

Sowing hope: how Irish Missionaries are backing the women who feed Africa



Nazenti Mbavungu, South Sudan: Photo credit: Nyokabi Kahura

To mark the UN's International Year of the Woman Farmer, Mísean Cara is spotlighting projects across four African countries that show what happens when women smallholders are given skills, savings and a fair chance.

Ask most people to picture a farmer and they usually won't imagine a woman in her twenties with a baby on her back, hoeing a field in a drought-prone corner of northern Uganda. Yet across much of the developing world, that is the reality. Women grow a great deal of the food that reaches rural tables, while often struggling to secure land, borrow money, attend training or be heard in community decisions. The United Nations has named 2026 the International Year of the Woman Farmer, calling on governments, organisations and communities to recognise that imbalance and start to fix it.

For Irish missionaries, this is familiar ground. Mísean Cara was founded in 2004, with Irish Government backing, to channel Irish Aid funding to missionary groups working among the world's poorest communities. It has grown into a network of 77 missionary-led organisations operating in more than 40

countries. In 2025 alone, its members reached 1.13 million people globally through 344 projects spanning education, healthcare, human rights and sustainable livelihoods. Missionaries often work where few others can, in remote villages and conflict zones, and they tend to stay long after the headlines move on. These stories from Uganda, Mozambique, South Sudan and Malawi, show what that patience can achieve when it is pointed at the fields women work every day.

Uganda: scattered seeds and savings groups

In Uganda's far north-west, families had no shortage of land. What they lacked was know-how. Seed was scattered by hand with no spacing, so crops crowded each other out. Fields were cleared by burning the bush, which wrecked the soil and wildlife. Animals wandered freely, and households relied on wild greens instead of growing vegetables. Hunger and malnutrition were common.

Adraa Agriculture College, run by the Franciscan Brothers, set out to change this through its Sustainable Agriculture Livelihood Programme. Villagers learned

early planting, crop rotation, and how to protect soil and water. They were also taught kitchen gardening, tree planting, sound livestock care, nutrition and basic financial management.

“She now pays school fees without anxiety and can afford treatment when her children fall ill”

Ires Candiru, a 47-year-old widow raising three children, is one of those who put it to use. Her first kitchen-garden profits bought three goats. The goats multiplied and she swapped them for a cow, which in turn produced more animals. When she sold one, she used the money to buy a plot at the Giligili trading centre, where she plans to build a commercial property. She now pays school fees without anxiety and can afford treatment when her children fall ill.

Perhaps the most striking change is what women have

done with their earnings. Doris Maturu, 32, belongs to a village savings group the college helped set up in Ayuu. It now has 75 members, who have saved about 27 million shillings on average each year. Doris bought a boar, sold it for 760,000 shillings, and used the money for school fees, household furniture and a goat that has already had two kids.

Elsewhere in the same community, 63-year-old widow Betty Atrii received fifty tree seedlings, planted more of her own and established a small woodlot. She no longer walks long distances for firewood, her home is sheltered from strong winds, and she is teaching younger neighbours to plant and protect trees.

Mozambique: growing through crisis

Cabo Delgado, in northern Mozambique, is a place of displacement and fear. Hundreds of thousands of people have fled violence there, and a large share are women, many of them facing food insecurity with children in tow. The Augustinian Sisters, long present in the region, decided that women smallholders were the group most

in need of support and most able to turn it into lasting change.

“The women, who had begun to manage project funds themselves, described a growing sense of control over their futures”

In the years following its formation, the number of women's farming groups supported by the project grew from three to eight. Around 175 women were formally trained, and because the courses were kept open, at least 300 people in total took part. Training combined theory and hands-on practice, taught by a university lecturer, and alongside it came classes in literacy, since most of the women had never learned to read, along with lessons on hygiene and human rights. Each group received a set of tools, including a fertiliser and bio-pesticide sprayer. Staff prepared land for veg-

etables, and installed green-houses.

Climate change brought its own problems, including new pests that attack a wide range of crops. The response was homegrown and affordable: an expert showed the women how to make fertiliser and pesticide from sugar-cane molasses and farm waste, a technique that was new to the whole community. When drought threatened the dry-season harvest, the sisters went beyond their original plan and dug eight hand wells, one for each village. They are about ten metres deep and easy to maintain, which suits places far from any town. Household incomes among participants rose by 20%, and the women, who had begun to manage project funds themselves, described a growing sense of control over their futures.

South Sudan: nutrition begins in the garden

In Riimenze, in South Sudan's Western Equatoria State, the Solidarity with South Sudan programme has linked farming with family health. Nazenti Mbavungu, 33, is a single mother of seven and has been involved

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Doris Maturu, Uganda. Photo credit: Nyokabi Kahura

“Training combined theory and hands-on practice, taught by a university lecturer, and alongside it came classes in literacy, since most of the women had never learned to read, along with lessons on hygiene and human rights”

for two years. Before the training, she says, children often went without breakfast because their mothers left for the fields at first light, and one starchy dish was usually the day's main meal. Many local children looked frail.

“Farmers from across the Diocese of Tombura-Yambio visited the Riimenze demonstration farm to see sustainable methods”

The programme taught the women to grow vegetables such as nightshade and amaranth, to cook them briefly to keep their goodness, to

keep kitchens clean, and to breastfeed for six months before introducing other foods. Nazenti now keeps some of her crop for her family and sells the rest, using the income for school fees, meat and cooking oil. She says malnourished children are now rare in her village.

The project reaches beyond individual households. In July 2026, farmers from across the Diocese of Tombura-Yambio visited the Riimenze demonstration farm to see sustainable methods in practice. A radio programme taught listeners about balanced diets, a community animal health worker visited pig farmers, and advice on drying harvested grain on raised racks helped families cut post-harvest losses.

Malawi: sun, seeds and a cooperative

Malawi offers a stark illustration of why this work matters. In 2024, an estimated 4.2 million Malawians faced

acute food insecurity, and the national poverty rate climbed above 71%. In Mchilawengo, in the north of the country, a baseline survey found maize harvests that varied wildly between households. A few did well, but most struggled with very little, and few had any means of earning income from higher-value crops.

“Erratic rainfall once left her family hungry and unable to afford fertiliser, and she often ate only one meal a day”

The Ungweru Organisation, supported by Miseen Cara through the Saint Patrick's Missionary Society, worked with 320 house-



Veronica Phiri, Malawi: Photo credit: Ungweru Organisation



Ires Candiru, Uganda. Photo credit: Nyokabi Kahura

holds. It installed a solar-powered irrigation system so families could grow beans in the dry winter season instead of depending on the rains. It gave pigs and chickens to dozens of households on a pass-on basis, meaning each recipient shares offspring with neighbours. And it helped farmers form a cooperative, which the government duly registered.

A year on, bean yields had more than doubled, from an average of 80 kilograms per household to 196, and groundnut harvests rose from 105 to 256 kilograms. Use of solar technology jumped from 4% of respondents to 64%. The cooperative then won a substantial government loan, which it used to buy more panels and irrigation equipment.

Veronica Phiri knows what that means. Erratic rainfall once left her family hungry and unable to afford fertiliser, and she often ate only one meal a day. With irrigation, she can now farm

through the dry months and plan ahead with some confidence.

What the stories share

These projects differ in climate, language and politics, yet they share a pattern. Women are given practical skills, often in their own villages, along with the tools and water they need to use them. They then build on that foundation through savings groups, cooperatives, small livestock or new crops. Income goes to school fees, medicine and better food, and what women learn is passed on to neighbours and daughters. The result is not dependency but confidence, and in many cases the women are now teaching others.

Recognising the work

Miseen Cara is marking the International Year of the Woman Farmer with Dóchas,

the Irish network of development organisations, with the support of the European Union. The timing is apt: Ireland currently holds the Presidency of the Council of the EU, and climate change and food security are high on the agenda. The message from the partners is that women's work in agriculture deserves far more recognition and recognition than it gets.

Many of the women in these stories ask for one thing above all: that the training reaches neighbouring communities still waiting for it. As Miseen Cara marks Mission Sunday this October, it is sharing the work Irish missionaries began more than a century ago, so that their legacy can carry on reaching the poorest communities for generations to come.

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