

Digital Innovation in Food Processing Award

Co-hosted with Smart Solutions for Agri-food (SS4AF) Innovation Hub

Overview

Food processing plays a vital role in creating local jobs, supporting small businesses and boosting food security especially in rural and peri-urban areas across Africa and the Global South. Beyond its association with convenience foods, food processing is essential in enhancing the nutritional value of diets, reducing post-harvest losses and making healthy foods more affordable and widely available.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)'s 2023 report, [The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems](#), small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in food processing, transport and retail are essential sources of employment for women and youth in low- and middle-income countries. The Digital Innovation in Food Processing Award recognizes startups using digital solutions to make food processing safer, more efficient and more inclusive. Co-hosted with Smart Solutions for Agri-food (SS4AF) Innovation Hub, this award supports FAO's mission to transform agrifood systems and empower underserved communities through technology and entrepreneurship.

Digital tools are transforming the way food is handled after it leaves the farm - through processing, preservation and packaging. This award seeks to support youth-led innovations that apply digital technologies in post-harvest stages of the food chain, including activities such as food transformation, quality control and value addition. We are especially interested in solutions that improve accessibility for women, youth and small-scale enterprises. Please note: this award is focused on innovations beyond primary production.

The award aligns with key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 9 (Industry and Innovation), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

Targeted solutions

Startups should offer solutions that:

- Use digital tools in any stage of food processing, from sorting to packaging;
- Are adaptable to small business needs and various local contexts;
- Show potential for scale and impact on the food processing industry;
- Advance inclusion by benefiting women, youth or underserved communities in food processing;
- Use tools that build digital skills for small-scale processors;

- Employ mobile platforms for traceability or food safety monitoring; and
- Utilize affordable digital tools for cooperatives to improve processing or packaging.

Objectives

- Promote digital innovations that improve the safety, efficiency and sustainability of food processing;
- Support small and medium-sized food businesses in integrating and implementing digital technologies; and
- Encourage inclusive solutions, particularly those that benefit women, youth and underserved communities in food processing.

Thematic priorities

Startups may apply with solutions focused on the following areas:

- **Real-time sensors** for monitoring food quality, safety, environmental conditions and critical control parameters in food processing;
- **Sensor integration** to enhance communication and operation of food processing equipment;
- **Smart data management and analytics** to reduce waste, optimize production and enhance decision-making in food processing;
- **Interoperability** to ensure digital systems work coherently across processing and supply chains.
- **Robotics and automation** in food sorting, handling or packaging;
- **Cold chain** optimization and temperature tracking in food processing and distribution; and
- **AI-driven solutions** for quality control, anomaly detection, predictive maintenance and automation in food processing.

Eligibility criteria

- **Focus on food processing:** The solution must directly address food processing, including methods like sorting, grinding, cooking, preserving or packaging;
- **Youth-led startups:** We seek **youth-led startups**, with a founder or C-level executive between **18 and 35 years old** at the time of submission; and

- **Small Business Focus:** Startups must demonstrate how their solutions can be adopted by small-scale food processors and cooperatives.

Important dates & timeline

- Application deadline: 22 May 2025
- Semi-finalist announcement: 2 July 2025
- Finalist announcement: 24 July 2025
- Final pitch and award ceremony: 15 October 2025, World Food Forum (WFF) flagship event, FAO headquarters, Rome, Italy.

Prize and benefits

- Cash prize of up to USD 15,000 for the winner;
- Potential inclusion in a Startup Accelerator Programme offering implementation support to Startup Innovation Awards winners;
- Travel support for two finalists to attend the WFF flagship event in Rome;
- Comprehensive virtual communication and pitch training boot camp;
- Extensive visibility and promotional opportunities via WFF global communication platforms and FAO and United Nations networks; and
- Qualified semi-finalists can compete for the [MassChallenge Switzerland: Fighting Malnutrition and Enhancing Food Security Prize](#) ([more information here](#)) on an additional prize of EUR 10 000.