

Machakos Co-operative Union – helping Kenyan home-based workers’ groups grow stronger

Home-based workers produce goods or services in or near their homes. They sell these goods locally and in global markets. They are often invisible and undervalued. In most countries, they are excluded from labour legislation, social protection and have low and insecure incomes. To overcome these hardships, home-based worker organisations around the globe have put into practice different social and solidarity economy (SSE) organising models. These SSE models value principles like democratic ownership and control of the organisation to make it accountable to its members, self-help, self-reliance and the building of solidarity amongst the members of the organisation. By following these principles, many SSE organisations have built better access to markets and members’ income has improved.



Mary Nanzai Munyoli training her home-based workers’ group with material on organising and democratic principles.

Machakos Co-operative Union (MCU)

The [Machakos Cooperative Union](#) (MCU), a member of HomeNet International (HNI), is working hard to change the negative view of the Kenya informal economy highlighted in the ILO reports. (See box)

Formed in the 1960s to help small coffee farmers “grow and market their coffee,” 20 years later it expanded to provide women with other ways to support their families, like encouraging handicrafts.

According to the MCU, it now represents 81 cooperative societies with more than 70,000 individual producers and 26 women’s groups with a combined membership of 4,000 home-based workers (HBWs) that make handicrafts, rear livestock or are small farmers.

Key to the successes of the women’s groups are common SSE principles that unite them:

- The groups are created for and by their members around common needs
- Leaders are accountable to the members of the group
- Membership is voluntary but members must be committed
- Members help themselves and each other
- Members meet regularly to share problems, find solutions and support each other.

The informal economy in Kenya

[A 2021 ILO study](#) on Kenya found that more than 8 out of 10 workers are employed in the informal economy.

A 1972 ILO report (quoted in the 2021 ILO study) proposed measures to assist the sector to help move workers into the formal sector.

ILO’s 2021 report reiterated the problems informal workers were experiencing in 1972:

- Informal workers lack training in a wide range of skills like marketing and innovating their products so they lack competitiveness.
- Most do not advertise
- They are financially constrained because they are unable to access loans to advance their businesses.

HomeNet International (HNI) spoke to two members of different women's groups affiliated to MCU to find out how their groups function and the role of the MCU.

Meeting regularly as a women's group is important, says Mary Nzanzai Munyoli, a member of the 30-strong Wumiisyo wa Aka Women's Group since 2004, and current chairlady. Group members whose major focus is making sisal baskets for sale, gather once a week on a Friday; on Tuesdays their Village Saving Loans group affiliated to Moko Sacco Savings and Credit Co-Operative Society meets. Once a month, they get together to talk about micro finances.

Getting mutual agreement in their group is essential, says Mary. "Some agree [on an issue] and some disagree. So we have to make an effort to bring each member near." Elections for leaders of her group happen annually.

Bead-making and tie-dying fabric are the key products of

Support from MCU

"My group is strong because of MCU," says Mary. It helped group members find new markets through MCU's online shop. Here they can get 500 shillings for their sisal bags on international markets instead of 200 shillings in their local market. This meant they could put their savings into MCU's Savings and Credit Cooperative Society, Moko Sacco.

They could then borrow against their savings and diversify their activities away from just making sisal handbags. Now many have livestock like goats and chickens, grow vegetables and bananas and what they don't eat, they sell to local markets.

Groups get other benefits from the MCU like training. Mary's group has benefited from training "on food security, fertiliser, the best seeds to plant, and how to plant them." They are also trained by government agricultural officers. All this has strengthened their farming efforts.

Living in a water-scarce part of the country, members have been taught to re-use their grey water for their vegetables while parts of the sisal plant that are not used in bag-making, are used for compost and mixed with animal dung to make manure which is put back into their land to boost its productivity. Individuals are also being encouraged to grow their own 1-acre sisal lots to ensure a steady source of the material.

Juliana talks of how MCU has also trained them "on organising and maintaining our group; making a group farm - we have benefited from them so much."

Most importantly, being part of MCU has put them in touch with other women's groups nearby. "We do bench-marking

the 42-strong Seven Sisters women's group. Secretary of the group, Juliana Kikui, and a friend launched the group with five others in 2013 and it has grown hugely since then. The organisational structure is similar to Mary's: leaders are elected every two years, members meet weekly, "we have just a few apologies," says Juliana.

Their umbrella organisation, MCU, holds an Annual General Meeting (AGM) once a year. Every group, regardless of its size, sends two delegates to the AGM, mostly the chairlady and secretary of each group. Some come as individuals but from 2023, all groups must send delegates.

Here the groups' representatives hear what the MCU has done, how MCU spent the money it received, "so that members know what is going on." The AGM reports on its saving arm, the Moko Sacco, and "if there are people with loans, [whether] they have paid."



Juliana Kikui with members of her home-based workers' group displaying the fabric they tie-dyed.

with groups in Machakos," says Juliana. "They learn from us and we go to learn from them. When we visited Mary's group, we got an interest in making baskets; and when they came to visit us, they also got interested in doing beadwork."

Juliana speaks of how MCU has also helped them to plan how to use their income. "[Before] we were dividing our money immediately after selling," she says. "They have made us understand the meaning of saving, having a bank account and saving our own money." And from watching other groups she has taught herself how to sell and market her products and now has "become better than the others. I can call a customer and persuade that person to buy," she says.

This skill came in handy during the Covid-19 pandemic when their normal markets dried up. Her group managed to secure a contract with local schools to provide each and every classroom with beaded serviette-holders, important in the drive to keep hands safe from Covid-19.

Mary and Juliana's stories are like other women from MCU who belong to different women's groups in Kenya. These women told [WIEGO](#) in 2015 of the benefits they had reaped from being part of MCU. Through a training module on the new constitution, Nora Mueni Nyile learnt of her rights to access land. She secured some land that had belonged to her father and her life changed. She was able to supplement her income from basket-making by planting crops, buying a goat and chickens.

Lydia John, the coordinator of another women's group described to WIEGO how she had learnt better techniques to make baskets and the importance of quality. "Before, you were weaving without knowing what you were doing," Lydia told WIEGO. "Now, you are counting your hours to make sure you are paid enough."

Social benefits:

Both Mary and Juliana agree that being part of their women's groups and MCU has done more than just improve their standard of living.

Belonging to these groups has "broadened my mind," says Juliana. "We have different ages of women and when we meet, we share a lot. We have very many challenges in our houses, our families; we share and get bigger knowledge." Mary concurs.

These organisations "have given me power, they have given me a voice," says Juliana. "We are together, sharing ideas, we learn from others and they learn from us. Many people come to me and ask how to make these products, they want to know how they can improve their group in selling things. I'm a secretary even in my village."

Women like Mary, Juliana, Nora and Lydia are living proof of the benefits of a social solidarity economy.



An agricultural officer engaged by MCU training a home-based workers' group on the use of seeds.



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HOMENET INTERNATIONAL (HNI) is a global network of membership-based workers' organisations representing thousands of home-based workers (HBWs) around the world. In February 2021, 36 HBW organisations from 20 countries became the first affiliate members to join the organisation, representing more than 600 000 HBWs. The network aims to achieve the following: raise visibility and gain recognition of home-based workers (HBWs) as workers, build and provide solidarity amongst HBWs around common issues and use the power of a global voice to influence governments and employers globally. HomeNet International held its first Congress and was officially launched on February 23 and 24, 2021.

**Resources
Social and Solidarity Economy
(SSE)**

HomeNet International- Social and Solidarity Economy
<https://www.homenetinternational.org/social-solidarity-economy/>

ILO - Social and Solidarity Economy:
<https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/sse/lang-en/index.htm>