



**TITLE: *ACDI/VOCA-AICCRA Internship Program***

**(Internship program with USAID EDGE and IWMI-AICCRA SME partners)**

May 2023



**AICCRA**  
Accelerating Impacts of CGIAR  
Climate Research for Africa



# Highlights



1

## Where are we coming from?

To accelerate inclusive and gainful employment for young women and men in Zambia, ACIDI/VOCA, under its USAID EDGE project, developed an internship program. ACIDI/VOCA partnered with the Accelerating Impact of CGIAR Climate Research for Africa (AICCRA) project to deliver a joint program centered around building capacities of interns in business management skills, key value chain practices, climate information services (CIS) and climate-smart agricultural (CSA) practices.



2

## What did we hope to achieve?

The internship program aimed to advance and accomplish two (2) key objectives:

- 1) Provide youth with private sector working experience via attachments to agricultural SMEs.
- 2) Stimulate demand-driven and inclusive innovation development amongst SMEs.



## How did we achieve our objective?

In accordance with ACIDI/VOCA-AICCRA Partnership Agreement, the Zambia team inaugurated the ACIDI/VOCA- AICCRA Internship Program in September 2022 with the following key processes:

- Intern-SME Selection
- Internship Assignments and Placements
- Pause and Reflect Meeting



4

## What activities did we implement to make the program a success?

Interns have supported SMEs and the EDGE Activity in multiple and unique ways, including:

- Conducted Climate Smart and CIS Training to SMEs'
- Market linkages and network creation
- Development of accounting and book-keeping systems.
- Human resource support and statutory registrations/conformities
- Market and gender inclusive research support



5

## What were our key achievements?

- Improved development and management of SME financial records to make them presentable to financial service providers.
- Improved product branding, visibility, sales, and profits among SMEs.
- Enhanced appreciation of gender and youth inclusion among the SMEs.
- Improved understanding and compliance to CSA and CIS requirements among SMEs.



6

## Our reflection for learning and recommendations.

Some of the key learnings from the program include:

- The need to strengthen linkages among the SMEs, interns, and partner universities.
- Internship programs can be a key driver to benefit youth beyond employment.
- Internships should bridge the gap between technical skill and work-readiness among youth.
- The program was resource heavy which made it difficult to implement it to scale.





# 1: Where are we coming from?

Zambia's youth are key development catalysts that have the potential to foster economic prosperity in their communities, when provided with adequate support. According to the Zambia Labour Force Survey of 2020, the labour force participation rate was highest in the age group 35-39 years at 95.7 percent and was lowest in the age group 15-19 years at 34.3 percent. This entails that a high proportion of youth are unemployed, not gainfully employed and economically inactive. The total youth unemployment rate as of 2020 was approximately 22%.

To better support Zambia's youth population, many recent interventions have focused on expanding youth's access to quality education. However, despite obtaining a higher education, numerous recent university graduates remain unable to qualify for gainful employment opportunities due to their lack of work experience and/or underdevelopment professional skills. Female fresh graduates are even more affected by unemployment compared to their male counterparts. This is partly because of the cultural norms that inhibit female youths from taking up gainful employment and entrepreneurship on one hand and the potential employers' preference to work with male youths on the other hand.

To accelerate inclusive and gainful employment for young women and men in Zambia, ACDO/VOCA developed an internship program and partnered with the Accelerating Impact of CGIAR Climate Research for Africa (AICCRA) project. In 2022-23, the partnership delivered a program centred around building the capacities of interns in business management skills,

key value chain practices - climate information services (CIS) and climate-smart agricultural (CSA) practices. Most importantly, the internship program focused on empowering young professionals with 'hands-on' work experience in a wide array of agricultural SMEs.

The program connected interns with multiple SMEs over the duration of their assignment to assist with key/priority needs as identified by ACDI/VOCA, financial service providers (e.g., commercial banks), third party evaluators and the SMEs themselves.

The students supported the SMEs with their knowledge in value chains and technical processes of their fields of study. The interns in turn gained active experience working with SMEs; where they were able to apply their theoretical knowledge to real life and industrial activities.

The intervention additionally catalysed relevant technical, social, and financial innovations to support Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA) and Climate Information System (CIS) targets, including:

- Scaling up EDGE SME's competitiveness by addressing a series of gaps, weaknesses, and opportunities at the SME level.
- Fostering inclusive participation in agricultural value chain development.
- Identifying, where appropriate, scientific evidence to catalyse innovative approaches to CSA agribusiness and fostering national research – private sector partnerships to catalyse CSA-CIS.
- As a spin-off effect, strengthening systemic capacity to be responsive and inclusive to scaling of IMWI-AICCRA CSA-CIS bundles.

ACDI/VOCA and the AICCRA Zambia team launched the Program in September 2022. The program ran for six (6) months and came to an end in February 2023. A total of 35 youths (23 female and 12 male) were formally recruited, all of whom were assigned to EDGE's private sector SMEs, based on the interns' skillsets and SMEs' technical necessities.



## 2: What Did we hope to achieve?



The internship program aimed to advance and accomplish two (2) core objectives.

*Objective 1: Provide youth with private sector working experience via attachments to agricultural SMEs.*

ACDI/VOCA accomplished the placement of AICCRA interns to EDGE's agricultural SMEs. Throughout the project implementation, the interns acquired first-hand technical experience, practical knowledge, and skills by working with their assigned SMEs and from the mentorship and coaching provided by ACDI/VOCA's technical program advisors. The program further facilitated employment opportunities for high-achieving interns with interested EDGE SMEs during or after their internship tenure. This resulted in six (6) interns (2 females and 4 males) getting full-time employment within their assigned SMEs, and with other private entities.

Some interns received opportunities to intern outside the country with larger institutions such as the World Food Program and ABSA Bank (supporting local grants for civil Society organizations and providing customer care).

*Objective 2: Stimulate demand-driven and inclusive innovation development.*

The ACDI/VOCA-AICCRA Internship Program has indirectly sensitized SMEs' acknowledgement to youth's valuable potential in the private sector. ACDI/VOCA has fostered this objective by effectively evaluating SMEs' needs and appropriately assigning interns to strengthen SMEs' respective gaps. During this initial period, intern trained and/or coached SMEs in specific business activities. Additionally, some interns supported their SMEs through the development of innovative solutions, strategies, and tools to improve SMEs' business performance. This included increased productivity, sales, profit, revenue, and employment opportunities while fostering CSA and CIS initiatives.

SMEs have explicitly communicated their satisfaction with the Internship Program and the results attained to date, with some requesting to extend their engagement in the Internship Program. Beyond this intervention, it is anticipated that more SMEs will begin to demand more youth innovation and talent to foster youth-inclusive work force at different levels.

# 3: How Did we achieve our objective?

In accordance with ACDI/VOCA-AICCRA Partnership Agreement, the Zambia team inaugurated the ACDI/VOCA - AICCRA Internship Program in September 2022. A total of four (4) partnership agreements between ACDI/VOCA and higher learning institutions were developed before the launch of the program to ensure that a consistent pipeline of young students and graduates were available for placement as the program progressed. The ACDI/VOCA team went on to select the program's interns through a formal recruitment process by evaluating interns' profiles, skills, and interests to support SMEs under the EDGE Activity. The team also developed and outlined various activities under the interns' respective scopes of work.

The Program team subsequently placed interns with private sector actors (SMEs) for a period of up to 6 months, using ACDI/VOCA's Award Management contracting tools. This section details the methodologies which the ACDI/VOCA-EDGE team employed to execute the intern distribution and allocation plan, including the interns and SMEs selection process, placement strategies, and operational coordination strategies.

## 3.1 Intern-SME Selection

ACDI/VOCA partnered with four (4) local universities to identify potential students/graduates to participate in the Internship Program and support EDGE's SMEs in key areas such as financial/business management, supply chain management, horticulture, aquaculture, and feed processing. These efforts began before ACDI/VOCA officially executed the Partnership Agreement with IMWI-AICCRA, occurring from

April to September 2022. EDGE identified and selected interns based on their academic specialization and training, and per the recommendations of their University Departments.

At the beginning of the program, EDGE collaborated with its implementing partner, Agova, to evaluate and identify host SMEs based on their gaps and constraints as stipulated in their company profiles. The Zambia team, in synergy with its Business Advisors (BAs), vetted these findings via EDGE's baseline data, annual reports, growth strategies, and quarterly assessments. This information, along with the SME's commitment to host an intern, was the methodology applied to select participating SMEs.

## 3.2 Internship Assignments and Placements

A total of 35 interns (23 female and 12 male) were selected to support an initial 26 SMEs in the following 5 provinces: Northern, Central, Eastern, Lusaka, and Luapula. Of the 26 SMEs, IMWI-AICCRA recommended 5 SMEs that are scaling CSA and CIS interventions through aquaculture. Due to the nature of their needs, some SMEs requested more than one intern to support them, explaining the lower number of participating SMEs compared to the number of interns. It is worth noting that some interns were placed with more than one SME over their period of performance, with some supporting up to 3 SMEs over the course of 6 months. By the end of the program a total of 35 SMEs benefited from the interventions.

Given that some Intern-SME placements could not begin immediately following the onboarding session with IWMI-AICCRA, the



program made provisions for the interns to be given assignments in a remote and/or preparatory work capacity. The ACDI/VOCA team developed intern Scopes of Work (SOW) that included support for EDGE activities to maximize interns' learning opportunities and ensure that no intern would be idle due to delays in placements, switches to host SMEs, or temporary gaps when transitioning from one SME pairing to another.

### ***Textbox 1: Testimonial from Holland Greentech***

*"We would like to express our appreciation for having considered Holland Greentech to house an intern during the tenure of the program. The intern sent to us was extremely helpful in his role and has played a huge part in uplifting the brand of Holland Greentech and achieving the company objectives that were assigned to him. We would like to inform you that we have decided to extend the internship program for the intern as we still feel there is a lot he can learn and are quite confident that in a few months from now, he will be a valuable employee at Holland Greentech."*

### ***3.3 Operational Preparation and Coordination***

As the IMWI-AICCRA & ACDI/VOCA Internship Program is part of a broader USAID EDGE internship program, the EDGE team began planning for internship placements, host SME identification and pairings, EDGE-specific apprenticeship opportunities, and developing scopes of work, as early as May/June 2022. By the time the IWWI-AICCRA and ACDI/VOCA partnership began, the Zambia team had executed In-kind grant agreements with host SMEs and finalized the interns' purchase orders (POs) agreements and terms of reference. EDGE additionally hired an Internship Coordinator and a Gender Intern in August 2022, in preparation to diligently manage the Program.



## 4. What Activities did we implement to make the program a success?



### *Mobilization: Internship Preparation and Onboarding*

As per the approved workplan, at the beginning of the interns' assignments (September 1 through 16, 2022), ACDI/VOCA tasked the interns with:

- Preparing for and participating in an IMWI-AICCRA/EDGE two-day onboarding program, requiring travel to and from the venue in Lusaka.

- Completing questionnaire/surveys pertaining to their assignment.
- Participating in tripartite (virtual) meetings with EDGE and assigned SMEs.
- Reviewing SMEs via online resources, profiles, data sets, and company information.
- Spending time at the EDGE office to familiarize themselves with the work of the project's Gender, Youth and Social Inclusion team and environmental compliance portfolio.
- Meeting with EDGE sector leads in preparation of their 2 to 6-month assignments.
- Joining introductory calls and meet-and-greet with host SMEs.
- Conducting specific tasks related to the work they will be undertaking with host SMEs until placements with SMEs can begin.

The EDGE team administered the intern onboarding program during the months of August and September 2022. During this period, the interns had an opportunity to learn about their assigned businesses by familiarizing themselves with individual SMEs, reviewing business plans, data sets, strategies, and profiles, as well as learning about the EDGE project and the partnership with AICCRA. This onboarding was



aimed at expanding the interns' understanding of their assigned businesses and the nature of support they would provide, and how the SMEs apply the CSA and CIS principles.

The onboarding process additionally included one-on-one introductions between the SMEs and interns, and a two-day internship orientation session, bringing all interns to Lusaka in mid-September 2022.

The USAID EDGE team executed the majority of the interns' physical placement with host SMEs following the two-day onboarding activity. However, it should be noted that EDGE did not finalize all physical placements at the same time because of the diverse needs of each SME. The ACDI/VOCA team discussed this on multiple occasions with IMWI-AICCRA representatives during the project planning and implementation, leading to adjustments to interns' assignments and related terms of reference. In some cases, SMEs requested short-term virtual support while they made operational arrangements to properly host the interns' in-person assistance, per the requirements outlined in the SMEs' in-kind grant agreements. Simultaneously, other SMEs requested prompt and early physical presence of the interns.

### *Implementation: Intern Placements and Activities*

As part of the interns' physical placement, ACDI/VOCA-EDGE staff conducted a total of 6 follow-ups and check-ins with the interns and the SMEs. During the reporting period, in addition to frequent interactions with the Internship Coordinator, the team held virtual meetings via Zoom monthly, as well as 6 in-person visits to the program in the targeted provinces. The visits gave an opportunity to receive feedback on how the program is going both from the SMEs and the interns.

To obtain regular feedback and monitor the work the interns were doing and how the program was impacting positively on both the intern and the SMEs, interns were required to submit monthly reports to

EDGE's Internship Coordinator. The Zambia team established virtual platforms, such as WhatsApp groups, to enhance communication and disperse best practices amongst the interns. The mechanism allowed the interns to interact with ACDI/VOCA-EDGE staff and receive instant feedback and/or updates on the progress of their individual internship assignments.

### *Pause and Reflect Meeting*

As ACDI/VOCA approached the mid-point, and as per contractual requirements, the EDGE team assigned to the internship program held a Pause and Reflect (P&R) session to gauge the progress and gather early lessons learned on the joint internship intervention.

One limitation of this in-person P&R session was that it only included SMEs, education partners, and interns in Lusaka due to limited time and resources to bring the interns together into one place. To address this challenge, some SMEs and interns were engaged from their respective sites before the expiry of the program. These were made as joint programs with other EDGE portfolios. EDGE will gather additional information from SMEs as part of its annual survey, and will happily share any outcomes, impacts, and feedback with IMWI-AICCRA.

The stated objectives of the Pause and Reflect session were as follows:

- Understand what the proposed program was and what actually occurred.
- Discuss the positives of the program for all involved parties.
- Discuss the challenges of the program for all involved parties.
- Vision solutions to challenges and what the program could look like in the next phase.

Below is a summary of the learnings that emerged during the P&R sessions.

1. improvement in information sharing at every stage of the program among the different stakeholders: Since SMEs and university partners were in the same group for the first discussion, it gave them an opportunity to identify the need for continuous interaction among them. It also gave them the opportunity to discuss the needs of the SMEs, the interns, and universities and how they could all work together to address these needs.
2. Positive benefits to youth beyond employment: Youth noted many positive benefits to the internships beyond the potential for eventual employment including networking, the opportunity to earn some money which some internship programs do not offer and learning new skills they had previously unrecognized in agriculture and/or entrepreneurship.
3. Better onboarding between the interns and their assigned supervisors: It was clear that a better understanding of roles for both (and by

both) interns and SMEs was needed. This came up in different forms from a need to provide interns with resources to do their jobs (both physical and access to certain systems) to the need to help intern supervisors understand their roles when managing interns.

4. Orientation plans within the SMEs during onboarding: The orientation needed to consider other members of staff within the SMEs and not just with the top management in the business. This could lead to effective support to the interns during the period of their assignment. SMEs on the other hand appreciated the P&R process as it gave them the opportunity for cross-learning on working with young people. They indicated the need for their involvement in the intern's selection process.
5. Work readiness versus technical skill transfer: While interns may have technical skills, their education has not prepared all of them for work readiness skills, which could have lowered their confidence. While many interns brought technical skills in areas such as accounting or digital marketing to their respective SMEs, they commented about not being ready to handle certain situations in the workplace like negotiations or presenting new ideas.

6. Lack of resources across universities and SMEs for proper sourcing and placement: It was clear that the implemented internship program was difficult to scale due to a lack of resources in SMEs (especially rural businesses, in remote areas) and universities to effectively manage interns. To scale the program, increased due diligence by SMEs, partners and stakeholders, particularly around selection and monitoring processes, will be needed.





## 5. What were our Key Achievements and Outcomes of the program?



*The intern who was attached to my business was not just supporting me in recording and reconciling my financial records but also trained me and my staff on how to do these things. This will help us continue doing the right thing when it comes to recording our finances in my business. This will ultimately reduce losses as I conduct my business. Even though the internship program has ended, I am still in touch with the intern to receive guidance where we need it – Rhomach General Dealers*

As the internship program has come to an end, ACDI/VOCA is pleased to report several positive outcomes of the intervention. During the period of the program, interns have supported SMEs under the EDGE Activity in multiple and unique ways.



---

## AICCRA Success Stories

---

### *Highlights of Achievements from the Interns perspective:*

Interns saw value in networking with other interns and notably professionals within their assigned SMEs and the wider agriculture sector when offered those opportunities.

#### Testimonial from Alick Zulu, one of AICCRA's interns:

*Though I am a trained person in aquaculture, the knowledge I gained from my practical interaction with other professionals in aquaculture is immense. I have learnt some things that we never had an opportunity to learn while at school such as engaging with rural farmers, especially women who produce fish.*

### *Highlight of Achievements from the SMEs perspective:*

Most of the SMEs did not have their financial records in order due to lack of capacity to develop and manage financial records. Through the internship program, the interns were able to support the SMEs. In developing and managing their records and making them presentable to the financial service providers (FSP), a total of 12 SMEs have demonstrated improvements in the management of their books of accounts and financial records.

Improved sales and profits – through improved digital marketing and sales support, the SMEs saw increased demand for their products and hence increased sales (and likely profit).

A chance to apply the knowledge they gained at university, especially in relation to CSA and CIS. Some SMEs gave the interns the opportunity to pilot new ideas in managing the businesses and maximizing profit which led to effective and efficient management of the businesses.

Interns also noted the opportunity to gain new skills and knowledge in agriculture, especially those that studied non-agriculture related courses. This has ignited their ambition to venture into agribusiness for some of the interns.

As some interns were given responsibilities to supervise some workers, the program has led to improved leadership and management skills which they will utilize beyond the program.



### Testimonial from Catherine Milling, Nature's Nectar

*"...As a company we struggled to advertise our honey products, as we only relied on physical advertising within our catchment area. However, the story was different with the coming of an intern who had knowledge in digital marketing. She embarked on a journey of producing monthly bulletins and messages which were shared on online platforms such as Facebook. This resulted in increased inquiries about our products and subsequently increase in sales."*

Improved compliance to statutory requirements such as ZRA, NAPSA. The interns put in place systems that made it easier for the SMEs to continuously comply with statutory requirements.

Improved appreciation of gender and inclusion among the SMEs through the

development and popularizing gender policies and manuals within and outside the SME establishment.

### Testimonial from Cosmos, Betterworld Innovations:

*"Despite working with a lot of women, our business did not have a gender policy. The intern attached to us managed to produce such a policy for us, and later trained our staff on gender mainstreaming. We have now rolled out the policy to the groups we work with in our out grower scheme."*

Through training and awareness raising on CSA and CIS, the SMEs demonstrated understanding and compliance to CSA and CIS requirements as they conducted their businesses.

---

## 6: Our Reflection for Learning and Recommendations.

*Reflection:* The intern-SME assignments were successful to-date due to the continuous engagements among the ACDI/VOCA-EDGE team, the universities, the interns, and the SMEs throughout the execution of the program. The continuous feedback mechanisms through different platforms such online meetings, field visits, one-on-one meetings and WhatsApp resulted in improvements in the implementation of the program over time and increased commitment among the SMEs and the interns.

The interns made profound contributions to their assigned businesses, and several SMEs have offered positive feedback on the support that these youth rendered.

The interns have also attested to the merit of the Internship Program, sharing that this experience has enabled them to acquire new technical knowledge and skills, particularly in a professional work environment relating to the agriculture sector. These young leaders believe that the internship opportunity improved their chances on employability within the SMEs and outside of this program.

Through the interaction with higher learning institutions and the SMEs, it was evident that that SMEs need to be engaged in the selection process of the interns to be attached to their business. This will ensure the selection of interns is done on merit from the long lists shared by universities.

Universities also requested that SMEs need to engage with them to ensure that the curriculum delivered is tailored to respond to the needs and challenges of the SMEs in the agriculture sector.



## Recommendations

In retrospect, the Zambia team outlines the following lessons learned and recommendations for future implementing opportunities:

The delay in signing the contract/partnership agreement and executing modifications between ACDI/VOCA and IWMI impacted the timeliness of some placements. There is need to begin planning for the program long before the date of commencement so that all administrative issues are addressed well in advance.

As some interns were still enrolled in their respective schools, it made it difficult for them to fit into the SMEs calendars, especially for the rural SMEs. There is need to devise and adopt a flexible schedule that will allow the interns to support the SMEs and still be able to attend to their academic needs and demands. There is also a need to not solely rely on recommendations and referrals made by universities, but that interns be tested in their skill areas before placement.

The interaction with the SMEs revealed that the duration for the intern's attachment (6 months) was not adequate to appreciate the actual impact of the support on the SME. Some of the interns were moved to the next SMEs while still learning operations of first business they are attached to. It is recommended that the duration of the internship is increased to more than 6 months for all the SMEs.

Some interns "dropped out" from the program due to various reasons, such as interns having full-time employment. Replacement of interns posed a challenge in some instances due to delays from the universities to provide names of interns for replacement. Universities should create a pool of interns under different categories (e.g., short term, long-term, embedded, virtual), scopes (e.g., research, capacity building, coaching, technical support, etc.), value chains and/or subject matter expertise, so that replacements are easier whenever there is attrition.









---

## Acknowledgement

The Accelerating Impact of CGIAR Climate Research for Africa (AICCRA) project is supported by a grant from the International Development Association (IDA) of the World Bank. IDA helps the world's poorest countries by providing grants and low to zero-interest loans for projects and programs that boost economic growth, reduce poverty, and improve poor people's lives. IDA is one of the largest sources of assistance for the world's 76 poorest countries, 39 of which are in Africa. Annual IDA commitments have averaged about \$21 billion over circa 2017-2020, with approximately 61 percent going to Africa.



**AICCRA**  
Accelerating Impacts of CGIAR  
Climate Research for Africa



Implemented by:

