



Royal Academy
of Engineering



Empowering
handcraft
women with
entrepreneurial
skills in
Uganda



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Project

Critical success factors for facilitating building manufacturing capacity for handcraft women in Uganda

Awardee

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Challenge

The traditional art of handcrafting has been passed from generation to generation for many years. From jewellery to weaving, handcrafting is a predominantly female trade and often the only way that families can make a living. In Uganda, women make up 67% of the labour force¹, but many of them face legal impediments, established cultural norms about women's roles and unequal demands of domestic responsibilities that can hamper their business progress. The lack of business expertise is a barrier to starting and managing their own craft making businesses. There is an opportunity for them to develop their business skills and examine how their manufacturing processes can be improved.

Project solution

To empower women in Uganda's informal craft sector, researchers from the UK, Malawi, and Uganda sought ways to foster their entrepreneurial skills and apply operational principals widely used in manufacturing, in a

¹ The World Bank. https://tcdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/344319cd?country=BRA&indicator=28116&viz=line_chart&years=1990,2019

local context. In a research trip to Uganda, the team interviewed 84 craft women in informal settlements in and around Kampala to identify critical success factors and barriers they faced in growing their business. They found that many resources were wasted due to the lack of standardisation, which contributed to time and financial loss. Following their findings, the project team ran a workshop for 20 of the women, training them in standardised procedures as well as building and costing of their products. The team hoped that the women would go on to train more people in their communities.

Interdisciplinary collaboration

The project brought together academics from engineering, quality management, economics and business with community groups in

Sustainable Development Goals



Kampala. While building entrepreneurial and engineering capacity were important goals in the project, the researchers thought it paramount that they were not simply instructing the craft women to improve their operational methods. Working closely and building partnerships with these women allowed the team to tailor their approach for the local circumstances, facilitating long-term changes to methods of manufacturing within the community.

Impact

Upon revisiting the community six months later, the researchers saw a transformation in the handcraft women's ways of working, including outsourcing of non-specialised tasks, product standardisation and the use of alternative materials that are local and more sustainable. Some craft women had also started to train other women in their community with the entrepreneurial skills they had learned, creating knowledge transfer and developing role models for the next generation.

The researchers also established a business hub with the Resilience Africa Network at Makerere University, where 20 craft women were provided with digital training once a week for three months, building on their branding and online presence. This allowed them to reach a much wider pool of potential customers to help expand their businesses. Since this training, the

craft women have created WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages to showcase their work online.

Future plans

There are now plans in place to expand the support for the handcraft women in Kampala. While the business hub pilot only ran for three months, the researchers are seeking funding to establish it as a more permanent information hub for the women. The researchers also acknowledge that the problems these women face are similar in many lower-income countries and refugee camps. The team has received further funding to run the same pilot with Kenyan craft women and are seeking further funding to host similar workshops in other countries, and grow their operation to an international scale.

“The project empowered me and my team to work together and create real change. As well as the amazing impact we were able to achieve together in Uganda, the project had an unprecedented impact on my life as an engineer. The collaborations I developed along the way will be lasting.”

Evdoxia Viza, University of the West of Scotland

Funding

This 18-month project received £20,000 of seed funding from the Frontiers of Engineering for Development Programme in 2017.



84 handcraft women interviewed



20 women provided with digital training

For more information, including eligibility, please visit raeng.org.uk/frontiers and follow [@RAEngGlobal](https://twitter.com/RAEngGlobal)

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