

## Monica Musonda, Java Foods

I founded Java Foods with the vision of manufacturing nutritious foods from local sourced raw materials almost 8 years ago. The journey has not been easy. So, I am grateful to be asked to contribute to this discussion and share my experiences.

Over the past few years, we have seen increased discussion, attention and focus by various stakeholders on the need to encourage/support women economic empowerment efforts to achieve economic development, reduce poverty etc. The momentum has been encouraging. However, the continued support to SME's (the bulk of which women owned/led businesses in many of our countries) remains critical.

- COVID-19 has presented unprecedented challenges to the entrepreneurship landscape especially for women and if we are not careful will unravel the work done to support women economic empowerment in many of our countries.
- By the end of March 2020, Africa experienced its first cases and we began to see lock downs being put into place in many countries, businesses being classified as non-essential and being asked to close, schools & centres of learnings being closed and the unilateral closure of borders.
- The impact of these actions has been huge – for instance many women SME's in the informal sector were affected and could not earn income (could not get good to market to sell, could not access transport, their market was restricted because people were staying home). Many of these businesses were caught up in paying fixed costs like rent, workers payment, microloan payments despite the fact they were not making any income.
- For larger companies, problems with supply chain and logistics caused many to reduce working hours, productivity and cut staff. Also, many were unable to deliver on contracts or struggled to pay statutory obligations or loan payments due to reduced income.
- COVID19 is not just a public health issues but also an economic crisis. It has strained supply chains, depreciated currencies, driven up costs of production and distribution putting pressure on the operations of SMEs, and has caused price shocks, unemployment, bankruptcies and potential food shortages.
- Women-led SMEs, particularly women-led micro-enterprises will be disproportionately impacted – they already face greater challenges in accessing technical assistance and finance – and will face greater challenges as they balance additional care duties with keeping their businesses afloat.
- To address the issues, we need leadership, courage and continued focus. This is the time we must continue to push forward on key issues to capture the opportunity.