.

ESP+ delivered four core modules across all batches: 1. Business model development, 2. Access to markets, 3. Access to finance, and 4. Pitching combined with personal productivity. These modules were selected to address the most critical gaps faced by early-stage agribusinesses. The effectiveness of this component lay in its interactive nature. Rather than focusing solely on theory, sessions encouraged practical reflection and discussion. The inclusion of guest experts further strengthened the trainings by connecting

concepts to real-world experiences within Ethiopia's agricultural sector, making the learning more applicable and grounded.

Through post-training testimonials, participants recognized the practical value of learning from their peers. The shared environment allowed for group problem solving, diverse perspectives being shared, and partnerships forming among participants. The guest experts also included alumni from batches 1 and 2, creating an opportunity for the participants to network and learn from the experiences of those before them.



Figure 1: Trainees discussing during Business Model Canvas module training



Figure 2: Trainees learning from each other during the technical training

Individual coaching

Individual coaching complemented the group training by providing tailored support to each participant. This component ensured that general concepts introduced in training were translated into business-specific actions. The coaching sessions provided support in business, technical, and financial areas to address specific operational gaps. The process began with one-on-one diagnostic sessions to identify each entrepreneur's priority challenges and capacity gaps. Based on these assessments, targeted coaching plans were developed for each business.

Coaching sessions were then structured using the Growth Wheel tool, with a focused Key Performance Indicator (KPI) assigned per business to guide progress tracking. This approach helped structure discussions around key business dimensions such as customer segments, value proposition, market channels, revenue streams, partnerships, and cost structures.

This targeted approach proved effective in addressing specific business challenges. For example, several participants transitioned from informal record-keeping to structured financial management systems, improving both internal decision-making and readiness to access external finance. Pitching practice also helped participants improve their ability to communicate their business value proposition, with several entrepreneurs reporting increased confidence when presenting their ideas to potential financiers and partners.

Experience-sharing visits

Experience-sharing visits were incorporated to complement theoretical learning with practical exposure. These visits allowed participants to observe established businesses and research institutions, helping them better understand how concepts discussed in training are applied in real settings.

By engaging directly with companies and institutions, participants gained insights into production processes, quality standards, and business management practices. The visits also created opportunities for networking, which is essential for market access and long-term growth.

Visits to organizations were organized to companies such as ATM seed producing company, a key company within the ESP accelerator program's private sector component. This together with companies and research centers like Joy Tech PLC and Holeta Agricultural Research Center, respectively, exposed participants to improved technologies and ongoing research developments in the seed sector. This exposure helped broaden their perspectives and encouraged the adoption of improved practices within their own businesses. Some participants were able to find seed suppliers for their businesses, discover relevant trainings that were being offered by the companies, and connect with expert mentors through this experience.



Figure 3: Participants visiting Holeta Agricultural Research Center



Figure 4: Participants visiting Selam Agricultural Research Center

Pitching competitions

The pitching competition marked the final stage of the incubation process, providing participants with an opportunity to present their business ideas and demonstrate the progress made during the program. It also served as a practical platform for strengthening presentation and communication skills, which are critical for engaging investors and partners.

In the third batch, separate award categories were introduced for women and young men. This approach recognized that entrepreneurs operate within different structural contexts and face distinct challenges. By assessing participants within separate categories, the program ensured a more equitable and context-sensitive evaluation process, while maintaining its focus on gender empowerment.

The competition included a financial award, enabling winners to invest directly in their businesses. This reinforced the practical nature of the incubator and supported immediate business improvements.

The pitching event concluded with a closing and award ceremony, which recognized participants' efforts and marked the transition from structured program support to independent business growth. The event also provided a networking opportunity for entrepreneurs to connect with partners and stakeholders.

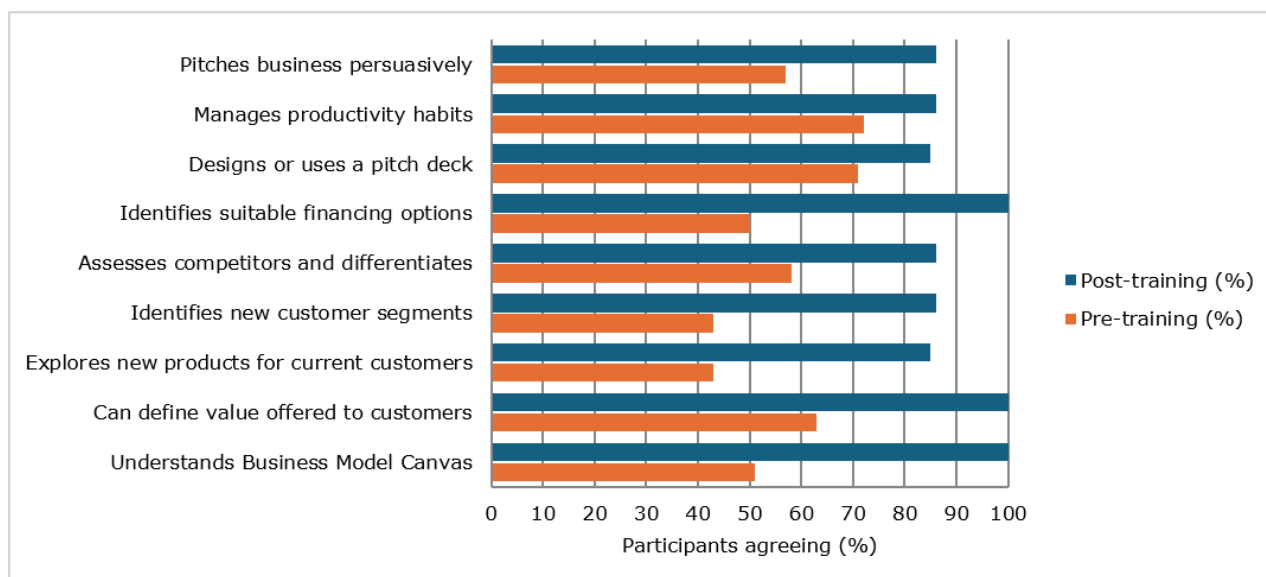


Figure 5: Third batch (2025) — participants assessment before and after training.

Program outcomes

The incubation program contributed to both the economic and personal empowerment of women and youth by strengthening their ability to run sustainable businesses, make informed decisions, and actively engage in market systems. These outcomes are drawn from pre and post-incubator self-assessments conducted with every cohort, from post-training testimonials, and from observed changes in participants' businesses. The third batch, shown in Figure 5, illustrates the pattern.

Across the third batch, participants reported gains in nine areas assessed. The largest increases were in business planning and market analysis. Understanding of the Business Model Canvas rose from 51% to 100%, the ability to define the value a business offers customers from 63% to 100%, and the ability to identify new customer segments from 43% to 86%. Access to finance showed the single biggest jump, from 50% to 100%, which is notable because it had been the weakest area in the two preceding cohorts, reaching only 75% and 72%; that persistent gap prompted a revision of the finance module for the third batch so that it covered core concepts, including financial documentation and loan obligations. Participants also demonstrated improvements in presentation skills. Confidence in pitching a business persuasively increased from 57% to 86%, while the ability to design and use a pitch deck also improved by 14%.

The program also facilitated market linkages among trainees, encouraging collaboration and integration within value chains. Participants engaged in joint business activities that enabled product diversification and access to new opportunities, including contractual engagement in hydroponic seedling production for ESP+. Internally, participants began trading with one another, with some sourcing seed and other inputs from fellow trainees; turning the cohort itself into a small value chain. These connections changed how participants understood and approached the market. In post-training evaluations, first-batch participants described the shift directly. "My previous approach to customer acquisition was limited, but now I have learned new and effective methods to attract and retain customers." These interactions, along with emerging connections to external companies, improved participants' understanding of market requirements and strengthened their ability to engage effectively with buyers, partners, and peers within the value chain.

The incubation program also strengthened participants' understanding of business formalization as a key step for growth and sustainability. Several trainees took steps to register their businesses, improving their credibility, market access, and readiness for opportunities such as financing and partnerships. In parallel, coaching sessions reinforced financial literacy and encouraged consistent record-keeping practices, enabling participants to better track performance, manage costs, and make informed decisions.

Overall, the program resulted in a clear shift in participants' capabilities and mindset. Women and youth demonstrated improved communication, stronger customer relationship management, and greater confidence in market engagement. Many became more proactive in approaching new customers, negotiating, and sustaining long-term business relationships. This transformation was particularly significant for women and youth, as it strengthened their active participation in markets and increased their ownership of business growth.

Lessons learned across all batches

Best practices

Across all incubation cycles, several practices consistently demonstrated strong effectiveness in strengthening participant learning, engagement, and business development outcomes. These practices contributed to improved knowledge transfer, practical application, and sustained program impact.

The following practices have been identified as effective and should be maintained:

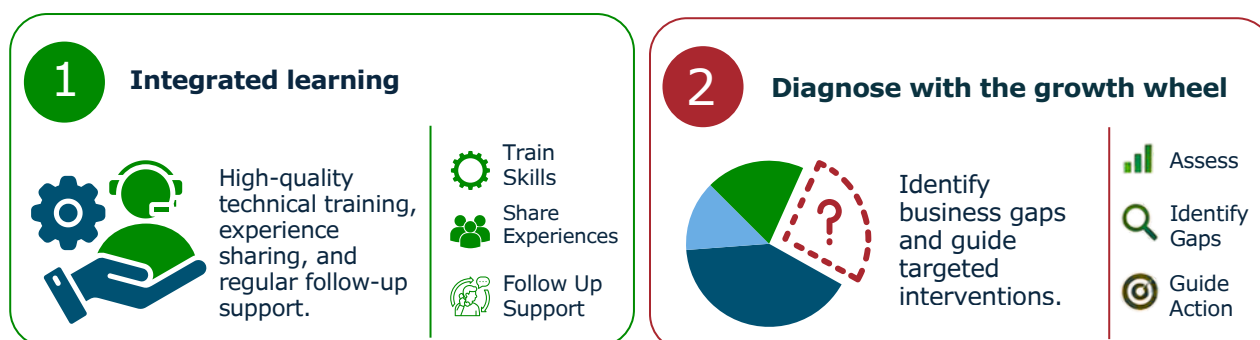




Figure 6: Alumni networking with third batch participants



Figure 7: ESP Incubator third batch journey video

Areas of improvement to enhance effectiveness and reach

The incubator's iterative design meant that gaps identified in one batch could be addressed in the next. For instance; the finance module was revised for the third batch to cover core concepts, including taxation and loan obligations, without overwhelming early-stage entrepreneurs, shifting participants from apprehension toward active enquiry. The technical focus was narrowed to seed and seedling production in the third batch. Alumni from the first two batches were brought in as guest experts, turning past cohorts into a peer-learning resource for the next.

While the program has demonstrated strong results in strengthening the capacity and confidence of women and youth entrepreneurs, some areas can further enhance the effectiveness, inclusiveness, and sustainability of similar incubation

approaches. The following lessons and recommendations are based on implementation experience across all incubation cycles:

Design from a diagnostic, not an assumption

This incubator exists because a gender analysis explained why a 30% women-owned participation target was missed; the constraint was capacity at entry level, not willingness to participate. Programs should establish what is actually blocking a target group before designing the response, as the diagnosis shapes both who is recruited and how support is delivered.

Expand outreach and inclusion

Future incubation programs should explore approaches to reach a larger number of entrepreneurs while ensuring meaningful participation of women and youth from diverse backgrounds.

Combine group training with individual coaching

Group sessions created shared knowledge and peer networks, while one-on-one coaching applied concepts to specific business actions. Using a diagnostic tool with one Key Performance Indicator per business kept sessions focused and progress measurable.

Tailor support to different business maturity levels

Incubation programs should tailor their coaching methods, delivering essential support to early-stage entrepreneurs and supplying more sophisticated resources and advice to businesses poised for growth.

Strengthen business management capacity

Emphasize practical business skills like record-keeping, documentation, financial management, and business planning. Participants improved decision-making and finance readiness by adopting structured financial management.

Enhance technical and practical learning opportunities

Offering detailed learning materials and more time for experience-sharing visits can enhance participants' application of knowledge in business. Visits to seed companies and research centers exposed participants to production standards and technologies, helping some secure suppliers and mentors.

Improve access to finance and market opportunities

Program participants developed strong market connections, trading and sourcing from each other. Incubators should enhance these by linking with financial institutions, grant providers, and other value chain actors to support entrepreneurs post-training.

Establish structured post-incubation support

Implement refresher training, mentorship, or coaching to help graduates apply learning and overcome challenges post-program. Involve alumni as guest experts and mentors to build cross-cohort connections cost-effectively.

Maintain flexible and accessible delivery approaches

Training schedules, delivery formats, and communication channels should remain adaptable to accommodate participants with different geographic locations, availability, and connectivity conditions.

Conclusion

The ESP+ Woman and Youth-Led Business Incubator has been an effective model for strengthening early-stage entrepreneurs in the seed value chain. Through training, coaching, experience-sharing, and pitching sessions, participants improved their business skills, market engagement, and financial management, while also gaining access to new market linkages and opportunities.

The program also contributed to increased confidence, stronger communication, and a shift in mindset toward more structured and proactive entrepreneurship. Its iterative design allowed continuous improvement across cohorts, ensuring the program remained responsive to participants' needs.

Overall, the incubator demonstrated the value of an integrated and adaptive approach to supporting women and youth-led businesses and provides a strong foundation for scaling and improving future interventions, particularly in access to finance and post-program support.

Twenty-six businesses have come through this program, and the most valuable thing a reader can do is buy from them, supply them, partner with them, or invest in them. Companies interested in connecting with our alumni can reach the Business Incubator team at 'mekdes@resiliencebv.com'. We also welcome contact from organizations considering a similar incubator model in other sectors or geographies, and from financial institutions and development partners who want to support future cohorts or help strengthen post-incubation support.

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For more information on ESP+ please contact either:

Joep van den Broek

RSLNC Consultancy PLC Ethiopia
joep@resiliencebv.com

www.resiliencebv.com

Abishkar Subedi

Wageningen University and Research
abishkar.subedi@wur.nl

www.wur.nl