



AgriLAC Resiliente:
Resilient Agrifood Innovation
Systems in Latin America and
the Caribbean

STRENGTHEN GENDER MAINSTREAMING AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN INNOVATION CHALLENGES: RECOMMENDATIONS

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Content

Summary	2
The innovation challenge	3
Recommendations	6
Conclusions	9



SUMMARY

The **Sustainable Cocoa Innovation Challenge**: financing scalable solutions for peace building and climate change mitigation, was held in Colombia between August and November 2023. The challenge sought to identify, accelerate and finance innovative start-ups within the cocoa value chain in the country to promote sustainable land use practices to mitigate climate change and foster peacebuilding.

The challenge was carried out as a collaboration between the One CGIAR research initiatives AgriLAC Resiliente and Mitigate+ and the project "Implementing sustainable agricultural and livestock systems for simultaneous targeting of forest conservation for climate change mitigation (REDD+) and peacebuilding in Colombia", known as the IKI-SLUS project. Both initiatives and the project aim to contribute to the achievement of sustainable food systems by scaling sustainable land use practices.

The Alliance Bioversity International and the Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), CGIAR's Accelerate for Impact (A4IP) platform and the Rockstart accelerator powered the challenge, providing technical expertise and a network of contacts in Latin America to ensure that the cocoa industry contributes to forest conservation and peacebuilding.

As part of the conclusion of the first four years of AgriLAC Resiliente, Work Package 3, which focuses on developing agroforestry systems that meet mitigation and sustainable development goals, along with the gender team, reviewed the lessons learned from the development of the challenge. The goal was to generate recommendations on the inclusion of gender and social inclusion approaches in future challenges led by the Alliance Bioversity International and Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT).

THE INNOVATION CHALLENGE

The **Sustainable Cocoa Innovation Challenge** aimed to identify, accelerate and fund early-stage innovative businesses - including products, services and technologies - operating along the cocoa value chain in Colombia that promote sustainable land use systems for climate change mitigation and peacebuilding.

The innovations could include sustainable cocoa sourcing, prioritizing zero deforestation; improving quality and traceability, ensuring transparency along the value chain; adopting sustainable agricultural practices and increasing productivity by promoting training and access to tools to improve yields, along with promoting environmentally responsible approaches such as agroforestry and organic farming; cocoa processing and other value-adding processes; and promoting fair pricing mechanisms and social empowerment and inclusion throughout the cocoa value chain.

AMONG THE ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA, PRIORITY WAS GIVEN TO INNOVATIONS THAT:

- 1 ▶ Had a minimum viable product or proof of concept.
- 2 ▶ Had a product with commercial value and verified potential impact.
- 3 ▶ Had evidence of validation from users or customers of the value proposition.
- 4 ▶ Included an inclusive strategy for smallholder farmers, women and youth in at least one of the following dimensions: ownership; management team; workforce and policies; and supply chain and customers.
- 5 ▶ Benefited smallholder farmers, food processors, small and medium-sized enterprises, consumers, youth and/or women.
- 6 ▶ Demonstrated commercial viability and profitability or on the path to profitability.
- 7 ▶ Had a presence in Colombia.
- 8 ▶ Had a diverse, non-discriminatory, gender-balanced culture, an entrepreneurial mindset and a clear vision.

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

The promotion of the Challenge involved several strategies:



1. **Social media:** graphic content was posted on the social media platforms of the Alliance Bioversity International and CIAT, A4IP, Rockstart Latin America, Caracol and the Information and Communication Network of the Colombian Agricultural Sector - Agronet, directing users to the Challenge website <https://colombia.agritechchallenge.org/>, where the terms of reference, selection criteria, partners, frequently asked questions and contact information were published in both English and Spanish.



2. **Media outlets:** A press release was distributed to the Alliance's and Rockstart's network of journalists, and a radio report was broadcasted on Caracol Radio.



3. **Dissemination groups:** Promotional materials were shared via WhatsApp groups formed by cocoa farmers in the regions of Caquetá and Cesar.

Participants had one month to register, complete a profile, and fill out an application form. During this time, questions were asked in the posts and answered by the team as soon as possible. Additionally, throughout the month of the call, questions were received via the program's official email (info@agritechchallenge.org) and at the end of the application period, a Q&A session was held on Zoom where previously asked questions were addressed, and new ones were answered live.

SELECTION OF STARTUPS

A committee was formed, consisting of experts from the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, as well as representatives from the public and private sectors, research institutions, the agri-food industry and investors. This committee assessed the relevance of each startup based on five criteria:



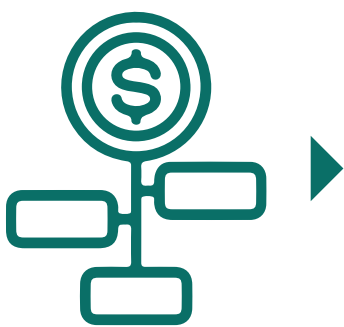
- **Business model:** defined strategy to generate revenue and achieve profitability.
- **Team:** open to learning, adaptable and committed to having a positive impact.
- **Market potential:** untapped opportunities and potential for growth and success within the cocoa market.
- **Progress:** tangible evidence that the business model works and connects with users.
- **Alignment with the challenge:** the proposed solution or business is aligned with the geographies, criteria, and objectives of the funders, particularly where the solutions relate to climate change mitigation and peacebuilding.

A total of 220 proposals were received, all of which were rated, and the top 20 moved on to the strategic alignment phase. The top 20 ventures were then interviewed by the committee to learn more about each of them and their alignment with the Acceleration Program. Finally, based on the responses, 10 startups were selected.

ACCELERATION PROGRAM

For each startup, a diagnosis was conducted to identify their needs and expectations during the challenge, in order to design a tailored acceleration program accordingly.

The program consisted of group and individual sessions covering theoretical topics related to marketing and sales, product experimentation, approaching new markets, allocating funds for growth and technical aspects related to the crop for those that required it (management and production of organic fertilizers). The content was divided into the following stages:



- **Diagnosis and business model:** identification and recording of sales and expenses.
- **Technical challenges:** training in organic agriculture, post-harvest, crop renewal and traceability.
- **Marketing and sales:** tools to improve sustainable practices to increase customers, enhance communication and expand the business.
- **Preparing for future business success:** identifying new challenges and the best ways to address them.

Table 1. Contents of the acceleration phase

CONTENTS
Welcome - The sustainable cocoa innovation challenge
Talk: Profitable and sustainable businesses
Talk: Learn about the successful businesses in our community
Talk: How to deliver a great pitch
Community talk: Business growth and sales
Marketing and Sales Workshop
Talk: Cocoa Program - Business Expansion and Exports
Talk: User and product experimentation

Source: Own elaboration

DEMO DAY

The Challenge concluded with the "D-Day". The objective of the event was to showcase innovative solutions, the work being done in Colombia, and the impact of cocoa entrepreneurship on the economic growth of people living in areas affected by armed conflict.

In order to foster strategic alliances between entrepreneurs and key stakeholders in the cocoa industry, a presentation was given by the Green and Sustainable Business Office of the Colombian Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development.

Throughout the day, each startup presented their pitch to representatives from the Alliance, Rockstart Latin America, the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development and the British Embassy in Colombia. In the end, the startups that best met the objectives set out by the challenge were selected.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering that innovation challenges typically follow a similar structure to the one described above, general recommendations have been formulated based on the results obtained in the **Sustainable Cocoa Innovation Challenge**. These recommendations aim to ensure that innovations, from their early stages of development, not only experience accelerated development, but are also sustainable, inclusive and equitable.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

The Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT operates in areas with limited internet coverage and access, where different community groups coexist. Therefore, it is essential to implement information dissemination strategies that are adapted to the territorial context.

The call for applications is a fundamental aspect of any initiative; making it inclusive can have a positive impact on the development of the initiative, and in this particular case, sustainable challenges and acceleration programs. An inclusive call ensures that all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic, linguistic or geographical characteristics, have equal access to the opportunities offered, thus promoting social justice and reducing inequalities. Furthermore, by involving different groups and communities, the process is enriched with a variety of perspectives, knowledge, and experiences, which strengthens the quality of the exchanges generated during this type of challenge.



○ Dissemination of information

It is recommended to use local media, such as community radios and informative posters in places with a high concentration of people, such as marketplaces, association headquarters, town halls, and community action boards. Additionally, it is also important not to overlook WhatsApp channels and groups used by town halls and other groups for mass dissemination of messages.



○ Social and linguistic inclusion

To ensure social inclusion, it is important to consider the linguistic differences that exist in the territories and to propose bilingual strategies that allow ethnic communities to access content in their own language. Having a focal point for the translation and dissemination of material can be of great help, so it is important to consider this aspect in the budget from the beginning of the project. It is crucial to avoid overly technical language and jargon to ensure that the call for application content is easy to understand by everyone.



○ **Participant support channels**

Provide various communication channels, in addition to email, to assist and guide applicants throughout the application process. Ensure that all interested parties have access to the support they need, especially considering potential connectivity limitations (for this, a WhatsApp or a phone line can be made available if needed).



○ **Flexibility in requirements**

Ensure that the requirements to participate in the call for applications are not overly restrictive. Consider the possibility of relaxing criteria such as the required documentation and other requirements that could pose barriers for certain groups, for example, permanent internet access, land ownership or the legal constitution of a group or association.



○ **Description of the expected information**

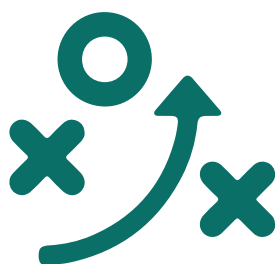
Clearly explain what information is expected for each selection criterion. For example, to prove the venture has an inclusive strategy, the examples below are pieces of evidence that we would expect to receive:

- Figures that tell us about the scope of the strategy, the number of people involved in the venture, ages, number of activities developed, changes in the livelihoods of those people involved in the startup and their main beneficiaries.
- Percentage of participation of young people, women or people with disabilities in relation to the total population involved in the venture.
- Percentage of participation of youth, women or people with disabilities in decision-making roles.
- A description of the organization's activities, territory, and scope.
- A description of the population living in these areas and who directly or indirectly benefit.
- Information on whether there is a gender inclusion policy or related guidelines in their statutes.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON ELIGIBILITY AND SELECTION CRITERIA

It is essential to ensure that factors such as social impact, diversity and gender equality are included in the eligibility and selection criteria. To achieve this, it is essential to have the guidance of a professional expert in gender and social inclusion, who can provide the necessary perspective to effectively define criteria.

For example, in the [Sustainable Cocoa Innovation Challenge](#), three social criteria were included:



- The business model includes a clear inclusive strategy for smallholder farmers, women and youth in at least one of the following dimensions: ownership, management team, workforce and policies, and supply chain and customers.
- The beneficiaries must be smallholder farmers, food processors, small and medium enterprises, consumers, youth and/or women.
- Ventures must be able to demonstrate that they have a diverse, non-discriminatory, gender-balanced culture, an entrepreneurial mindset, and a clear vision.

Additionally, the application form included three questions to help ventures describe their social contribution:



- How does your product contribute to peacebuilding?
- Briefly describe your social inclusion strategy (including women, youth and other vulnerable groups).
- How is gender equality reflected in the team?

Incorporating other aspects will allow the evaluation of the ventures not only in commercial terms, but also in terms of their ability to promote social justice and sustainable development in their communities. For example:



- Social impact and equity
- Beneficiaries of innovative solutions
- Organizational culture
- Peacebuilding
- Diversity

All these variables will need to be included in the evaluation score in order to prioritize those projects that are making real efforts towards inclusion.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CONTENT OF MENTORING

In order to minimize the challenges faced by mentoring programs and ensure they reach their intended impact; it is essential that the content is based on inclusive and equitable approaches. Below are some key recommendations for structuring this content in a way that promotes the participation of women, young people and people with disabilities, and fosters the development of their entrepreneurial and technical skills:

- Include a training approach that promotes the participation of women, youth and people with disabilities, enhancing their entrepreneurial and technical skills.
- Establish digital platforms that connect women entrepreneurs with mentors, investors and markets, facilitating access to support networks and business opportunities.
- Establish mentorship programs that connect women and youth with experienced entrepreneurs and industry leaders.
- Promote inclusive leadership that fosters capacity building in all areas of entrepreneurship and within the community.
- Foster an organizational culture that values and promotes diversity, equality and gender inclusion, and that promotes and guides the implementation of internal policies that ensure a non-discriminatory and gender-balanced work environment.
- Implement education and training programs that not only address technical aspects of agriculture, but also include specific modules on gender equality, women's leadership, women's empowerment in the agricultural sector and new masculinities, all with a focus on business and entrepreneurship.
- Promote workshops and seminars to raise awareness among entrepreneurs about the importance of gender inclusion and equity in their business practices, with a particular focus on existing gaps and how to overcome them.
- Encourage the creation of financing and technical support programs exclusively for women-led enterprises, ensuring that these enterprises have the same development opportunities as their male counterparts.
- When developing strategies in empowerment programs, facilitate tools to ensure the active participation of women and youth, and leverage this to be included in their business model value proposition.
- Collaborate with universities and civil society organizations to develop specific curricula that integrate a gender perspective into technical and business training.
- Partner with national education centers to reach populations in remote areas with limited access to virtual learning platforms, ensuring they can also participate in programs designed to accelerate entrepreneurship.

CONCLUSIONS

The integration of gender and social inclusion into the business landscape continues to face significant challenges. Although there is a clear willingness among teams to integrate these differential approaches, knowledge gaps still need to be filled to achieve this goal. These recommendations are intended to serve as a guide, to open the door to new proposals and innovative approaches, and to provide tools for the teams that promote these initiatives on a continuous basis.

The **Sustainable Cocoa Innovation Challenge** in Colombia was an important initiative in the search for innovative solutions that promote environmental sustainability and peacebuilding in conflict-affected areas. The call for application and selection process established selection criteria that ensured social inclusion, gender equity and commercial viability. However, several challenges were identified concerning the effective integration of gender and social inclusion approaches, suggesting that these aspects still require more attention and contextualization in future initiatives:



1. **Strengthening expert advice:** It is crucial to have continuous support from gender and social inclusion experts from the initial planning stages to the final implementation of the challenge. This approach will ensure that eligibility and selection criteria are aligned with equality and diversity objectives.



2. **Development of inclusive training content:** For acceleration programs, it is recommended to design content that not only develop technical and business related aspects, but to also includes specific modules on gender equality, inclusive leadership and empowerment of vulnerable groups. This will ensure that enterprises are not only profitable but also contribute to social development.



3. **Improve the dissemination of the Call for Proposals:** Communication strategies need to be adapted to ensure that the call for applications effectively reaches communities in areas with low connectivity and limited resources. These strategies include the use of local media, translation of materials into local languages and the use of platforms accessible for all participants.



4. **Comprehensive social impact assessment:** In future challenges, social impact assessment should be strengthened as a key criterion. This will make it possible to evaluate venues that promote equity, inclusion and sustainability, and to ensure that the benefits of proposed solutions reach the most vulnerable communities.



5. **Facilitate the participation of vulnerable groups:** Participation requirements should be made more flexible to remove barriers that could exclude small-scale farmers, women, youth and people with disabilities. This includes simplifying processes, providing access to technical support, and offering alternative communication channels.

This document aims not only to improve future sustainable challenges, but also to contribute to a structural change that effectively integrates social inclusion and gender equality at all stages of innovation processes.



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Mónica Juliana Chavarro, Martha Vanegas Cubillos, Ivon Maritza Casallas M. and Karoll Valentina Yomayuya Herrera. Recommendations to strengthen gender mainstreaming and social inclusion in innovation challenges, m.chavarro@cgiar.org, m.vanegas@cgiar.org, i.casallas@cgiar.org, k.yomayuya@cgiar.org.

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