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“Filling gaps and removing traps  
for sustainable resource management”

## Leveraging Collaborative Learning to Build Capacity for Entrepreneurship together with Rural Women’s Groups in Nigeria

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### Abstract

In UPGRADE Plus, a project that aims to co-develop processing of underutilised species together with women’s groups in West Africa, entrepreneurial capacity building is approached through the application of collaborative learning within a transdisciplinary research design. This epistemological orientation recognises participating women as custodians of knowledge specific to the contextual system within which they operate and thus uses methods that create action opportunities for them to decide what is feasible and what is not. Within the frame of this broader project, this study analyses the different levels of engagement of women’s groups selected to participate in this transdisciplinary research. The interactions with the women were guided by the collaborative learning (CL) framework which follows a series of iterative phases of team building, dialogue, discovery and application. The phases of dialogue and discovery were facilitated with six steps which first brought forward existing knowledge on entrepreneurship within the women’s groups and in later stages allowed for learning exchanges with other functioning businesses within the region leading towards the development of their own business plans. The study employed a qualitative approach to analyse themes that emerged from 25 group meetings and 12 individual interviews with four rural women’s groups in south-western Nigeria from December 2018 until April 2019. Results show how groups respond differently to the same CL process, with some groups advancing more quickly than others. Although the groups share similarities in culture, occupation, religion and age distribution, it is their differences in intrinsic motivation, group cohesiveness, previous experiences and individual and group foresight that determined the pace of the group, that is, their ability to learn together. Capacity building goals could only be achieved with women’s groups who were willing to go beyond transactional relationships. We found that the time and energy required for active engagement in the CL process revealed groups that were ready for longer term collaboration. Critically, the sense of ownership that is built through the active engagement is essential for projects that aim to sustainably improve rural livelihoods through entrepreneurial activities.

**Keywords:** Business, learning, transdisciplinary research, women