

INVEST

The Process for Unleashing SME Banking

Executive Summary for Funders





November 2025



Note: This report was made possible through support from the Argidius Foundation on behalf of the Growth Firms Alliance. It does not necessarily reflect the views of other GFA sponsors, who did not participate in its development.

INVEST comprises a set of knowledge products and tools to support Banks and their Funders and Supporters through the process of understanding SME markets and developing profitable value propositions



	Executive summary	Knowledge product	Toolkit	Toolkit guide
	<i>A high-level summary designed to provide an overview of the INVEST Process and accompanying Toolkit</i>	<i>Document that highlights the SME banking gap, and describes INVEST as an effective approach to address it, backed by evaluations and case studies</i>	<i>An open and public digital platform that provides both TA funders and banks with a suite of tools to support them through INVEST Process to unleash SME banking.</i>	<i>An overview guide that introduces the INVEST Toolkit and offers an overview of its contents through descriptive one-pagers for each tool</i>
TA Funders and Providers	 <p>Current piece</p>			
Banks	Find the bank version here .	Find the bank version here .		Find the bank version here .

SMEs are the backbone of emerging economies, yet they remain trapped in the missing middle due to a \$5.7 trillion financing gap

In emerging economies, SMEs represent:

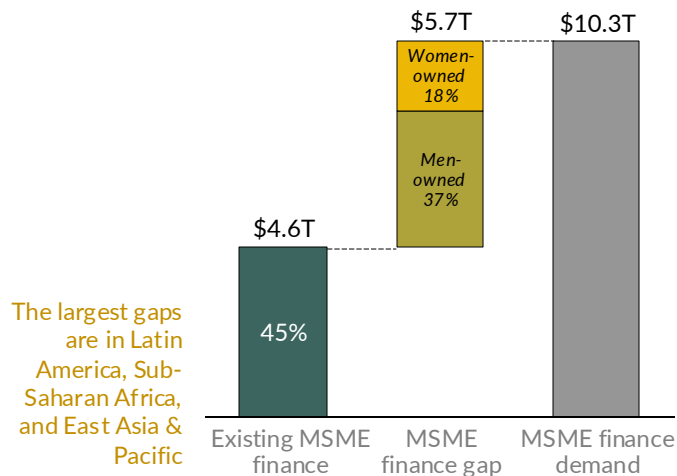
70%
of jobs

70%
of businesses

35%
of GDP

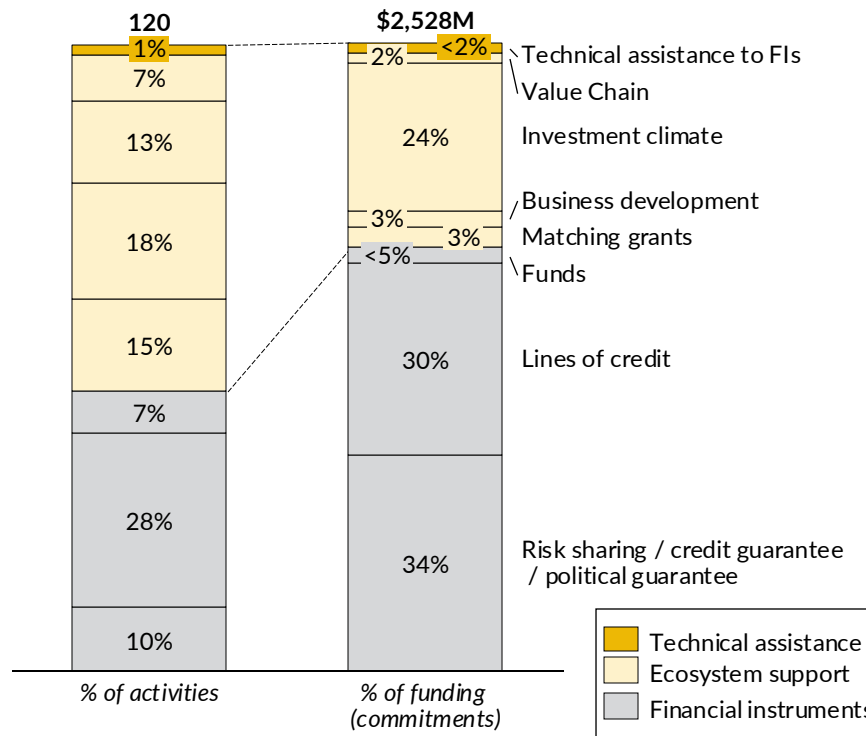
Strengthening SMEs in LMICs supports **production** across value chains, boosts **productivity**, and improves **livelihoods** for underserved groups.

The +\$5.7 trillion annual financing gap leaves SMEs trapped in the missing middle and **unable to access financial products** and **non-financial services** required to grow their businesses



Funders rarely provide technical assistance (TA) to banks, overlooking a key opportunity to strengthen SME banking propositions

World Bank Group* SME interventions evaluated, by type of support
(Projects Evaluated by IEG 2014–18, #, \$M)



- Funders have **focused on providing funding** (e.g., lines of credit) **and advisory services** for ecosystem and institutional change (e.g., business environment reforms)
- TA to financial institutions is often overlooked, though necessary** to help banks improve their SME proposition and provide impactful, long-term SME banking

TA helps lenders to adapt their business models to serve high-impact SME segments in a commercially viable way
British International Investment

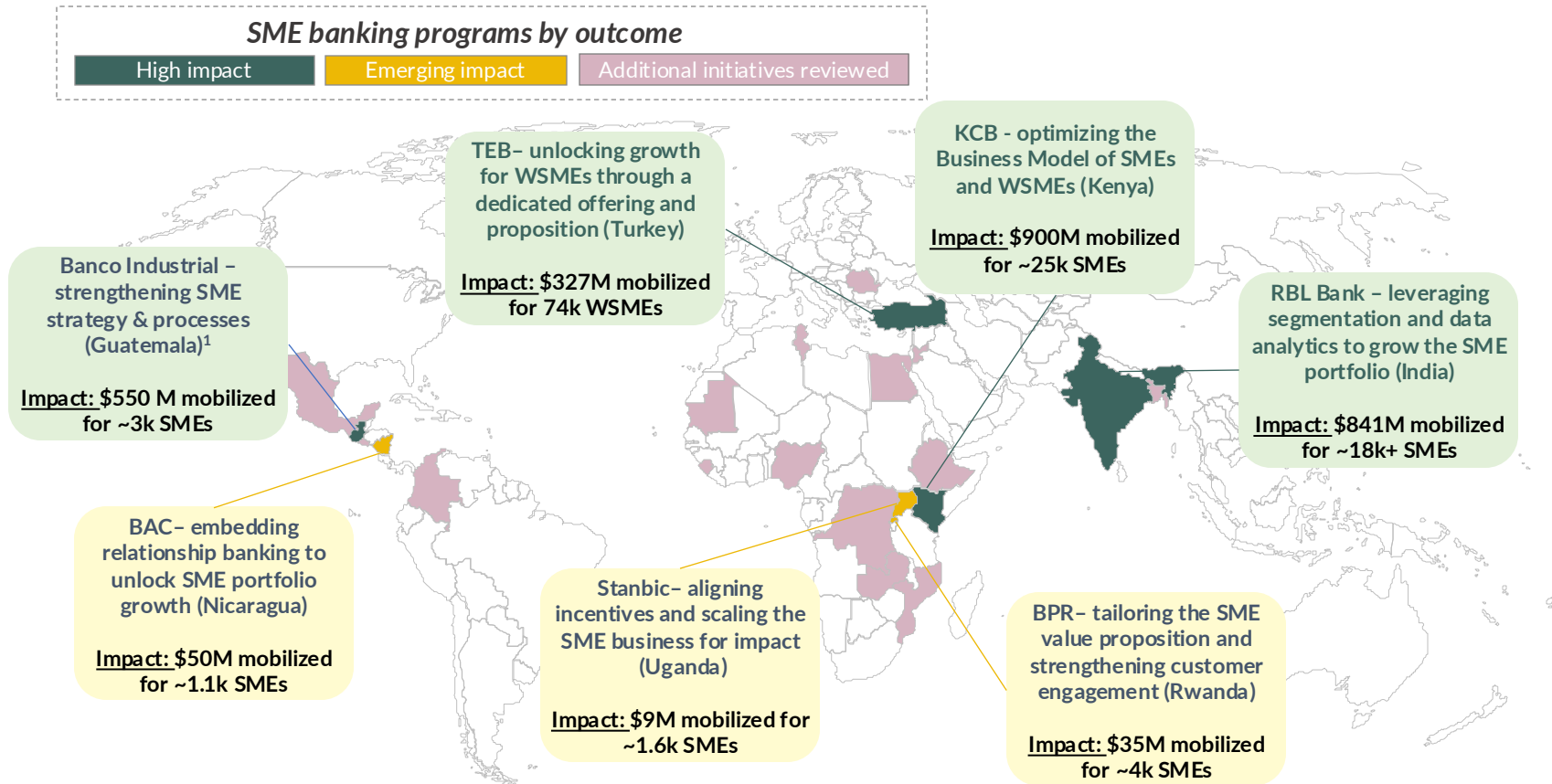
DFIs can play a catalytic role by offering TA focused on capacity building (i.e., staff training, risk assessment development) lowering upfront costs and improving SME banking delivery
FERDI

Note: *Includes interventions carried out by WB Lending, IFC Investment Services, and MIGA

Sources: World Bank Group. (2019). [Support for Small and Medium Enterprises A Synthesis of Evaluative Findings](#); FERDI. (2023). [Financing SMEs in Africa: Rethinking the Role of Development Finance Institutions](#); BII. (2024). [How and why we finance SMEs](#)



After reviewing 20+ TA-supported SME banking programs, we identified what drives successful SME propositions



What good looks like: The exponential growth of KCB's billion-dollar SME banking portfolio



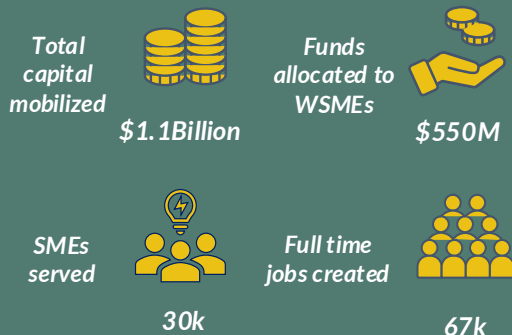
Partners



Outcomes KCB's SME portfolio grew from \$4 million in 2017 to \$1.1 billion in 2025, with a \$2 billion commitment by 2027

By 2025

SMEs are KCB's 2nd most profitable segment



*"It is like walking into a totally different bank."
- Small Enterprise Owner, Female - Machakos*

Context and problem

In Kenya, **SMEs (and in particular, WSMEs)** lacked **financial resources** in large part because **banks did not offer products and services tailored to their needs.**

In 2016, Women's World Banking, with the support of Argidius, partnered with Kenya Commercial Bank (KCB) to conduct a field study to **understand the constraints** that limited banks from better serving SMEs. These included:

- A lack of understanding of SME needs and gaps due to insufficient customer research and lack of gender-disaggregated data
- A fragmented business model under which SMEs were commonly served through multiple points of contact at a bank
- A lack of SME-appropriate lending products—e.g., most were collateral based, which often limited access for SMEs that nonetheless had sufficient cash flow

The assessment indicated that KCB had **tremendous potential to further serve existing customers.** Of the bank's ~1 million MSME account holders at the end of 2016, only 7% had a loan with the bank and only 1% utilized non-financial services offered through the SME membership program "Biashara Club".

What good looks like: The exponential growth of KCB's billion-dollar SME banking portfolio



Partners



Approach

Following the assessment, Argidius, WWB, and CCX supported KCB through a three-year TA program, starting with a 10-branch pilot and reaching 200+ branches by 2020. The TA focused on improving KCB's SME offerings by:

1 Conducting in-depth research and bank diagnostics

KCB began its research phase by:

- Analyzing the market and segmenting WSMEs to understand their unique financial and non-financial needs
- Identifying the bank's capabilities and gaps in serving WSMEs

2 Designing an optimized business model

Building on its research findings, KCB improved the value proposition of its SME offerings by:

- Upgrading the bank's use of data and customer management
- Implementing a new cash-flow-based credit assessment
- Shifting toward a relationship-based management model
- Upgrading the non-financial services offering

3 Building institutional alignment

The bank used a top-down approach to ensure change management at all levels and successfully serve women-owned SMEs by:

- Building staff buy-in through internal communication campaigns
- Providing continuous training to embed a women-focused culture
- Giving the Biashara Club team a strategic position within the bank

Intervention

Strengthening of the portfolio performance management

- Upgraded its CRM system to tag clients separately as individuals or businesses and to track gender-disaggregated data, enabling a clearer understanding of its customer base.
- Designed reports and dashboards to allow staff across levels to regularly monitor financial and non-financial service performance.
- Worked with the Head of SME Banking to determine KPIs and the reports IT and MIS teams should provide to support SME tracking.

Implementation of a cash-flow based credit assessment

- Shifted away from collateral-based credit assessments by equipping relationship managers with cash-flow-based credit assessment models, visiting businesses to build deeper understanding, and introducing credit panels at the branch level to strengthen assessments.

Development of a relationship-based banking model

- Developed a relationship management model which enabled KCB to foster relationships with SMEs, especially WSMEs.
- Trained 78 staff in relationship management throughout pilots; fully rolled out training to 560+ staff via KCB's training academy.

Expansion of KCB's non-financial services

- Transformed KCB's Biashara Club into an effective provider of non-financial services offering business networking and workshops, informed by better needs assessments and a partnership with the African Management Institute (AMI)



Why don't all SME banking programs match KCB's success?

The challenges and lessons learned of building and growing SME segments

Key challenges¹

Lacking incentives to align priorities

Taking a product-first approach

Disregarding change management

Description

Even when banks commit to SME banking, they often lack clear internal incentives and accountability to treat it as a strategic priority. As a result, SME business lines underperform or fail to reach their full potential.

Many banks and their backers take a product-first approach to SME banking. Launching generic offerings without appropriate market, institutional, and client level analysis. This limits the ability to develop coherent and compelling value proposition that resonate with banks and SMEs.

Banks often launch SME initiatives without ensuring that they can manage the organizational change this requires. Without strong change management, these efforts lose momentum and fail to scale.

Lessons learned

A

Focus efforts on banks with strong internal incentives to develop and expand SME banking

B

Follow a process of Research & Diagnostics, Pilot and Refinement, and finally Rollout

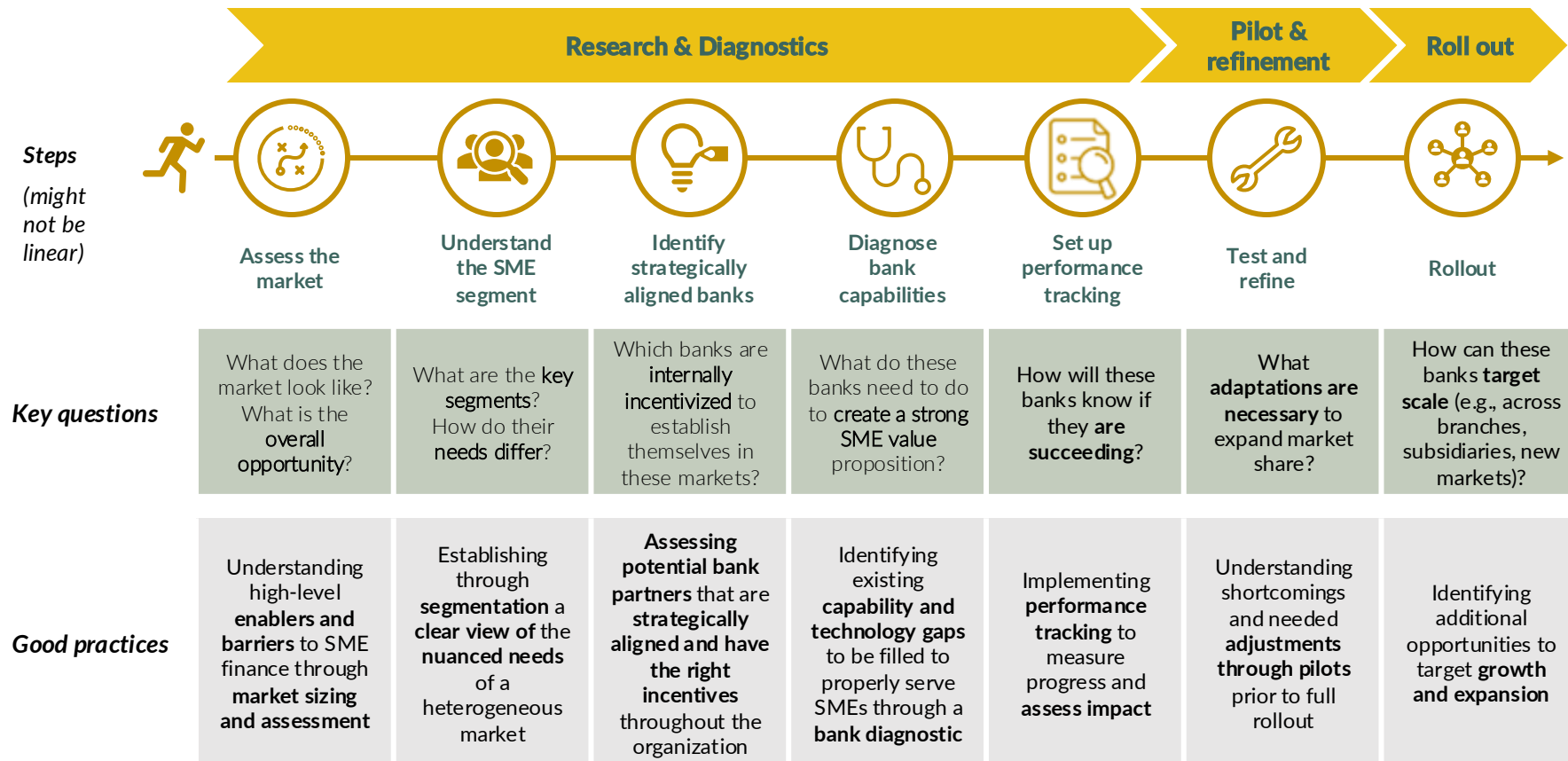
C

Manage internal change to sustain SME momentum

¹Note: These challenges are based on insights from interviews with banks and TA funders, as well as a review of SME banking program documents.



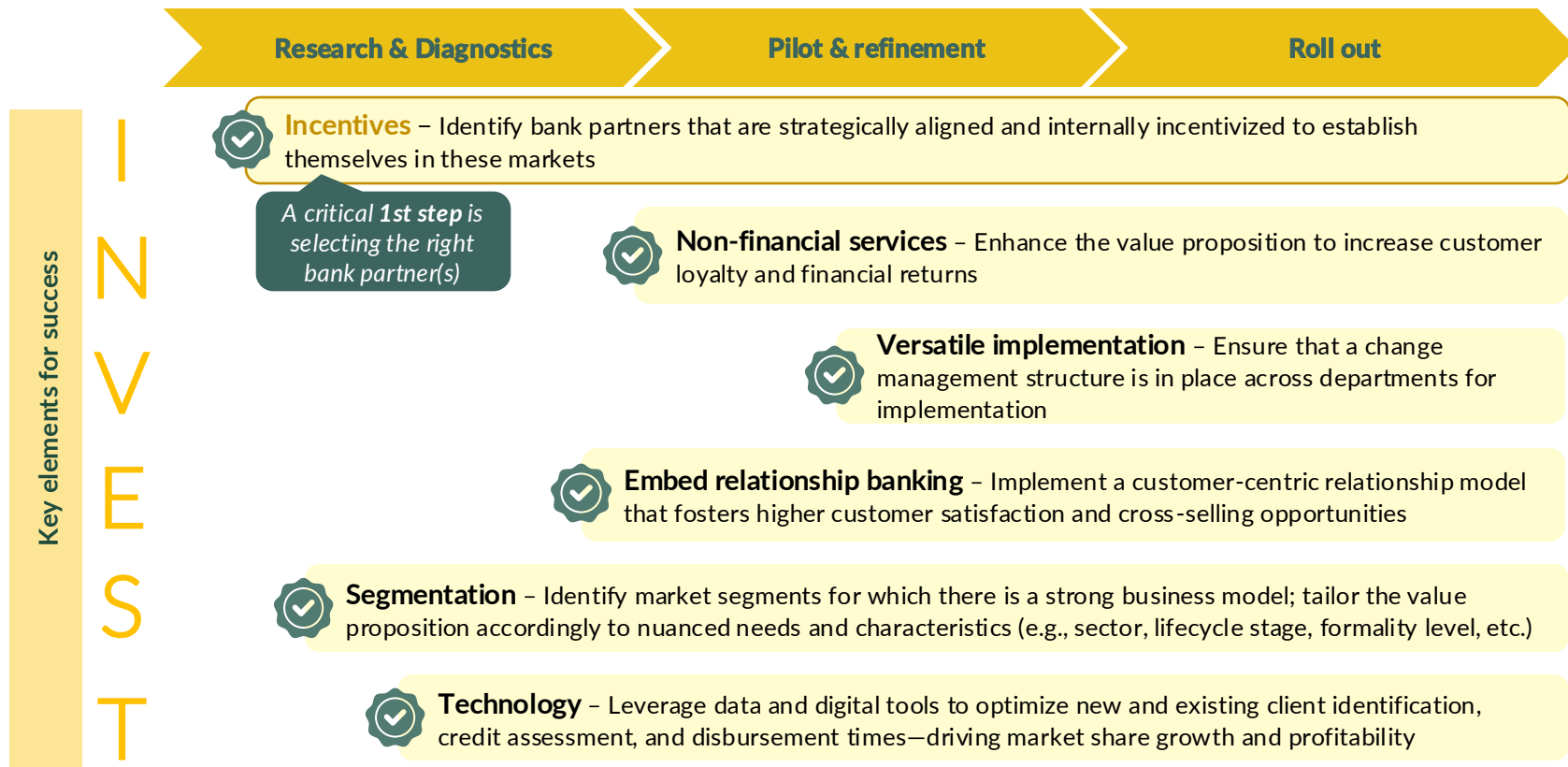
INVEST is a process that supports funders and TA providers through the key steps and critical questions at each stage of the SME banking journey



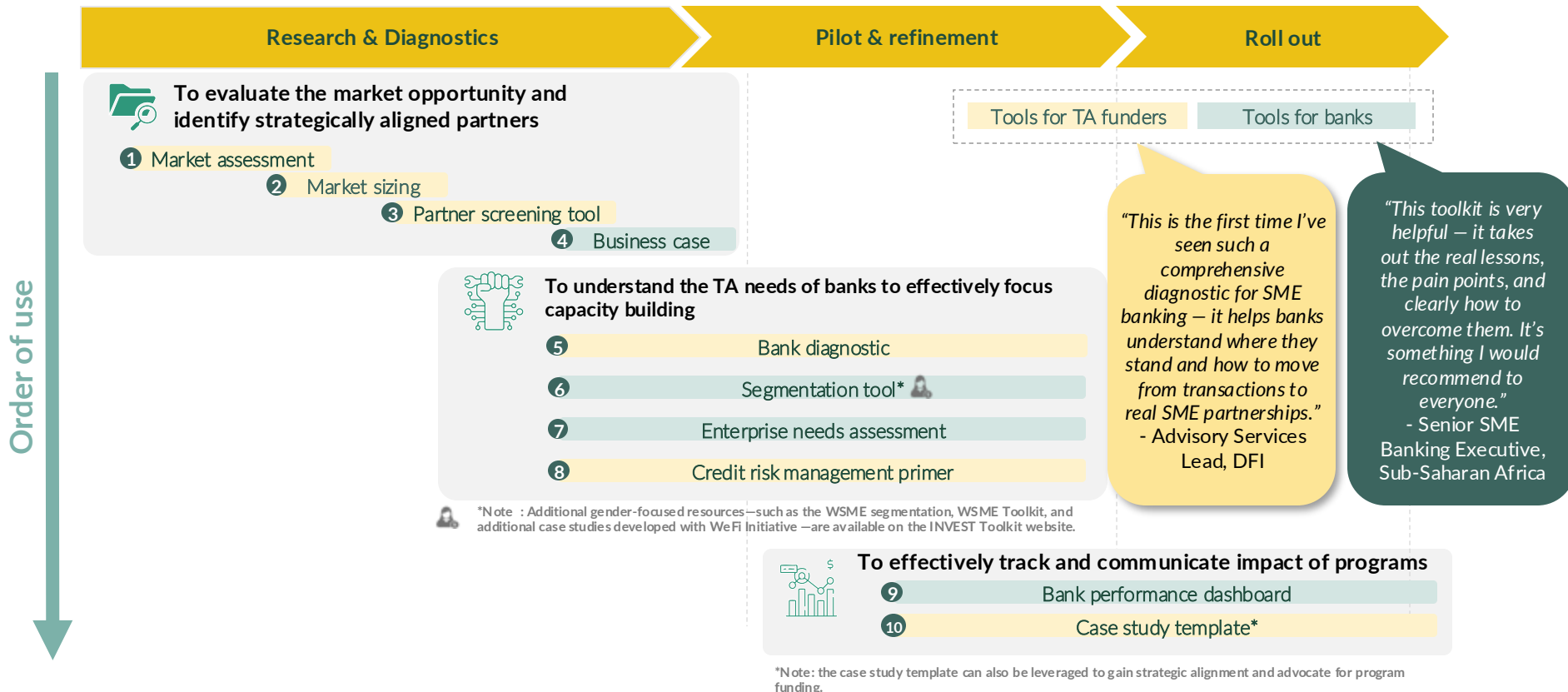
Note: The INVEST framework provides a simplified and generalized representation of elements of success applicable to the SME banking journey. It is intended for guiding purposes.



The INVEST approach highlights effective SME banking is a process, not a product, built on key success factors



The INVEST Toolkit provides funders and TA providers with tools to apply the INVEST process and strengthen SME banking practices across diverse contexts



The INVEST Toolkit [can be found here](#)



We extend our gratitude to all partner institutions, funders, and banks whose collaboration and insights made this work possible

Consortium partners



Participating institutions / banks



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*For more
information visit*



Thank you!

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