



Mathima members weave sisal baskets that are sold via the Machakos Co-operative Union. Photo: C. Wills

MCU Machakos, Kenya

African smallholder farmers fought for the right to organize, and in the 1950s, were finally allowed to promote and register cooperatives for cash crops such as coffee. The Machakos Co-operative Union Ltd. (MCU) was established in the 1960s in Kenya. Its original aim was to market coffee for producers. Today, MCU is an umbrella organization for 79 affiliated primary organizations serving over 60,000 individuals in the Machakos and Makeni counties (comprised of 15 districts). It supports workers through the production, processing and global marketing of their diverse, high quality agricultural and handicraft products. These include coffee, cotton, dairy, horticulture, and sisal handicrafts. MCU also provides a range of services and helps leverage partner support on behalf of its members.

Some of MCU's recent activities include:

- Formation of village saving and loan associations for women's groups
- Agribusiness projects to ensure sustainability
- Eradication of poverty through adult literacy classes
- Climate change prevention and mitigation projects (e.g. construction of energy saving stoves, planting of tree nurseries)
- Establishment of HIV/AIDS support groups
- Capacity building on record keeping

Among MCU's affiliates are 26 women's groups that produce stylish sisal baskets (as well as sisal plates, tablemats, hats, floor mats, etc.), which MCU markets internationally.

One of the major problems facing producer groups is inadequate raw materials due to climate change. MCU has a plan to grow 100,000 sisal plants to help overcome the scarcity, and has created demonstration plots for all its women's groups. One group, Kamakya – a cluster of three groups with a total of 120 members, 90 of whom are active – has planted over 10,000 sisal bulbils (seedlings) and expects to plant many more in the next rainy season. Each group member is also planting 100 sisal plants on their own farm.

A new MCU initiative involves establishing a coffee mill for which cooperatives have raised a third of the funds. The mill has been ordered. MCU is seeking strategic partners to make the project successful. In addition, MCU has undertaken the establishment of coffee farms to promote the involvement of women and youth.

Export and Marketing

Since 1988, the MCU's Export Department has been assisting handicraft and local women groups to market their products both locally and internationally. Services include pricing of products, quality control, packing and labeling, preparing export documents and coordinating payment to producers and buyers. Research, education and training to assist in product development are also offered.

Primary cooperatives benefit from the union's links to international networks such as the World Fair Trade Organization, which enforces adherence to a code of practice that includes fair payment for products, accountability and transparency, care for the environment, and no use of child labour. MCU is also a member of World Fair Trade in Africa and the Kenya Federation For Alternative Trade (KEFAT). The latter organization was a partner in WIEGO's Women Organizing for Fair Trade project, which is detailed in *Trading Our Way Up: Women Organizing for Fair Trade* (see below).



MCU's original aim was to market coffee for producers but has grown to support producers of agricultural and handicraft products. Photo: MCU

The Union has done a lot of projects in collaboration with its customers abroad to provide assistance to MCU affiliate members. These include:

- With funding from a customer organization called Peter Cowley Africa Trust in UK, MCU established a dispensary and a weir to serve the Mathima women's group community; the same organization assisted women's groups with beehives.
- An ongoing partnership with Swedish Cooperative Centre, an NGO, is helping to make possible computerization, establishment of tree nurseries, enhanced youth and women participation, greater food security, certifications, training and education.
- Through a German customer, El-Puente, 1965 households belonging to 23 women's groups working with MCU in drought-affected areas received maize.
- With support from the University of Mexico, MCU set up the Kisesini Dispensary to serve all the groups from the south. Women in this area previously had no local assistance when they were in labour or had sick children as the nearest hospital was 30 km away.

Relevant Publications

We Are Workers Too! Organizing Home-Based Workers in the Global Economy by Celia Mather. 2010. WIEGO Organizing Series.

Trading Our Way Up: Women Organizing for Fair Trade by Elaine Jones, Sally Smith and Carol Wills. 2012. WIEGO.

All WIEGO publications and resources are available on our website, www.wiego.org, and can be downloaded for free.



Showcasing handcrafts produced by members. Photo: MCU

Cooperatives for Informal Workers' Rights and Sustainable Livelihoods!

Cooperatives create jobs and help improve livelihoods. But cooperatives are more than economic entities; they are an essential part of an alternative economy in which strength lies in social solidarity. Cooperatives allow workers to raise their voices together in the fight for recognition, political power and social protection. Just as pooled resources can achieve better economic outcomes and offer more stable livelihoods for informal workers, united voices can create political change and improve social standing.

WIEGO supports informal workers' cooperatives in their struggle for a better life.