

Supporting Self-Organization of Home-Based Workers in Africa: Lessons Learned

Vanessa Pillay and Edwin Bett

Key Points

- 1 Most home-based workers (HBWs) in Africa did not initially self-identify as workers, whether they are own-account or contracted workers. The HBWs view themselves as micro-enterprises primarily seeking market access rather than as workers seeking recognition to advance their worker rights.
- 2 At first home-based workers appeared to lack agency, as they deferred all decisions about their livelihoods to various intermediaries and coordinators. However, they are gradually challenging the unequal power relationships as their consciousness is raised.
- 3 Maintaining a strategy of organizing for movement-building is important beyond funded project activities. At the end of the [FLOW project](#), the WIEGO Organization and Representation Programme supported an informal regional network to maintain contact among all the HBW organizations that were found through the project's mapping process. Recognizing that projects end but the need for long-term organizing to build a strong movement remains, the organizations were encouraged to continue organizing and mobilizing at a local level.



*Coffee Producer, Kenya.
Photo: WIEGO*

Introduction

We have learned significant lessons in the course of either direct organizing or indirectly supporting the organizing of home-based workers in five countries in the region – Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda – over a period of 10 years, beginning with WIEGO’s 2012 FLOW¹ project, until 2021, recruiting affiliates to HomeNet International (HNI) and building the Africa Regional Platform. These lessons concern power relationships between home-based workers (HBWs) and intermediary organizations; power relationships between HBWs and political allies or influencers that are associated with HBW groups in one form or another; and power relationships between HBWs and administrative convenors.

The objectives of the [FLOW project](#) were to deepen WIEGO’s knowledge of home-based workers and their organizations in Africa and to strengthen connections and solidarity between home-based workers within Africa and globally. It was difficult to map home-based workers at first, as many of them are hidden in their homes and villages and only known to the agents who interact with them in different capacities. WIEGO engaged with the World Fair Trade Organization and its affiliates, the Kenya Federation for Alternative Trade (KEFAT) and the Uganda Federation for Alternative Trade (UGAFAT), to meet the mainly fair trade producer groups who did not identify as workers but as supplier groups. Through their traditional weaving and carving skills, their products linked them through different intermediaries to often-unknown markets.

Finding and supporting the organizing of home-based workers was not possible in three brief years. However, the larger goal was maintained, and several capacity-building and networking activities were arranged in support of the goal of strengthening connections and solidarity among home-based workers.

Sustaining an Informal Network while Raising Funds to Support Regional Movement-Building

By the end of the FLOW project, several capacity-building activities had helped to equip community facilitators (see [Leadership & Business Skills for Informal Women Workers in Fair Trade – A Case Study](#)) and many more networking opportunities had been created for home-based workers in the region and globally. WIEGO’s Organization and Representation Programme supported a loose regional

network that maintained minimal contact but managed to nominate a representative to attend the International Labour Conference in 2016 for a discussion on global supply chains. Fast forward to 2021 and a now-active Africa Regional Platform has managed to sustain strategic goals until the capacity to meet them has become possible. Among other initiatives, it has identified the need for a study on craft supply chains in Africa as a mechanism to not only better understand the HBW products’ supply chain actors but also identify other HBWs within the five countries and beyond through the creation of a database of HBWs.

Early in 2018 organizing support was again initiated in Kenya and Uganda to reconnect with the home-based workers in the two national networks, with the view to raise consciousness of their worker identity and organize as independent worker organizations.

1 Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women, a project funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

A key observation during the FLOW project was that home-based workers did not identify themselves as workers (see the section on Africa in the case study, [Strengthening the Movement of Home-based Workers](#)). A groundbreaking political decision by the KEFAT leadership to support the formation of an independent home-based worker organization led and controlled by home-based workers was the catalyst for HomeNet Kenya, which was launched December 10, 2020. By 2018, UGAFAT had collapsed, but some of the leaders have remained active in the lead-up to the formation of a new network, which is mainly around Kampala but has a plan to expand the organization nationally.

An important organizing lesson to draw out of this approach is that activity-based projects without a broader movement-building vision could deflate the momentum if they are not well managed. Efforts by WIEGO's Organization and Representation Programme to maintain the connection and build a rapport with the home-based worker organizations in Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa and Uganda between funded projects has helped in the progressive building of a home-based workers' movement in the region led by home-based workers in the above four countries and with the later addition of Tanzania.



Gcobisa Jingqi, Sophumelela Cooperative, Cape Town. 2018.
Photo: Sofia Trevino

Power in Organizing

Organizing is about building workers' power to achieve concrete improvements in their own lives, workers realizing their own power and altering power relationships between themselves and those who wield power over them.¹

The main lesson that we have learned in this regard is that HBWs tend to defer power to others, mainly for economic reasons, as they depend on several individuals and entities to sell their products. There is also a clear gender dynamic, especially between male coordinators or administrative convenors and intermediaries and predominantly female-dominated producer groups. We also observe unequal power relations between women who are politically connected and the majority of vulnerable women in producer groups. These relationships are expressed as the powerful lead figures being the spokespersons or founders of the producer groups; some of the lead figures are not producers themselves but are well positioned to speak on behalf of the women who do the actual production. Examples of these relationships are evident among self-help groups in Uganda and in Turkana County in Kenya, and among several groups in Tanzania and South Africa.

Often the lead figures have played a role in establishing the groups on whose behalf they act and speak. This may not have ill-intent, but it does stifle workers' power and self-actualization.

A second layer of unequal power relationships that we have observed is between the coordinators of associations and groups of HBWs. This was evident when country-level working groups were first established in Kenya and Uganda to continue the organizing efforts at the end of the FLOW project in 2015. Most members of the working groups were full-time staff of support or marketing organizations and not HBWs themselves. Changing the dynamic between coordinator dominance and HBWs expressing their own voices is a work in progress, as observed in the gradual shifting of the roles and responsibilities of members of the Africa Regional Platform.

The Absence of Organizers

Organizers as activists supporting workers to build their confidence and power to speak and act for themselves are not common in the emerging HBW movement in Africa. In the absence of organizers, the capacity for self-organizing among HBWs is a priority for building the HBW movement.

The build-up to the mobilizing and organizing of HBW groups can be traced to the report on mapping of home-based workers in Kenya (2014) that identified several organizations working with HBWs and included: The Kenya Federation for Alternative Trade (KEFAT); Organization for Youth Empowerment (O-YES); Partner Africa; Association of East African Women Entrepreneurs; Kenya National Federation of Jua Kali Association; Kick Trading Ltd; Kipenzi Designs; and Machakos Cooperative Union Ltd. The report noted that organizations that had been identified as supporting or doing some work with HBWs were doing so for reasons other than the fact that they were HBWs.

The HBWs interviewed did not consider these organizations as a challenge to their voice and visibility. When asked to rank some of the challenges they face as HBWs, marketing of their products ranked first followed by poor-quality tools and inappropriate technology, in that order. The challenge of getting organized was ranked lowest. A similar situation was noted in mapping reports in Egypt and Uganda carried out about the same time as the report in Kenya.

1 Recruiting Informal Workers into Democratic Workers' Organisations. Organising In The Informal Economy Resource Books for Organisers Number 1. <https://www.wiego.org/resources/recruiting-informal-workers-democratic-workers'-organisations-icc1>

The opportunities that come with organizing have been very remote to the HBWs and, therefore, there is a need to further support the mobilizing and organizing processes among the HBWs. Since 2018, this process has grown both in strategy and reach with the following observations noted:

- At the beginning of 2018 and during part of 2019 the process was centrally carried out, with the mobilization done by one person, supported by two cluster leaders who were linked to the organization. To this effect the reach at each engagement was approximately 30 participants at a cost of about USD 600 per engagement.
- In the period 2019 and 2020 the process was carried out by two cluster area leaders from each of the six clusters with a reach of about 90 participants at a cost of about USD 600.
- In the period 2020 and 2021 the process expanded to the HBW leaders within the clusters working closely with the organization, with an increased reach to 120 participants and beyond at each engagement at a cost of about USD 600.



Susan Namuyaba from Envirojewels.
Photo: Betty Lunkuse

In this regard the role of the different coordinators or administrative convenors based in supporting or marketing organizations has been monumental in supporting the mobilizing and organizing activities among the HBW groups. Much as the above is so, there is a need either for appointed organizers or increasing the organizing capacity among HBWs to take a lead in furthering their objectives. Working groups were established in Kenya and Uganda in January 2018 to lead the process of reaching out to home-based workers beyond the fair-trade network of producer groups to build national home-based workers' networks. Coordinators who were part of the working groups often spoke on behalf of HBWs in workshops and on other platforms. HBWs initially deferred to the coordinators, but they are gradually building the confidence to articulate their own issues, which they have done on several occasions. Through the organization-building of the Africa Regional Platform, HBWs are encouraged to speak for themselves in meetings and workshops, especially in the webinars organized by HomeNet International for workers to share their experiences.

As the mobilizing and organizing activities happen closer to the HBW groups, two feats are achieved: reaching out to more HBW groups and building the capacity of the HBW group leaders to better understand home-based work; and recognition of the need to be organized and take a leadership role within the networks.



*Basket weavers producer group, Lodwah, Kenya.
Photo: WIEGO*

Home-Based Worker Capacity-Building

The mobilizing and organizing activities among the coordinators and HBW leaders have yielded mixed results as follows:

- A number of coordinators have come to the realization that they have indeed been an impediment to the full realization of HBWs' potential, not only in leadership roles but in economic decisions and opportunities. Supporting organizations often made decisions on behalf of the HBWs, including representation during forums, when and how to engage in forums, price decisions on products and participation in organizers' forums. Through the capacity-building training offered, most of the HBW organizations and leadership affiliate directly with networks so they can make independent decisions on representation.
- The identification of leadership at the network level was based on cluster/regional representation, with each seconding two leaders to the national committee, followed by the election of the national executive committee from among the national committee members. The scenario changed over time, and the HBWs have been able to elect the national executive committee directly from themselves. In HomeNet Kenya, for example, there are six HBW leaders represented at the National Executive Committee level as well as two supporting coordinators with no portfolio. It is envisaged that their role will end in the next election.



Violah Nampala and Hadijah Ahmed of Ngalo Buwereza Organisation Uganda facilitating worker education on HBW rights. Photo: Ngalo Buwereza Organisation Uganda

Recruiting Affiliates in the Lead-up to the Launch of HomeNet International

A new dynamic emerged as the recruitment of affiliates to the new international network began. The provision in the HomeNet International interim constitution for individual home-based worker organizations to affiliate created a keen interest among home-based worker organizations as well as among organizations that have worked with HBWs mainly for the purposes of market access. In the first round of applications leading up to the launch, eight of the eleven applications received met the criteria as democratic worker organizations.

A particularly interesting observation was the case of a social enterprise providing marketing support to disadvantaged artisans that had applied for affiliation. A meeting with the enterprise board and producer leaders to discuss the application for affiliation clarified that the home-based producers were not represented in the organization's decision-making structures. In the course of the meeting it also became clear that the producers were completely dependent on the social enterprise for all aspects of representation, so they felt that the social enterprise could represent them in the global network. This was not an isolated example of an instance where home-based workers have deferred their voice due to economic dependence. In the cited example, the social enterprise accepted that the producers should

affiliate directly to HomeNet International by themselves but offered to support the different groups to organize themselves better to meet the criteria for democratic organization.

There were several applications for affiliation to HomeNet International before its launch and afterwards from organizations that appear to consider affiliation to the global network more

prestigious than being part of building the national and regional home-based workers' movement.

The organizing lesson in this case is to emphasize the significance of home-based workers having strong representation at the national level in order to negotiate for inclusive policies and practices that would improve their livelihoods in the local context.



*Fair Trade Principles followed by the producer groups associated with KEFAT.
Photo: Vanessa Pillay*

Building Structures

As efforts to build the movement of HBWs continues, it is important to build and maintain democratic worker organizations, a task that has not been easy with the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic. All the plans for national, regional and global in-person activities to this end had to be suspended quite abruptly in the beginning. However, we soon turned to virtual platforms to continue the organizing and organization-building efforts.

What began as monthly virtual meetings to keep track of the economic, social and health impact of the pandemic on home-based workers' lives and livelihood developed into an active representative Africa Regional Platform. The platform played a significant role in trying to find solutions and bring relief to HBWs amid the pandemic. It was also a structure for accountability and representation between the region and HomeNet International, facilitating the process of active regional engagement in all governance and consultation processes, including the constitution, affiliation, programme priorities and a more-inclusive launching congress than would have been possible in person.

The Africa Regional Platform has subsequently evolved from having broad terms of reference to support HBW movement-building in the region to convening its first strategic planning workshop and emerging with a comprehensive five-year plan for 2022–2026.

This way of working is new to most small local organizations, whose members are not familiar with working on mandates from the local to the regional level and regularly reporting back from the regional to the local level. The Africa Regional Platform has expanded the representation by countries and agreed upon: the inclusion of different categories of representatives; established national organizations; emerging national organizations; and area-based clusters and HNI affiliates.



Viola Nampala presenting HBWs' highlights and challenges after the FLOW project, Kampala Workshop, January 2018.
Photo: Vanessa Pillay

Challenges Experienced

Equipping home-based workers to effectively communicate their messages to a wider audience remains a challenge. The Africa Regional Platform supported by WIEGO's Organization and Representation Programme facilitated capacity-building workshops and selected younger members who are familiar with several social media platforms to lead local communications, but it does not seem to have been successful.

During the initial COVID-19 lock-down restrictions in all countries, Africa Regional Platform initiated training on the use of cell phones for basic organizing and keeping in touch with members. Most home-based workers found the training useful, as they had not thought of their cell phones as organizing tools.

The use of WhatsApp platforms for continuous organizing, communication, training and meetings via voice notes has been most effective. There are active local and national WhatsApp groups, where home-based workers keep in touch to discuss work and organizational matters and to hold regular meetings using voice notes. This is a way to ensure transparency and build accountability through regular active communication.

The Africa Regional Platform also has an active WhatsApp group to discuss and share national, regional and international updates on home-based workers. Members set rules to ensure the integrity of these platforms as organizational representative platforms for transparency and accountability.

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*Violah Nampala, member of Buwambo Ngalo Women's Group and chairperson of Ngalo Buwereza Organization, the national home-based workers organization registered in February 2022.
Photo: WIEGO*

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About WIEGO

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on empowering the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy to secure their livelihoods. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities, rights, protection and voice. WIEGO promotes change by improving statistics and expanding knowledge on the informal economy, building networks and capacity among informal worker organizations and, jointly with the networks and organizations, influencing local, national and international policies.

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