

Analysis

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Tech entrepreneurs seek to shatter stereotypes about women in farming

When Oluwayimika Angel Adelaja-Kuye started Nigeria's first vertical farming company she already had years of experience advising governments under her belt - yet as a woman, she still struggled to be taken seriously. "In the beginning, even my staff, when they first come on board, are more likely to listen to my husband before me," said the founder of Fresh Direct Nigeria, which grows vegetables hydroponically - farming in water instead of soil.

"These challenges make you hungrier," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Women make up nearly half the global workforce in farming, but many say their contribution has long gone unrecognized, particularly in developing countries. Adelaja-Kuye is among a small but growing group of women entrepreneurs who are helping to change that, many using new technologies to produce food in more sustainable ways.

The 35-year-old, who started farming in the heart of the Nigerian capital Abuja in 2015 and uses shipping containers, said she wanted to support those who did not conform to the stereotype of the poor, uneducated subsistence farmer. Four of the six staff at her farm are young women who previously worked as household help. "I want young people to see agriculture as a solution for them, one that makes good money," she said. "If I'm changing the narrative of who a farmer is, I'm happy with that."

She has that in common with Awa Caba, a computer scientist who co-founded a platform for Senegalese women farmers to sell their produce online. Caba's company Sooretul - meaning "it's not far" - sells more than 400 products from about 2,800 rural women online. "My background is not agriculture," she said. "But it's more sensitive for me to use my knowledge as a woman to target underprivileged groups, and give them more access and income."

"My vision is to have a pan-African e-commerce platform where you can find different agricultural products produced by women in Africa." Sarah Nolet, who works as a consultant to the agricultural technology industry, said more and more women were getting involved in the growing sector. "When you take agriculture, it's male dominated, and tech is often male dominated," said Nolet, the Sydney-based chief executive of AgThentic, which consults on innovation in food and farming. "So you would think AgTech would be worse. But we actually see, especially in Australia, a lot of female founders starting AgTech companies."

Investment gap

Globally, women make up 43 percent of the agricultural workforce, but they tend to have less access to land, credit, technical advice and quality seeds, according to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). If women farmers had the same access to resources as men, they could increase yields by 20 percent to 30 percent, the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has said. But much depends on having the right role models. "We have to change mindsets and show women in lucrative, high-value markets, with access to technology, and innovation," said Tacko Ndiaye, the FAO's senior gender officer.

In 2018, companies working on food and agricultural technology globally raised a record \$16.9 billion, according to AgFunder, a San Francisco-based online investment platform for these businesses. Yet estimates based on available gender information show only 4% of that went to start-ups with one or more female founders, said Louisa Burwood-Taylor, head of media & research at AgFunder.

"However you slice the data, there's clearly a very big gap in the level of female entrepreneurship in food and agriculture technology," she said. "The reasons for this gap are broad including educational and investment biases, so we are investigating how they can be overcome." Benjamina Bollag, who co-founded Britain-based Higher Steaks with stem cell scientist Stephanie Wallis, is among those who did receive funding - at least \$200,000 since setting up 18 months ago.

Higher Steaks hopes to bring laboratory-grown pork to consumers within the next three years. Several companies are seeking to produce cell-based meat, promising less waste and dramatically fewer greenhouse gas emissions than livestock, but most are focusing on beef or poultry. Bollag said being a woman in a male-dominated industry had its difficulties, but added, "there are times when it was helpful too, where people were like, 'actually, we want to diversify so we will pick you.'" Ensuring women's voices are heard in farming was a key motivation for Rose Funja, whose company uses aerial surveillance to help farmers in Tanzania avoid crop losses to insects, disease and other pests. Funja, one of the country's only female drone pilots, said she made a point of going to farms in person because that was the best way to meet the women who worked on cultivating the crop while the men tended to focus on sales. — Reuters

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People play with soap bubbles in the Gardens of Trocadero in front of the Eiffel Tower on July 13, 2019 in Paris. — AFP

Social businesses take tourists off beaten path

With its panoramic, riverside views and perfectly Instagrammable interiors, on first appearances, the Good Hotel seems to be another of London's many trendy boutiques. But the neon sign "Sleep Good, Do Good," on the floating hotel's entrance wall is not just a backdrop to guests' selfies - it signals the company's mission as a social enterprise: To give back to the community as well as make a profit. "Hotels are often internationally owned, and often times filled with people who are quite far removed from the local setting," said the hotel's founder, Marten Dresen. "They mostly serve people who are not local to them."

Ethical tourism is increasingly popular among socially conscious travellers who want to minimise their environmental footprint and boost local economies, rather than global hotel chains or cruise companies that repatriate their profits. Growing numbers of people are on the move, with 1.4 billion international tourists in 2018 according to United Nations data - equal to the population of China - up 53 percent in a decade, as travel becomes cheaper and easier.

Yet locals often bear the brunt of overcrowding in popular sites, pollution caused by cruise ships or soaring rents driven up by tourists paying more for accommodation via sites like Airbnb. London's container-like Good Hotel started out as a detention centre for illegal immigrants in the Netherlands before becoming a pop-up hotel in Amsterdam in 2015 and then towed up the River Thames by tug boats in 2016 to its new home.

Situated in East London's Royal Docks, where ships unloaded their cargo a century ago, the 148-room Good Hotel invests all of its profits in training and education to create jobs and opportunities for locals in one of the city's poorest areas. "The more we grow as a business, the more we can reinvest," said Dresen, who runs a similar Good Hotel in Antigua, a city in the highlands of Guatemala, with a scheme to train and hire single mothers and provide apprenticeships for local schools. More than 80 London

locals who struggled to find work have completed the Good Hotel's four-month hospitality training scheme since 2016. Almost all are now in full-time jobs, including nine who work at the hotel.

Good path

Shaquene Wilson set her sights on working at the Good Hotel after her mother completed the training course and got a job in the kitchen. Two years on, Wilson is one of the senior bar staff, and managers have made sure her shifts do not clash with her mother's so they can share the care of Wilson's young daughter. "The job means so much to me. I feel very comfortable here," Wilson told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "We are definitely on a good path and helping others."

The funding for the training schemes is included in the Good Hotel's operating costs, and the business donates any profits after that to its charity partner Ninos de Guatemala. It has given more than \$100,000 to the charity, which runs three schools for poor Guatemalan children, and was founded by Dresen during a 2006 trip but is no longer run by him. London's Good Hotel sources food and drink locally where possible, offers Newham residents a 20 percent discount in its bar and restaurant, and occasionally hosts open bar events for them.

But many guests do not know about its social business model until they check in, choosing to stay at the hotel because of its proximity to London City Airport and the ExCeL centre, host to events such as the 2009 G20 summit and the London Boat Show. Of the five guests the Thomson Reuters Foundation spoke to, just one knew it was a social enterprise before he booked. As a frequent traveller for work, Brad Garrison, an IT executive from Staffordshire in central England, said he seeks out businesses like the Good Hotel when he travels. "Places like this feel less price gouging - it is cheap for London and the quality is high," he said.

Unusual experiences

It is not just locals that want a different kind of tourism - consumers are starting to demand it. "Travellers are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that they are contributing to environmental issues by travelling around the world," said Marloes de Vries, a travel analyst from British research firm, Mintel. "Travellers are increasingly seeking novel activities that enable them to get 'under the skin' of the destination, or unusual experiences outside of the parameters of traditional mass tourism."

Planeterra Foundation is a Canadian charity that seeks to tap into this growing demand for purpose-driven travel. Founded by adventure travel company G-Adventures in 2003, Planeterra describes itself as an incubator, helping to fund and establish 75 social enterprises, including cultural experiences and souvenir makers, in 42 global tourist destinations.

In Peru's Sacred Valley of the Incas, for example, it helped establish a social enterprise restaurant, Parwa, for groups to have a traditional meal as part of a tour of the famed ancient ruins of Machu Picchu. Tourism to Machu Picchu over the past decade has surged to more than 1 million visitors in 2018, with a ticketing system in place to regulate the stream of tourists. Aside from local souvenir sellers, porters and cooks who accompany tour groups, "very little money goes into the community from tourism," said Jamie Sweeting, president of Planeterra.

The off the beaten path restaurant - which employs 65 people, sources local products, sells souvenirs from local artisans and reinvests its profits in community projects - hosts about 16,000 tourists a year. "We are trying to ... take advantage of tourism volume to some of these places, but spread the wealth to people that aren't necessarily benefiting from that tourism," Sweeting said. "The tourism industry, when done right, has the phenomenal ability to raise people up ... It has made tremendous strides in getting more responsible, but there is a long way for us to go as an industry." — Reuters

Robots to install telescopes to peer into cosmos from the moon

As the United States races to put humans back on the moon for the first time in 50 years, a NASA-funded lab in Colorado aims to send robots there to deploy telescopes that will look far into our galaxy, remotely operated by orbiting astronauts. The radio telescopes, to be planted on the far side of the moon, are among a plethora of projects underway by the US space agency, private companies and other nations that will transform the moonscape in the coming decade.

"This is not your grandfather's Apollo program that we're looking at," said Jack Burns, director of the Network for Exploration and Space Science at the University of Colorado, which is working on the telescope project. "This is really a very different kind of program and very importantly it's going to involve machines and humans working together," Burns said in an interview at his lab on the Boulder campus.

Sometime in the coming decade, Burns' team will send a rover aboard a lunar lander spacecraft to the far side of the moon. The rover will rumble across the craggy and rough surface - featuring a mountain taller than any on earth - to set up a network of radio telescopes with little help from humans. Astronauts will be able to control the rover's single robotic arm from an orbital lunar outpost called Gateway, which an international consortium of space agencies is building. The platform will provide access to and from the moon's surface and serve as a refueling station for deep space missions.

The goal is to give astronauts control of the rover "in a quicker fashion and more like doing some sort of video game," said Ben Mellinkoff, a graduate student at the university. His project is telebotics, or using artificial intelligence to give users better control over robotic movements from afar. "It has a lot of potential, especially applied toward space exploration," he says.

The rover, being built at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif., will plant the shoeboxed telescopes on the moon's regolith - the dust, soil and broken rock that covers its surface. Unfettered by the noisy radio interference and light that hinders Earth-bound space observations, the telescopes will

peer into the cosmic void, looking back in time to the early formation of our solar system, Burns says.

Robot prototype

Working out of a small lab on the Boulder campus, Mellinkoff and two fellow graduate students have built a prototype of the robot named Armstrong (named for the first man on the moon, Neil Armstrong). It is made from computer parts and powered by two modified portable cell phone chargers. On a recent visit, Mellinkoff controlled the robotic arm using an X-box gaming controller, driving it toward an assortment of shoe-sized objects created with 3-D printing and resembling the radio telescopes to be planted on the moon.

"It's really going to be a platform for us to start different science studies that we couldn't do from the surface of Earth," said Keith Tauscher, a physics graduate student. Tauscher is working on a lunar orbiter designed to take advantage of the radio silence of the far side of the moon to discover when the first stars and black-holes formed during the formation of the universe. The lab has dubbed this mission "the Dark Ages Polarimeter Pathfinder, or "DAPPER."

The work in Boulder and elsewhere underscores NASA's plan to build a lasting presence on the moon, unlike the fleeting Apollo missions in the 1960s and '70s. Vice President Mike Pence in March announced an accelerated timeline to put humans on the moon in 2024 "by any means necessary," cutting the agency's previous 2028 goal in half and putting researchers and companies into overdrive in the new space race.

The Americans are not alone in their latest moon quest, unlike a half-century ago. In January, the China National Space Administration landed a spacecraft on the far side of the moon, with a long-term aim of building a base on the moon. India was scheduled to send a rover to the moon this month. Another key difference between the Apollo program and the Artemis program, as NASA chief Jim Bridenstine named the new lunar initiative in May, is bringing in help from commercial partners such as Elon Musk's SpaceX and Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin. Those companies are working to slash the cost of rocket launches with a longer-term ambition of doing their own projects on the moon and eventually Mars.

"It's a new way of operating in which the private sector is intimately entangled with NASA," Burns said. He predicts that in roughly 20 years, the moon will be dotted with inflatable hotels for deep-pocketed tourists and mining sites where robotic drills dig under the moon's south pole for frozen water that can be synthesized into rocket fuel for missions back to Earth or further out to Mars. — Reuters

As election nears, are economic stars aligning for Macri?

Argentine President Mauricio Macri is making an election race comeback, bolstered by a stronger peso and glimmers of economic revival as the South American nation looks to escape from a biting recession. That had looked unlikely a few months ago with the peso at record lows, bonds yields spiking and inflation out of control, hurting the centre-right leader ahead of October elections seen as a referendum on his austerity economics.

Since then, a decision by ex-president Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner not to run has calmed investor fears about a return to unchecked populism, while a dovish turn by the US Federal Reserve has supported emerging market currencies like the peso. Macri's tight monetary policy - enforced as part of a major financing deal with the International Monetary Fund last year - has also finally helped to get inflation in check.

The effect has been dramatic. Argentina's currency has strengthened around 10 percent against the dollar since its April nadir, the equities market is at a record high, bond yields have tumbled and interest rates are slowly retreating. Recent polls now show Macri gaining strength and a handful have him even edging out Peronist Alberto Fernandez, now seen as his main rival with Kirchner as his running mate, in a possible election run-off after the first round on Oct 27. "The last two months have been very good news for the government," said Thomaz Favaro, regional director at consultancy Control Risks. "It's now a much more benign situation for Macri."

The latest data from a closely-watched index by the Torcuato Di Tella University showed consumer confidence, which reached a more than 15-year low earlier in 2019, spiked in June to its highest level in more than a year. Daniel Elsztein, director of IRSA Commercial Properties which operates the Argentina's biggest shopping malls, said exchange rate stability and government stimulus measures such low- or zero-interest credit had noticeably bolstered shoppers. "The change we're seeing in our numbers at the end of the day is really big," he told Reuters.

The country's benchmark interest rate, set by daily auctions of short-term "Leliq" notes, has also been edging down since May from a high of nearly 75 percent to under 60 percent this month for the first time since March. High interest rates have helped prop up the peso by encouraging investments in the currency, but strangled economic growth and companies' ability to borrow. — Reuters