



Building Rural Women's Climate Resilience: Seven Business Drivers Delivering Commercial Value

November 2025 • Edel Were, Rashmi Pillai, Larissa Shnayder, Juan Carlo Intriago Zambrano,
and Jamie Anderson

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Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	3
Resilience and Viability: Seven Drivers in Three Domains	8
Emerging Implications for Funders	15
Annex	18
References	21

Executive Summary

A S CLIMATE SHOCKS AND STRESSES intensify, it is essential to strengthen the resilience of rural women—not only for their own livelihoods and well-being, but also for the long-term viability of the rural businesses in the food and financial systems that surround them. Yet rural women remain underserved, despite their pivotal roles as customers, suppliers, laborers, employees, leaders, and household managers (Anderson, Clause, Mattern, and Zani 2023).

ABERA (Accelerating Business to Empower Rural women in Agriculture), a CGAP and IDH¹ collaboration, has identified seven practical business drivers (“drivers”) that simultaneously strengthen rural women’s climate resilience and improve commercial performance for the businesses that serve them. The seven drivers span three strategic domains:

- Social engagement, including the women’s groups and male allyship drivers
- Economic inclusion, comprised of the income diversification strategies and access to productive assets drivers
- Service design and delivery, covering the inclusive delivery strategies, digital tools, and data for insights drivers

Across these domains, inclusive financial services such as savings, credit, and insurance often act as

a common enabler, providing the pathway through which women and businesses translate the drivers into measurable resilience and commercial outcomes. While businesses individually have limited influence over the broader contextual factors shaping their business climate (e.g., regulatory policy, national and regional infrastructure), they can act on and operationalize the seven drivers in tailored combinations for specific customer segments and market environments. Leaving aside the broader contextual drivers, this paper focuses on the practical, actionable business drivers that can unlock value for both rural women and businesses.

ABERA defines value for women as increased agency and resilience; for businesses, value is defined as improved commercial viability, particularly in the face of climate-related shocks and stresses. Early qualitative learnings from ABERA’s first cohort of partner companies demonstrates that when businesses strategically deploy these drivers, they achieve this dual value creation in measurable ways. When properly implemented, businesses can reduce customer acquisition costs, improve retention rates, and decrease business risk while simultaneously increasing women’s access to finance, productive assets, and decision-making power.

For funders seeking to scale these approaches, ABERA recommends three critical actions: (i) fund interventions aligned with the seven business drivers,

¹ IDH is transforming agricultural markets to make them work for companies, farmers, workers and the environment. IDH works with private and public stakeholders to tackle challenges in local and global value chains including climate change and gender disparities.

(ii) invest in the systems, data, and partnerships that enable the seven business drivers and (iii) adapt organizational structures and incentives to more effectively respond to cross-thematic challenges at the nexus of agriculture, inclusive finance, gender, and climate resilience.

By supporting gender-intentional business models that integrate climate resilience and financial inclusion, funders can help create commercially viable solutions that transform agricultural markets and strengthen rural women's agency in the face of climate change.

Introduction

CLIMATE SHOCKS ARE INCREASING IN frequency and intensity, disproportionately impacting rural women, who tend to work in lower skill, lower wage, seasonal, and informal jobs, often in agrifood systems. Rural women have been significantly underserved by agricultural and financial services providers (FSPs) because the business case for services tailored to rural women is poorly documented and understood. Agricultural and FSPs often operate without the data, peers, and partners needed to establish how serving this diverse, sizable market can contribute to their business goals and climate resilience.

But what if businesses could identify and act on a core set of practical strategies that improve both their commercial performance and women's climate resilience? How might they make strategic decisions on the products and outreach that minimize risks from climate shocks and stresses as well as answer the needs and preferences of specific client segments? What catalytic role could targeted funding and investments play in strengthening their business models? And as traditional aid models contract, how might funders best play their catalytic role in identifying, testing, and scaling these strategies, mobilizing private capital toward business models that deliver both commercial value and improved outcomes for rural women?

In tackling some of these questions, ABERA² (Accelerating Business to Empower Rural Women in Agriculture)—the CGAP-IDH collaboration with select financial and agricultural service providers—has generated early insights into how businesses can strengthen both commercial performance and women's climate resilience.

About ABERA

ABERA aims to improve the climate resilience of service providers and the rural women they serve by fostering commercially viable innovations in inclusive finance. ABERA explores how serving rural women aligns with business goals while offering strategies, insights, and practical examples to guide the inclusive growth of businesses.

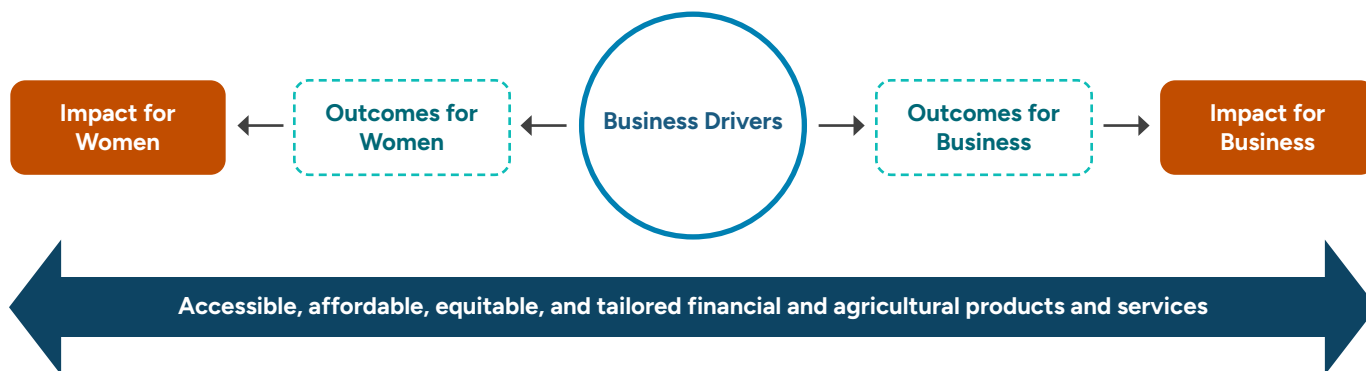
To facilitate inclusive business models,³ ABERA explores how seven specific business drivers can strengthen the commercial performance of service providers as well as resilience among rural women. Inclusive business models provide low-income customers with goods and services on a commercially viable basis, engaging them on equitable terms as suppliers, distributors, retailers, and customers in rural businesses and agricultural value chains.

Inclusive business models are those of agribusinesses, FSPs, or businesses in any sector that actively balance

2 See CGAP (n.d.a.) for an overview of ABERA and its initiatives.

3 Ploughman Agro Private Limited (PAPL), India, provides an illustrative example of inclusive business models (see IDH 2023). To learn more about IDH FarmFit, see IDH (n.d.).

FIGURE 1. **Overarching ABERA inclusive finance learning framework**



Source: Authors, 2025.

their own commercial interests with those of the stakeholders and customers in their value chain, advancing a long-term vision of sustainability. Financial services often play a pivotal enabling role in inclusive business models. Access to credit, savings, and insurance enables rural women to invest in climate-smart practices, smooths consumption during shocks, and builds long-term resilience. For businesses, these financial tools reduce risk, improve customer retention, and create more stable partnerships.

The central role of financial services shines through in ABERA’s first cohort of companies. Of the six companies in Cohort 1, four were directly involved in financial services delivery (e.g., productive credit and asset financing through their core business or via subsidiaries), while two facilitated financial services access through strategic partnerships. Across all six companies, women and businesses consistently identified access to a range of financial services—including savings, credit, and insurance—as important to strengthening their resilience.

Research synthesized in CGAP’s Impact Pathfinder⁴ also shows that when credit is available, rural households are less likely to resort to negative short-term coping strategies (e.g., selling productive assets after climate shocks) and, in some cases, use loans to

diversify into more stable income sources. Research in Northern Ghana, for example, found that farmers who used informal credit were less likely to sell important assets during climate shocks. This helped them recover faster and maintain their livelihoods, improving their resilience by about 12 percent (Batung et al. 2022). Similarly, savings products can enable investment in climate-smart agricultural practices and help households smooth consumption during shocks, reducing reliance on harmful coping mechanisms.

Supporting this point, a study in Kenya found that households with savings were more likely to adopt climate-smart farming practices than those without savings. Having savings and earning interest on it also made it more likely that these households would use more than one climate-smart technology (Gikonyo et al. 2022). By integrating climate considerations into tailored financial products and services, businesses can address the specific needs, aspirations, and challenges faced by different segments of rural women, enhancing the resilience of the women and the businesses.

ABERA’s seven business drivers operationalize this approach, showing how financial inclusion strategies can be implemented and scaled to deliver mutual benefits for rural women and the service providers working to reach them. The ABERA learning approach

4 The CGAP Impact Pathfinder offers a collection of proof points drawn from these studies (see CGAP 2023).

suggests that at least one, and often several, of the drivers must be in place to both increase agency and resilience for women and increase commercial viability for businesses. Inclusive finance thus serves as the key lens for ABERA's business drivers as well as the pathway to these mutually beneficial outcomes. Well-designed financial and agricultural products and services are both a valuable outcome for women and a catalyst for strengthening overall system resilience.

Unlocking this transformation, however, requires catalytic funder support. As traditional aid declines it becomes increasingly urgent to attract private capital into inclusive models. Funders can play a pivotal role by providing the coordination, proof points, and de-risking mechanisms needed to share catalytic insights and scale commercial investment in businesses that serve rural women. This includes helping investors to recognize rural women's diverse roles in food and financial systems and to see women as customers and suppliers as well as decision-makers in businesses and households. Long-term private sector investment in these inclusive business models is essential to resilient business strategy.

ABERA's learning approach

To address gaps in evidence and know-how, ABERA partners with select financial and agricultural service providers to co-design solutions that improve women's livelihoods and strengthen their climate resilience. Participating businesses are selected through a competitive process and each collaboration starts with an Inclusive Business Analysis (IBA).⁵ This data-driven process engages workers and leaders at all levels of the business to gain a deep understanding of operations and identify opportunities to enhance both profitability and gender and climate goals. Based on this foundational analysis, ABERA co-designs and pilots solutions, generating evidence and insights, fostering peer learning and exchange, and sharing and disseminating public

knowledge, synthesizing experience across the ABERA cohort of companies to influence the larger ecosystem of private and public actors.

ABERA defines value for women in terms of their increased agency and resilience and value for businesses as increased commercial viability—particularly in the face of climate shocks and stresses. Two overarching learning questions guide ABERA research on how successful, inclusive business models can better serve rural women facing climate shocks and stresses:

- What approaches, factors, or services do rural women most value in strengthening their livelihoods and resilience?
- How do these approaches, factors, or services contribute to the increased commercial viability of businesses?

ABERA's learning approach is then grounded in three elements: (i) the business drivers observed, (ii) how they lead to one or more positive outcomes for women and businesses, and (iii) their contribution to the overall impact of increased agency and resilience for women and the commercial viability of businesses (see Figure 1).

ABERA's partner companies

To generate actionable insights to apply to its learning agenda, ABERA selected a first cohort of six companies operating in Tanzania, Kenya, India, and Côte d'Ivoire.

1. **Avanti Finance**, a digital-first nonbank finance company (NBFC), delivers affordable, accessible credit in rural areas of India. Over 90 percent of its customers are women. Avanti's tech-enabled hyperlocal approach combines mobile onboarding, cloud-based workflows, and alternative data (e.g., credit reference bureau data, income flow, community reputation, behavioral indicators) to underwrite uncollateralized loans for women

⁵ Developed by IDH, IBAs help companies and investors build strong business cases for working with smallholder farmers by identifying opportunities that benefit both businesses and farmers.

who are unserved by conventional lenders. Operating in 26 of India's 28 states, Avanti's suite of loan products, including loans for agriculture, livestock, and microenterprises, supports income diversification and climate resilience, helping rural women to smooth earnings, invest in adaptive strategies, and build long-term financial health.

2. **BRAC Tanzania Finance Limited (BTFL)**, Tanzania's largest microfinance institution, operates in 27 of the country's 31 administrative regions. BTFL places a strong focus on rural outreach and women: 97 percent of its clients being women, 57 percent of whom live in rural areas. Many of these clients are agricultural value chain actors who face increasing climate-related risks. BTFL offers loans through a group lending model that requires at least one guarantor, yet has found these loans not entirely suited to reaching women reliant on income from agricultural production. Within ABERA, BTFL is designing a customized agri-finance loan for women producers in the beans, rice, and maize value chains.
3. **Hello Tractor**, an agricultural technology company, connects tractor owners with excess capacity to farmers across emerging markets. Due to the limited supply of tractors within the market, Hello Tractor also engages in the agricultural equipment lease-to-own business. The company works to increase farm equipment ownership among farmers in multiple African markets, including Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda, and Ethiopia, with a particular focus on women. Hello Tractor has found that while women have proven to be reliable borrowers, high diesel fuel costs pose a barrier to timely loan repayment. Through ABERA, Hello Tractor is testing financing and delivery models that make low-cost, climate-smart fuel options such as biofuel and hybrid alternatives more accessible to women tractor owners in Kenya. By reducing fuel costs, these

models aim to improve loan repayment rates and enable more women to acquire and operate farm equipment.

4. **Samunnati** is India's largest integrated agricultural value chain solutions provider, working to make markets work for smallholder farmers. Established in 2014 and headquartered in Chennai, Samunnati operates at the intersection of finance, commerce, and knowledge to bridge structural gaps across the agricultural ecosystem.⁶ Through its aggregation, market linkage, and advisory (AMLA) approach, the company serves over 8 million farmers across 5,500 farmer producer organizations (FPOs) with climate-smart solutions, financial literacy training, and market access. Together with ABERA, Samunnati is exploring financing options on labor-saving technologies for women farmers in the turmeric value chain. The goal is to enable these growers to adopt more sustainable agricultural practices, transition to export markets, and increase their incomes.
5. **Sistema.bio India** is a social enterprise that provides biodigesters designed to transform livestock waste into clean energy and organic fertilizer. These climate-smart, labor-saving technologies not only reduce the time spent collecting fuel but also enhance agricultural productivity—benefits that are especially significant for women engaged in the dairy value chain. Company data shows that households using Sistema.bio biodigesters achieve around 300 percent return on investment within five years, making them a practical asset for strengthening household resilience. To overcome affordability challenges and encourage widespread adoption, the company offers flexible payment options both directly and through partnerships with local microfinance institutions. Sistema.bio's largest market is India, with more than 125,000 biodigesters deployed across its rural communities.

6 Samunnati Group is comprised of four subsidiary entities: Samunnati Financial Intermediation & Services Pvt. Ltd (NBFC), Samunnati Agro Solutions Pvt. Ltd., Samunnati Finance Pvt. Ltd., and Samunnati Investment Management Services Pvt. Ltd.

6. **Wi-Agri**, a former digital agritech platform in Côte d'Ivoire that closed in 2024, bundled market access, financial services, and advisory tools tailored to local ecosystems.⁷ Through a strong gender and climate lens, Wi-Agri developed women-centric services that enabled smallholder farmers to access inputs, climate resilient practices, and uncollateralized finance. Through its *Digifemmes* (Digital Women) program and community ambassadors, the company bridged gaps in digital literacy and expanded outreach to rural women farmers, helping them transact, save, and grow their businesses in a sector marked by price volatility and climate stress. Wi-Agri partnered with ABERA to support women farmers in the cashew value chain.

⁷ Wi-Agri closed due to strategic and operational shifts, subsequently exiting the first ABERA cohort.

Resilience and Viability: Seven Drivers in Three Domains

DRAWING ON A LITERATURE REVIEW and research conducted with cohort companies, ABERA surfaced seven practical drivers that businesses can actively tailor and deploy to improve both women’s resilience and their own commercial performance. The drivers fall into three strategic domains: social engagement, economic inclusion, and service design and delivery. Each driver represents a distinct way to operationalize inclusive business models. Box 1 provides an overview of the definitions used in the ABERA learning framework.

As observed in ABERA’s partner companies and related literature, each of the drivers directly supports outcomes that benefit both rural women and businesses, leading to enhanced women’s agency and resilience and improved business performance (see Figure 2).

The seven business drivers,⁸ as derived from the ABERA experience, include:

1. Women’s groups
2. Male allyship
3. Income diversification strategies
4. Access to productive assets
5. Inclusive delivery strategies
6. Digital tools
7. Data for insights.

When thoughtfully designed and executed, these drivers can enhance business performance, support women’s agency, and foster more climate resilient commercial relationships. Income diversification strategies, for example, help rural women manage climate-related shocks while reducing default risks for financial institutions. Table 1 presents the three strategic domains, their associated drivers, and examples from ABERA company experiences.

The influence of social norms underpins the drivers and their effectiveness can vary depending on context. Control of assets such as land, for example, may be empowering in settings with supportive legal frameworks, but constraining in contexts governed by customary restrictive patrilineal laws or unfavourable intra-household power dynamics. In addition, capacity-building strategies, such as business literacy training and support to effectively use productive resources, are central to each driver’s success. Digital tools, for example, can improve rural women’s access to information and markets; however, their presence does not guarantee usage. Capacity-building approaches that strengthen digital and product literacy in the customer journey are essential to ensuring that women can optimize these tools.

⁸ The Annex to this Working Paper contains details on the methodology.

BOX 1. **ABERA learning framework: Drivers, outcomes, and domains**

Business drivers

Factors businesses can leverage to optimize service provision to rural women, leading to positive outcomes for both rural women and businesses.

Contextual drivers

External factors that businesses have limited individual influence over (e.g., regulatory policy, national and regional infrastructure).

Positive outcomes

Beneficial changes that create simultaneous value for both rural women and businesses when business drivers are effectively implemented, ensuring mutual gains rather than one-sided benefits.

Strategic domains

Three overarching categories that cover how businesses can optimize engagement with rural women, specifically:

- **Category one → social engagement:** Business drivers that leverage the social and cultural factors influencing rural women's decision-making and participation in inclusive financial and nonfinancial services. These drivers include:

1. **Women's groups:** Organized collectives of women that provide mutual support, share knowledge or resources, and collaborate on initiatives to improve their economic and social well-being.
2. **Male allyship:** Intentional and active male support in fostering and promoting gender equity, particularly when challenging systems, behaviors, and norms that perpetuate discrimination against women.

- **Category two → economic inclusion:** Business drivers that leverage the financial and material resources available to rural women. These drivers include:

3. **Income diversification strategies:**

Approaches to develop multiple income sources, which reduce financial risk and vulnerability and increase economic resilience, such as crop and livestock diversification, value-addition services, and off-farm businesses and labor.

4. **Access to productive assets:** The ability of women to own and/or manage assets (e.g., land, equipment, financial resources) that empowers their decision-making and improves their economic stability, including initiatives that help women secure access to farm equipment.

- **Category three → service design and delivery:** Business drivers that leverage the methods, tools, and approaches businesses use to reach rural women and effectively provide inclusive financial and nonfinancial services. These drivers include:

5. **Inclusive delivery strategies:** Strategies that position women as active partners in rather than passive recipients of financial and nonfinancial services to enhance climate resilience outcomes, such as phygital (i.e., physical + digital) approaches that provide onboarding support through a combination of digital transaction platforms and trusted women agents.
6. **Digital tools:** Technological solutions that facilitate access to financial and agricultural information, services, and markets for rural women, such as mobile apps or online platforms that provide real-time weather updates and market prices.
7. **Data for insights:** Approaches for gathering and leveraging data about rural women's financial patterns and barriers to inform the design of more inclusive and effective financial and nonfinancial services.

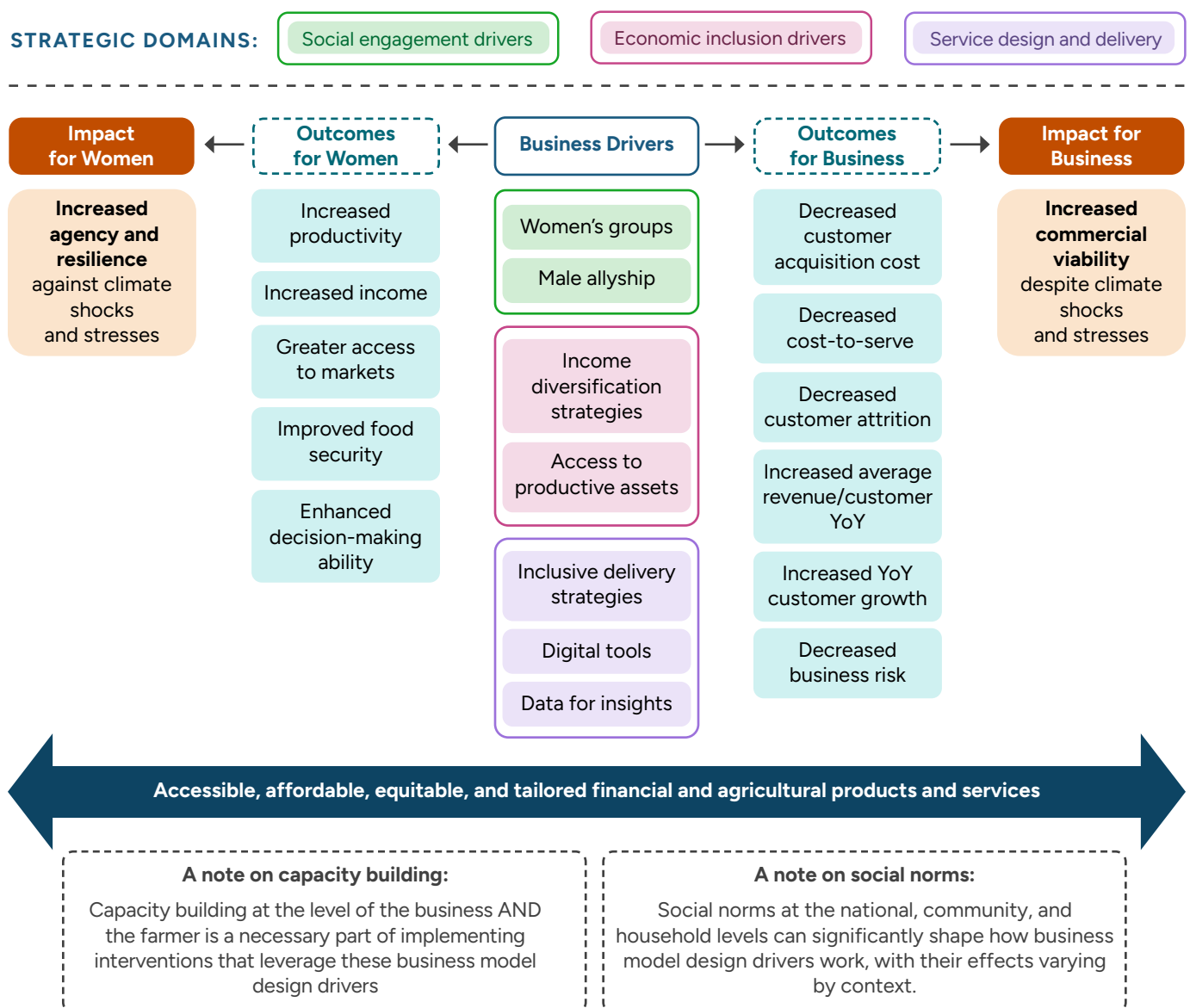
Source: Authors, 2025.

In the ABERA experience to date, businesses do not need to operationalize all the drivers. It can be effective to use a tailored combination of drivers based on objectives, market factors, value chains, and customer segments. Crucially, inclusive finance tools—including savings, credit, and insurance products and warehouse receipts—act as both the means through which these drivers are applied and the pathway through which they translate into measurable outcomes. When businesses leverage the drivers, they improve the delivery of their financial

and agricultural products and services, unlocking value both for themselves and for the women they serve. Inclusive finance therefore serves as the critical pathway that enables business drivers to deliver resilience for rural women and commercial viability for businesses, even in the face of climate shocks.

Taken together, the examples shared in Table 1 suggest that when business drivers such as women's groups, income diversification, digital tools, and inclusive delivery strategies are effectively deployed,

FIGURE 2. Detailed ABERA inclusive finance learning framework



Source: CGAP and IDH, 2025.

TABLE 1. **Business drivers: Defined and illustrated with ABERA examples**

	Strategic Domain	Driver	ABERA Company Examples
↑ Capacity Building and Social Norms ↓	<p>Social engagement</p> <p>This strategic domain encompasses the two business drivers that leverage the social and cultural factors influencing rural women’s decision-making and participation in inclusive financial and nonfinancial services.</p>	<p>1. Women’s groups</p> <p>Organized collectives of women that provide mutual support, share knowledge or resources, and collaborate on initiatives to improve their economic and social well-being.</p> <hr/> <p>2. Male allyship</p> <p>Intentional and active support of men in fostering and promoting gender equity, particularly when challenging systems, behaviors, and norms that perpetuate discrimination against women. For example, initiatives that involve spouses as guarantors for women borrowers, encouraging local rural leaders to advocate for women’s access to land use, shift community norms and encourage women’s economic participation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BTFL women’s groups present women with an opportunity to both access loans and to share peer learnings. Women share tips on business management and practical experiences around managing climate variability, increasing their confidence and enhancing their decision-making ability. • Samunnati supports women-led FPOs that often pool resources and knowledge. One FPO utilized shared infrastructure for agri-processing and storage to reduce post-harvest losses and negotiate better prices. Its successes not only draws in additional members but also shows potential for replication across regions. <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hello Tractor engages male community leaders to explain how having women tractor operators is economically beneficial to entire households, not just individual women. These efforts reduce resistance among community members to women’s employment in this new role and enable Hello Tractor to more effectively recruit women tractor operators in Kenya, expanding its base of skilled operators. More broadly, the cultural shift enables more women to enter a new employment sector and increase their economic opportunities. • Sistema.bio includes men in biodigester training sessions to foster household-level buy-in. When men understand the cost savings and health benefits of using a biodigester, many became champions of the participation of their wives. This shared commitment improves uptake and reinforces the company’s value proposition for inclusive, sustainable energy solutions.

TABLE 1. **Business drivers: Defined and illustrated with ABERA examples** (continued)

	Strategic Domain	Driver	ABERA Company Examples
↑ Capacity Building and Social Norms ↓	<p>Economic inclusion</p> <p>This strategic domain encompasses business drivers that leverage the financial and material resources available to rural women.</p>	<p>3. Income diversification strategies</p> <p>Approaches to develop multiple income sources, which reduce financial risk and vulnerability and increase economic resilience, such as crop and livestock diversification, value-addition services, and off-farm businesses and labor.</p> <hr/> <p>4. Access to productive assets</p> <p>The ability of women to own and/or manage assets (e.g., land, equipment, financial resources) that empowers their decision-making and improves their economic stability, including initiatives that help women secure access to farm equipment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BTFL in Tanzania strongly encourages income diversification among its clients, most of whom are women, and often makes income generation from more than a single source a requirement to access a group loan. In customer research, BTFL surfaced that its clients are also interested in diversifying their income as a resilience building tool. Income diversification helps rural women manage volatile cash flows while ensuring timely and consistent loan repayments, increasing their resilience and reducing their risk. • Samunnati's trade arm partners with women-led FPOs to promote crop diversification and value addition, strategies that reduce reliance on a single crop or market and help buffer incomes against price and climate shocks. By encouraging women farmers to diversify crops and tap into processing opportunities, Samunnati supports more stable and profitable livelihoods. <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sistema.bio, in documenting a sale of its biodigesters, registers the asset in the name of the woman of the household. This approach is specifically designed to strengthen women's asset ownership and decision-making power. According to Sistema.bio, the approach also benefits the company because women have proven to repay more reliably than men, thus creating value for both rural women and the business. • Hello Tractor targets women tractor operators in Kenya with specific services and incentives in its lease-to-own model for agricultural equipment, drawing on internal and external evidence that women consistently demonstrate stronger loan repayment rates than men (D'Espallier, Guérin, and Mersland 2011). When women train as Hello Tractor operators and begin to offer their services in their community, it can boost their income and status as a local role model. Other women are encouraged to enter the training program and earn income as a tractor operator, thereby expanding the company's operator network and improving service reliability.

TABLE 1. **Business drivers: Defined and illustrated with ABERA examples** (continued)

Strategic Domain	Driver	ABERA Company Examples
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Capacity Building and Social Norms</p>	<p>Service design and delivery</p> <p>This strategic domain encompasses three business drivers that leverage the methods, tools, and approaches businesses use to reach rural women and effectively provide inclusive financial and nonfinancial services.</p>	<p>5. Inclusive delivery strategies</p> <p>Strategies that position women as active partners in rather than passive recipients of financial and nonfinancial services to enhance climate resilience outcomes, such as phygital (physical + digital) approaches that combine digital transaction platforms with trusted women agents for onboarding support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avanti Finance uses the phygital model, blending local, community-based physical partners with digital infrastructure to reach rural women where they are. By combining agent-assisted mobile apps, local language support and onboarding, and flexible repayment options (including QR codes and cash collection points), Avanti ensures that women with limited digital literacy and those without formal credit histories can access tailored, uncollateralized loans in trusted physical settings. • Wi-Agri's <i>ambassadrice</i> approach engaged trusted women leaders to onboard users, provide financial education, and bridge the last-mile digital divide before the company closed in 2024. Women farmers used the platform to access real-time market prices, negotiate better deals, and increase their income. By positioning women as both beneficiaries and agents of outreach, Wi-Agri built trust, deepened service adoption, and strengthened its user base.
	<p>6. Digital tools</p> <p>Technological solutions that facilitate access to financial and agricultural information, services, and markets for rural women, such as mobile apps or online platforms that provide real-time weather updates and market prices.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avanti Finance uses a mobile platform to extend formal credit to rural women, enabling them to apply for loans and track repayments. Borrowers use the platform to move away from informal lenders, manage cash flows, and reinvest in their businesses. To Avanti, the transparency and convenience of its digital platform build trust, leading to higher uptake and lower default rates. • Wi-Agri in Côte d'Ivoire connected women who produce cashews to services and buyers via a digital platform. Growers could access real-time market prices and secure a better deal for their harvest. This transparency was economically empowering for women farmers and helped Wi-Agri build a more loyal and informed user base.
	<p>7. Data for insights</p> <p>Approaches for gathering and leveraging data about rural women's financial patterns and barriers to inform the design of more inclusive and effective financial and nonfinancial services.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avanti Finance analyzes customer engagement and repayment data on its digital platform to spot patterns among rural women. It uncovers seasonal cash flow gaps and then redesigns loan schedules to align with harvest cycles, reducing defaults and improving client satisfaction as well as portfolio performance. • Hello Tractor collects gender-disaggregated data on tractor operators and booking activity. This data informs product design and strategic decisions, such as exploring biofuels and tailoring services to women farming smaller plots. It also supports climate resilience planning.

Source: Authors, 2025.

they can create the enabling conditions for FSPs to extend offerings in low information, uncollateralized environments. In this way, the drivers not only support women's agency and climate resilience but also reduce perceived risk to unlock financial inclusion as a catalyst for resilience and commercial viability—especially in contexts where traditional models often fail. Box 2 further illustrates how the drivers can work in tandem, such as in the case of BTFL where a combination of multiple drivers enhances positive outcomes for both women and businesses.

Early experience from the first ABERA cohort suggests that gender-inclusive strategies are not only socially transformative but also make strong commercial sense and enhance climate resilience for both rural women and businesses. Whether through social engagement drivers such as women's groups and male allyship, economic inclusion drivers such as access to productive assets and income diversification, or service design and delivery drivers like digital platforms and data insights, businesses can benefit from improved customer retention, reduced operational risks, and more inclusive growth. Crucially, women are not merely beneficiaries; they emerge as empowered economic agents with greater access to finance, assets, markets, and decision-making power.

BOX 2. **ABERA business drivers in BTFL**

Engaging in **income diversification** and being a member of a **women's group** are prerequisites to accessing a BTFL group loan. Income diversification helps rural women manage volatile cash flows and ensures timely repayments, while being part of a group allows BTFL to (i) cost-effectively deliver critical access to financial services to a larger group of women and (ii) manage credit default risk through reputational collateral and peer monitoring mechanisms. Women's groups also act as important platforms for women to share learning and experiences, enabling them to collectively share and address challenges.

Male allyship also plays a role because loan guarantors are often men and any arrears or default-related first-level escalation involves their engagement. Hence, BTFL ensures that guarantors understand its products and approach so they can most effectively play their important supportive role. Through their engagement in the loan process, men within the community can also see how households and communities at large can benefit when women have access to responsible financial services.

For BTFL, leveraging these three business drivers—**income diversification**, **women's groups**, and **male allyship**—leads to positive outcomes, including lower customer acquisition costs, cost-to-serve, and business risk and therefore increased commercial viability. For rural women using BTFL financial services, access to finance has the potential to increase their income when loans are used for productive purposes, which global evidence suggests can contribute to improvements in agency and resilience (CGAP n.d.b.).

Source: Authors, 2025.

Emerging Implications for Funders

AS TRADITIONAL FUNDING SOURCES become more constrained, funders face increasing pressure to accelerate business strategies that strengthen both women’s resilience and commercial performance. In this context, funders should:

1. Fund interventions aligned with the seven business drivers
2. Invest in the systems, data, and partnerships that enable the seven business drivers
3. Adapt organizational structures and incentives to more effectively respond to cross-thematic

challenges at the nexus of agriculture, inclusive finance, gender, and climate resilience

Each priority action is explored in more detail below.

1. Fund interventions aligned with the seven business drivers

The interventions associated with each strategic domain and business driver are outlined in Table 2.

TABLE 2. **Funder interventions aligned with ABERA’s seven business drivers**

Strategic domain	Business driver	Funder actions
Social engagement	Women’s groups	<p>Champion programs that strengthen the effectiveness of women’s collectives in customer acquisition, distribution, product uptake, peer learning, and localized decision-making</p> <p>Women’s groups are cost-effective platforms for business engagement and financial literacy. Funders can enhance their impact by investments to strengthen their governance, digital enablement, credit processes, and capacity. Funders can provide direct grants to women-led cooperatives investing in local technical assistance partners and funding digital infrastructure for financial tracking and governance training. Such targeted investments can strengthen the capacity of women’s groups and help them become more active and effective players in agricultural value chains.</p>
	Male allyship	<p>Support ways to include male decision-makers and social influencers, including household heads, chiefs, religious leaders, and loan guarantors, in gender programs that seek to influence norms and unlock uptake</p> <p>Financial services can go beyond access by supporting shifts in social norms and power dynamics that expand women’s agency. Funders can support gender-transformative approaches by investing in financial products that promote joint decision-making, strengthen women’s asset ownership, and enhance women’s agency within households and communities.</p>

TABLE 2. **Funder inventions aligned with ABERA’s seven business drivers** (continued)

Strategic domain	Business driver	Funder actions
Economic inclusion	Income diversification strategies	<p>Play a catalytic role in supporting rural women’s income diversification by investing in training and integrated financial solutions</p> <p>This includes backing product bundling and delivery models that enable women to layer income streams, such as multi-purpose loans, agri-finance bundled with productive asset access, and tailored training for off-farm enterprises.</p> <p>Funders can co-invest in pilots that train women in on-farm and off-farm income generating opportunities, while testing input financing and market access models depending on geographical context. Pilots should also track income smoothing and repayment patterns across diversified borrowers to generate insights that help de-risk FSPs and boost women’s resilience to shocks.</p>
	Access to productive assets	<p>Expand affordable wholesale capital toward asset finance schemes and pay-as-you-go (PAYGO) models</p> <p>These mechanisms allow rural women to individually or jointly acquire access to or ownership of farm equipment, renewable energy systems, and labor-saving tools. Financing should go beyond loan guarantees to include first-loss capital, concessional rates, or outcome-based subsidies that make assets both affordable and usable, as well as de-risking commercial FSPs. Such efforts can lower upfront costs and make assets more affordable for rural women while reducing risk for private lenders.</p>
Service design and delivery	Inclusive delivery strategies	<p>Invest in phygital approaches to reach last-mile rural women.</p> <p>These approaches include investing in in-person local language content, agent-assisted models, human-centric user experience, and user journey improvements—from onboarding and adoption to recurring usage.</p>
	Digital tools	<p>Invest in digital public infrastructure, open-source platforms, and community-led onboarding models that reach low literacy, low connectivity segments.</p> <p>These investments can reduce the business cost of last-mile customer acquisition, service, and retention of rural women. Funding should support human-centric, community-led design approaches that prioritize trust, utility, and consistent usage of services, not just technology deployment. This approach enables women to digitally learn, be informed, transact, and market their businesses, contributing to their long-term resilience.</p>
	Data for insights	<p>Strengthen ecosystem capacity to collect, analyze, and apply gender and climate-segmented data.</p> <p>Funders can support data collection, segmentation exercises, and platform analytics to better inform both public and private sector actors. Increased capacity will enable more informed policy making and better product and service design that aligns with rural women’s needs and aspirations. Funders that invest in shared digital infrastructure (e.g., devices, content, training hubs) build capacity for digitally enabled last-mile engagement.</p>

Source: Authors, 2025.

2. Invest in the systems, data, and partnerships that enable the seven business drivers

Funders can invest in gender-intentional business models that integrate climate resilience and financial inclusion, building diversified and inclusive agricultural markets that work for rural women. Funders can also increase rural women's agency and resilience with specific investments in each of the business drivers and its respective strategic domains.

Based on ABERA's early experience, there are four key actions funders can take to help scale gender-intentional business models that benefit both rural women and the private sector.

1. **Integrate financial inclusion, business, gender, and climate strategy** by co-designing initiatives with businesses to align gender impact and commercial outcomes. Recognize financial services as a core enabler of climate-smart business models.
2. **Invest in the evidence base** by building research and data-sharing platforms to validate the business case for women-focused solutions and reduce risk for future investment.
3. **Crowd in patient capital** by blending grants with commercial capital, or offering guarantees to incentivize longer horizon, women-centered products and markets.
4. **Scale proven innovations**, cultivating the growth capital, regulatory support, and peer learning needed to accelerate the uptake of successful models across new geographies and use cases.

3. Adapt structures and incentives to better address cross-thematic challenges

In addition to external grant making and investments, funders should consider internal transformation: adapting organizational structures and incentive systems to more effectively respond to the interconnected challenges across agriculture, finance, gender, and climate. Siloed teams that narrowly focus on a single technical area may overlook opportunities for deeper systemic change. In contrast, cross-disciplinary teams are better positioned to tackle complex market failures and co-design initiatives with businesses that align gender impact with commercial outcomes. By working both externally and internally across drivers, funders can strengthen the long-term resilience of rural women and the businesses they engage with, especially in the face of climate shocks.

By supporting the adoption and scale-up of the drivers emerging from the ABERA experience and relevant literature, funders can catalyze climate-smart, commercially viable models that strengthen rural women's resilience and transform agricultural markets. Early learnings from ABERA's first cohort show that these strategies are not only socially impactful but also commercially sound. With targeted support, these innovations can evolve from promising pilots into mainstream models—unlocking new markets, reducing business risk, and ensuring that rural women are equipped to thrive in a changing climate. Now is the moment for funders to catalyze gender-intentional business models that deliver for women and businesses, and they have a pivotal role to play.

Annex

THIS PAPER IS PART OF A COLLECTION of ABERA knowledge outputs. It briefly describes the ABERA learning questions and the emerging factors ABERA has observed that can create value for rural women and value for businesses, resulting in the increased climate resilience of both. The research is currently in its preliminary stages with observations limited to the first cohort. In the years ahead, ABERA plans to refine its framework, triangulate observations and analyses with existing literature—especially large agricultural datasets hosted by IDH—and test the generalizability of the framework across multiple cohorts of companies before issuing recommendations.

How the learning framework and business drivers shape outcomes for women and businesses

Whether applied individually or in combination, the seven business drivers generate positive outcomes for both women and the businesses that serve them. Not every business tailoring services to rural women will employ all drivers; they may adopt one or several, with each leading to outputs for women (and in some cases men) that ultimately contribute to the desired outcomes.

The drivers will be refined based on new evidence from upcoming ABERA cohorts. The goal is to create a framework that is generalizable for businesses working in rural economies, eventually to be published in a final paper that captures insights over multiple cohorts.

ABERA's overall approach and next steps

The hypothesis around the business drivers emerged through an inductive approach that involved analyzing data from cohort companies, conducting field interviews with the women farmers they sourced from and/or served, and corroborating observed patterns against a comprehensive literature review to establish a strong evidence-based foundation. The analysis drew upon global frameworks related to women's economic empowerment, gender equality, financial inclusion, and gender-transformative approaches to better understand the multiple lenses for engaging in women's climate resilience and the commercial viability of the businesses women work with. This work builds on existing knowledge developed by credible institutions and contributes to a growing evidence base for gender-intentional business models.

Through IBAs, the team conducted quantitative assessments of business operations and financials to evaluate the inclusiveness and commercial viability of each model⁹. The analyses specifically examined business models, assessed each company's business case, and evaluated the farmer business case. The exercise generated a preliminary understanding of the drivers that both businesses and women farmers can leverage to strengthen their climate resilience strategies.

Additionally, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with each cohort member to gather qualitative data that deepened the understanding

9 Two example IBAs include Sistema.bio (IDH FarmFit Insights Hub n.d.a) and Wi-Agri (IDH FarmFit Insights Hub n.d.b)

of gender and climate resilience and helped shape the narrative. FGDs included at least four groups of 15 women clients from various regions across the company’s country of operation, one group of male clients, and a series of conversations with staff members at different levels within each organization. Alongside the qualitative and quantitative research, the first ABERA cohort met for a week of peer learning in Pune, India. These sessions provided an opportunity to present the emerging learning hypothesis, particularly around the emerging drivers, and to gather valuable industry feedback and validation. The feedback was used to refine outputs and to test and iterate ABERA’s findings, ensuring a robust and effective learning framework. Subsequent research will explore the results of practical applications of the drivers, including how they interconnect to provide value for businesses and the rural women they serve.

Outputs that measure value for women and businesses

The output indicators were adapted based on internal work by CGAP and IDH, as well as key literature, to capture the outputs most critical to women’s agency and resilience in rural economies. Whether individually or in combination, the outputs contribute to greater impact on the long-term outcomes of women’s agency and resilience. To identify the key output indicators that matter to businesses, the analysis drew on discussions and assessments of five diverse companies in the cohort, as well as insights from hundreds of IBAs conducted by IDH. This approach helped surface indicators most relevant to evaluating the inclusiveness and commercial viability of gender-intentional business models. Tables 3 and 4 further elaborate upon these outcomes.

TABLE 3. **Outcome: Women’s increased agency and resilience**

Key outcomes	How outcomes contribute to women’s increased agency and resilience
Increased productivity	Combined with greater access to markets, this leads to expanded opportunities for income generation, potentially resulting in increased financial decision-making power at home.
Increased income	Leads to greater spending power and the potential for enhanced financial decision-making within the household.
Greater access to markets	Together with increased productivity, creates more opportunities for income generation, which can strengthen women’s financial decision-making power at home.
Improved food security	Contributes to better health and a stronger ability to provide for one’s family, which in turn supports farming activities and enhances overall household stability.
Enhanced decision-making ability	Supports a more equitable role in the household through increased contributions to income, expanded opportunities specific to women, and greater confidence.

Source: Authors, 2025.

TABLE 4. **Outcome: Increased commercial viability for businesses**

Key outcomes	How outcomes contribute to women’s increased agency and resilience
Decreased customer acquisition cost	Reduces the high upfront costs required to onboard new clients, enabling businesses to achieve faster growth and profitability with lower operating expenses
Decreased cost-to-serve	Lowers the ongoing expenses needed to deliver services per customer, allowing businesses to sustainably serve more clients while maintaining or improving profit margins.
Decreased customer attrition	Minimizes the costs associated with replacing lost customers and recovering lost revenue, leading to more stable growth and a stronger return on investment.
Increased average revenue per customer, year over year (YoY)	Enhances commercial viability by signalling deeper customer engagement and higher value capture per client, driving revenue growth without a proportional increase in service costs or acquisition efforts.
Increased YoY customer growth	Expands the revenue base over time, indicating market demand, boosting investor confidence, and creating economies of scale that improve operational efficiency.
Decreased business risk	Improves portfolio stability by reducing exposure to defaults or operational disruptions, making the business more attractive to investors, partners, and financial institutions.

Source: Authors, 2025.

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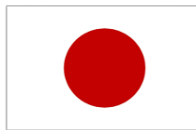
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