

Mburu: Reimagining West African Baking Through Local Grains and Women's Empowerment

In a country where 90% of the bread is made from imported wheat, Mburu, a bakery brand born in 2019 in the small town of Ngaparou, Senegal, is flipping the script. Rooted in local culture and driven by innovation, Mburu is introducing a healthier, more sustainable alternative to mass-produced bread, using indigenous grains like millet, sorghum, and maize. But Mburu is more than a bakery: it is a social enterprise with a mission to empower women, shift consumer habits, and rewire food systems in West Africa.

A New Kind of Bakery

True to its investment thesis of empowering impactful, female-led, growth stage businesses, WIC Capital, along with WE! Fund invested CFA 243 million (about USD 450,000) in Mburu in 2021. This was 2 years after Mburu's humble beginnings, when its female founder, Isseu Diop, started with a single store and a big vision: to make local cereals central to daily life again. Isseu was inspired by the breakfast women often sold informally on the streets. In Senegal, 91% of employed women are in the informal sector, compared to 82% of men¹, and in line with WIC Capital's commitment to empowering female informal workers, 70% of Mburu's staff are women.

This stands at odds with the trend as far as Senegal's bakery sector – typically male-dominated – is concerned, and for WIC Capital, the adoption of an inclusive recruitment strategy which actively creates sustainable jobs for women is a fundamental principle. “In regions outside Dakar, women often hold the economy together—but they rarely have stable jobs,” says Isseu. “Our model gives them visibility, training, and pride in their work. That's powerful.”

Leading as a woman in this industry hasn't always been easy. “Our logo is pink, our mindset is different. But people respect the way we work—because it works,” she adds. “And our team sticks around. We grow together.”

The company's operations reflect a commitment to other values which are of high importance to WIC: economic empowerment and local production. “Most bakeries in Senegal look to wheat, but wheat doesn't grow here,” says Mburu's founder. “So why do we depend on imports? We wanted to show there's a different, better way, one that honors our land and our people.” Promoting the consumption of local products is part of the impact story that WIC Capital is keen to tell, through its investments in companies like Mburu. Indeed, for Mburu, transforming perceptions in order to place value on local products is at the core of its *raison d'être*. Indeed, it has recently launched a campaign that is designed to celebrate African grains and shift perceptions around traditional foods. It achieves this by blending the traditional with the modern in the creation of products like millet bagels, corn-based pain de mie, and hibiscus-infused pastries. Even burgers get a makeover, served on buns made with local flour blends. This isn't just healthier; it's a strategy to build a more resilient food economy in the face of global wheat price shocks and climate change.

Building Local Value Chains

WIC Capital supports companies which clearly demonstrate the potential of impacting communities—both locally and nationally—at scale. Over the past few years, Mburu has grown from 15 employees to 50, most of them under 30 years old and based outside the capital. Its “retail kiosk” model, inspired by Senegal's classic 1960s-70s street kiosks, allows Mburu to

¹ https://www.wiego.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/WIEGO_Statistical_BriefN31_Senegal.pdf

operate leanly while reaching rural and peri-urban customers. These compact, affordable setups also serve as training grounds for future franchisees. Further, Mburu's impact is rooted in local sourcing and rural partnerships. From collaborating with cereal producers to training female bakers in underserved regions, the company is rebuilding local value chains from the ground up. "Our vision is to make Mburu a brand that uplifts everyone involved, from the women in the field to the youth at the storefront," the founder explains.

From Local Start-up to Scalable Enterprise

Mburu's journey hasn't been without challenge. In its early "Cycle 1" phase, the company focused on opening physical stores. But high operational costs and thin margins made the model unsustainable. "Entrepreneurship in Africa is like learning how to die and rise again," Isseu says, as she reflects on the very real difficulties she encountered along the way, particularly with regards to finding a sustainable work-life balance. That's where she leaned heavily on the technical assistance afforded by WIC Capital in the form of coaching during the transition from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2. Reflecting on the extent of the coaching support she received from WIC, Isseu said: 'It was just as valuable as the money...[WIC] helped us rethink everything—operations, strategy, even mindset.' For Isseu, WIC's involvement is a model for how impact investors can accelerate change. "The funding gave us breathing space," she says, "but their mentorship gave us the clarity and systems we needed to grow responsibly. From refining our pricing strategy to opening doors to new buyers, WIC has been in the trenches with us."

Growth by Numbers

Profitability is an essential ingredient for WIC Capital, as it supports companies which already have demonstrated sound financial performance yet with financial and technical support, can become very profitable. In Mburu's case, since the 2021 investment by WIC, annual revenue grew from CFA 40 million (GBP52,523) in year one to over CFA 400 million (GBP525,229) by 2024. This year, the company is aiming for CFA 500 million. Operating margins are holding steady at 30–35%, a solid benchmark in Senegal's food sector.

Yet Mburu's growth and impact has gone beyond the financials. Mburu's influence is reshaping consumer behaviour and food culture. The brand's stylish packaging, bold pink logo, and product design appeal to a new generation of Senegalese consumers who are increasingly curious about local, gluten-free, and nutritious alternatives.

Scaling Up, Regionally and Beyond

Mburu is currently preparing for its next leap, in alignment with the way in which WIC Capital seeks to steer its portfolio companies- in the direction of the export market. With demand growing, Mburu plans to establish a larger production site within the next 12–18 months. This would allow it to scale up its B2B operations (selling to airlines, supermarkets, etc.), launch new packaged snack lines, and enter new markets across Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, and beyond.

But capital and packaging remain major constraints. "Packaging is expensive. Working capital is tight. Government programs and private banks aren't built to support businesses like ours—unless you have zero risk," the founder explains.

WIC's technical team continues to work alongside Mburu's management, offering mentorship on supply chain management, branding, and governance, support that has been as vital as the capital itself in driving sustainable growth.

Lessons from the Journey

Looking back, the founder reflects: "I used to try to do everything myself. But to go far, you need the right people in the right roles. That's what changed everything—building a strong team."

And for other entrepreneurs? "Resilience isn't a buzzword—it's the difference between staying alive and shutting down. It's painful when you fail. But if you can hang on, adjust, and keep learning, you'll find your way."

In five years, Mburu envisions itself as a regional powerhouse for African grain-based bakery products—with a bold identity, a bigger team, and a lasting legacy for the women and farmers at its core. "Mburu means 'bread' in Wolof," the founder smiles. "But to us, it also means opportunity, identity, and the future of food in Africa."