

Small Rwandan Agribusiness Entrepreneurs Work in New Ways Following COVID-19 Restriction

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Credit: Polly Musayidizi

In 2020, UNL and DWFI researchers received support to collaborate with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) on a multi-country agricultural entrepreneurship project in sub-Saharan Africa. But COVID-19 had locked down the world, including travel, so team members that were recruited for the IFAD project began by working to understand how small agribusiness entrepreneurs were affected by the pandemic.

Last August, using an innovative research approach drawing in part from business interview models, the researchers interviewed farmers and related businesses.

The new research method shed light not only on smallholder farmers at the heart of the original project but an ecosystem of related entrepreneurs and stakeholders ranging from equipment manufacturers and distributors to banks, government offices and reporting institutions.

This work allowed the Rwanda team to expand and strengthen its professional network across agribusiness supply chains in spite of COVID-19. It is a network that will be accessible for the IFAD project and future research and business opportunities, as well. In addition to providing valuable information for the next program phase, the interviews allowed the team to test engagement strategies and provided important experience in teamwork, communications and interviewing for individual team

members. The lessons learned in this unexpected way also can be applied to other businesses and regions.

Thanks to COVID-19, Rwanda stakeholders now know how to successfully connect through social media—and have begun working with one another in new ways, with networks and relationships that will remain even after lockdowns are lifted. One entrepreneur struggling to find a new business model, for example, connected with women entrepreneurs struggling to sell product. He began selling their wares on his own online platform.

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