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Gaining Ground

The Cooperative Life of a Smallholder in Uganda

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With lives and livelihoods governed by so many forces beyond their control, women coffee producers like Jenipher Wettaka know it takes more than a global movement to make lives and livelihoods better. It takes a cooperative spirit in their communities to cultivate change.



Despite how remote the village feels, the lives of the smallholders who grow coffee here are intrinsically linked to world markets and global issues.

It's only about 50 kilometres from the major centre of Mbale in eastern Uganda, but Bunabudde is hard to reach—especially without a sturdy four-wheel drive vehicle. The dirt road that winds its way up Mt. Elgon deteriorates as it climbs, growing more rutted, rough and treacherous. In some places, water cascades down hills and crosses the road, the result of torrential rains that have persisted unusually late into December. The mountain is prone to wash outs and mudslides, which have claimed homes and hundreds of lives in recent years. But today, at least, the route is passable.



Long before the uncertain road reaches Bunabudde, electrical poles and wires vanish. There's just kerosene, candles, firewood and a rare few solar panels this far up.

Yet despite how remote the village feels, the lives of the smallholders who grow coffee here are intrinsically linked to world markets and global issues.

One of those smallholders, Jenipher Wettaka, is a woman in her late forties with a commanding presence and an unwavering gaze. The daughter of a teacher, she's well-educated, articulate and forthright as she tells her story.

Three years ago, Jenipher's husband died from cancer, leaving her with six children between the ages of 8 and 18. In addition, like so many of her neighbours, she has assumed the care for several orphans whose parents have been taken by AIDS, which continues to ravage families in sub-Saharan Africa.

But Jenipher knows she is fortunate, too. When he learned he was dying, and on the advice of a doctor in the city, her husband had Jenipher's name added to the land title. It was a bold move in this traditional culture, where women often don't even know they have the right to own land. His decision gave Jenipher a chance to support herself and all of the children. Otherwise, to survive she might have had to marry one of his brothers.

That's the traditional choice for a widow here, and Jenipher recalls her brothers-in-law coming for her, one after the other, insisting she marry them and relinquish her home. Knowing she had legal standing on the land allowed

¹ Leslie Vryenhoek, writer-editor for the global network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), visited the Gumutindo Coffee Cooperative office and spent two days with Jenipher Wettaka on the slopes of Mt. Elgon in December 2013

her to hold her ground. No, she told them—says again, emphatically, in the retelling—no. And then she offers her broad smile; clearly she draws strength from evoking this determined refusal.

Later, sitting on a low stool between the two simple wooden and plaster structures that comprise her home, she says, “I was very lucky. I had a good husband who helped me a lot.”

The children she cares for, her own and the orphans, swirl almost silently around the yard. The younger ones play or lounge while the older girls help prepare food and wash dishes. Draped clothing of differing sizes and varying conditions, the day’s laundry, dries in the sun. One young girl manages to reach high and pluck an avocado from a tree beside the road. She tears off the tough skin and bites into the richness underneath.

“It is most difficult now, caring for these children, this family, without his help,” Jenipher says. And her situation is made harder because a world away, the price of coffee has sunk to an all-time international low, dramatically impacting her income.

But Jenipher is not alone in her struggle. For companionship, she has her children and many close friends and family members who live nearby. And for help with the hard business of growing and selling coffee, she belongs to a cooperative that is improving lives and livelihoods here in Bunabudde.

A Mountain to Climb Each Day

Jenipher rises with the sun, well before six in the morning. Before she even lights a fire to boil water for morning tea, she goes to get food for the cow. A cow, after all, is a significant asset. Until recently, she had two cows, but the financial pinch led her to sell one. The journey to fetch the cow’s breakfast takes her a surprisingly long way down into the valley on a narrow footpath.

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Jenipher’s single cow represents a significant asset—but takes a lot of effort to feed.



She's also taught them to plant and to harvest, yet she hopes they won't follow in her footsteps

The sun has barely shouldered its way above the distant hills and a slight mist hangs in the valley. The air is still and silent. Along the path, tiered vegetable gardens look to be thriving from the recent rains. As she descends, the vegetation grows denser.

Finally she stops in the shade of a small forest that occupies one of her plots of land. Jenipher estimates she has about six acres in total, but the land is scattered, not contiguous, so it's that much harder to keep an eye on. This morning, she discovers someone has stolen a bunch of her bananas. She mutters angrily about this—it takes food from her children—but there's nothing to be done so she doesn't dwell on it. She just gets back to the business at hand.

She selects a small tree and makes short work of it with her machete, hacking the hollow trunk into lengths twice the width of her shoulders. She adds fronds of greenery to the pile. Using just a rope, she creates an ingenious harness to secure all this, then slips it over her shoulders, shifts to distribute the weight evenly, and marches back up the hill.

Her children have learned this traditional skill, she says, can tie a bundle to their backs with rope and haul it up the hill. She's also taught them to plant and to harvest, yet she hopes they won't follow in her footsteps. In fact, she speaks with some regret about her oldest daughter's decision to marry young, have children, and farm on the mountain. But Jenipher is even more worried about the second son. He's gone to Mbale and taken a job at a small store. If the store is robbed, she worries, he will be made to pay for the losses incurred.

Jenipher swells with pride, however, when she speaks of her oldest son. He studies public administration at a nearby university and is treated, in his absence, a bit like a hero in the family. Jenipher keeps a room safe just for him, the small bed neatly made and the door locked so the other children won't disturb it. On the door, the youngest boy, now 10, has written *My brother you are a very good boy* in chalk.

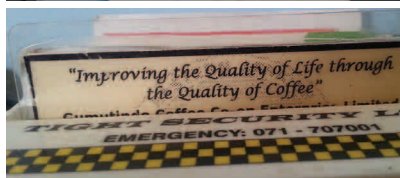
The cost of that oldest son's education represents an enormous sacrifice—one the whole family shares—but Jenipher believes education as the best hope to lift her children out of the life of struggle that she sees around her.

Growing Equity in the Community

Another blessing for which Jenipher is grateful is her involvement with the Gumutindo Coffee Cooperative. Since 2004, Gumutindo has been certified as a Fairtrade small producer organization under international fairtrade standards.

Fairtrade certification is one element within the massive fair trade movement. Started in the 1940s, the movement aims to improve both the livelihoods and communities of producer and workers by offering better terms of trade and a guaranteed price for what they make or grow. To maintain certification, a small producer organization must meet a set of standards that cover governance (with an emphasis on democratic accountability), labour and environmental requirements, and systems for traceability.

Currently, over 1.5 million farmers and workers are represented in producer networks that span 74 countries. The networks link together certified organizations—organizations like Gumutindo in Uganda.



In Gumutindo's office in Mbale, there are reminders everywhere that the business is as much about helping the grower as selling the coffee.

Gumutindo, which means “excellent quality” in the local Lugisu language, produces Arabica coffee grown on Mt. Elgon and sells it on the world market. The enterprise started as a small project with 200 farmers in 1998. It became a smallholder cooperative union in its own right in 2003 and now has about 8,000 farmer members organized in 16 primary societies in the coffee growing region.

“We all follow the cooperative principles,” says Phiona Nakusi, Coffee Manager with Gumutindo, adding that the coffee is 100 per cent Fairtrade certified and 98 per cent organic. “We do coffee—we don’t do anything else.”

Coffee may be all Gumutindo trades in, but the cooperative is, in fact, doing many other things to support its producers. Fair trade premiums are reinvested back into the community, providing needed items from solar panels to school desks.

And Gumutindo is especially working to empower women, who in 2013 comprised just 13 per cent of its total membership. That gender gap exists because members must own the land on which they grow.

“It’s always the man who owns land, and so he owns everything, although it’s the women who do most of the labour on the farm,” Phiona says. “Traditionally, women have been left behind. We are trying to see that women are empowered, both economically and socially.”

To address the imbalance, Gumutindo has begun separating out coffee delivered to its premises by women members and marketing it as a special brand. It has also established a policy that women must occupy half of the positions on its board. Now the cooperative is rolling out the expectation of gender balance to its primary societies, which are asked to ensure that at least two of seven members of a society’s executive are women. Requirements and reality, however, are different things. While women have

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Phiona Nakusi, Coffee Manager with Gumutindo, believes the efforts the coffee cooperative has undertaken to address women’s empowerment are paying off in many ways. Photo: B. Leifso





The women of Bunabudde say training has changed the way they do things, and changed attitudes, too. Photo: B. Leifso

The women learned about their rights to own assets, and gained skills that will enable them to fully participate as leaders and to help strengthen their cooperatives.

already risen to chair three primary societies, life in this traditional society has not always equipped women with leadership skills. The learning curve can be steep. But through innovative training partnerships, Gumutindo is leveling the leadership ground.

In 2013, Gumutindo launched a project in partnership with Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). The project aims to improve both the leadership and business skills of Gumutindo's female members (as well as male members' wives). A few facilitators from each of 10 primary societies, including Jenipher, are trained and then pass on what they have learned.

Training began in late 2013. The women learned about their rights to own assets, and gained skills that will enable them to fully participate as leaders and to help strengthen their cooperatives. They also learned about managing savings and credit groups.

"Some of these women are already running the small savings and credit groups," Phiona explains, "so they need to understand the requirements and benefits of such a group."

Better, diversified farming practices designed to improve livelihoods over the long-term are also included.

"The women have been very shy at first, but when they come out, they are very brilliant," Phiona says, adding that the women quickly came to understand how taking steps could improve their lives. "They said 'Ah, so this is how we should do this, this is what should be done.'"

Helping women first claim income of their own and then improve their livelihood prospects can be particularly effective in alleviating poverty. As Phiona explains, a woman with money in her pocket is more likely to use it to meet the needs of her family and pay children's school fees. "It is very different for most men," she says. "When a man gets his money, the first thing he will think of—especially those who drink—is to rush to the bar." (This seems like an exaggeration only until one visits Jenipher's house and hears the revelry coming from the nearby bar throughout the afternoon and well into the night.)

While the project is officially expected to reach 800 women, Elaine Jones, director of WIEGO's Global Trade Programme, believes the cascading training approach will have a much greater impact, creating sustainability as women share what they've learned in ever-widening circles.

Gumutindo also offers the women Gender Action Learning System (GALS) training, developed by Oxfam Novib, which provides a space to re-think gender dynamics. Its focus complements the trainings for women on leadership, good business practices, and savings schemes. However, because GALS both requires and affects cultural change, both women and men are targeted by this sensitization training.

And all of this, together, makes Phiona optimistic. "I think it's going to be a lot better than it has been in the past."

A Low Price for a Lot of Work

What is not getting better is the price coffee commands in the world.

Coffee is an immense global business that quenches the thirst of hundreds of millions of consumers worldwide. But the smallholder farmers who grow and harvest it work at the lowest end of this complex global value chain. Their hard labour often leads to meagre returns.

At the end of 2013, the world price for this hot commodity had sunk below the price in the 1980s, when the International Coffee Agreement governed relations between producing and importing countries and kept the price stable.

According to Phiona, a basic pound of coffee is fetching just about US \$1.10 on the New York Board of Trade commodities exchange. Gumutindo growers, however, do better than the commodity price and have more security.

Fairtrade certification guarantees a floor price, no matter how low the market drops. Organic coffee fetches a higher price at market, too. And there's a fair trade premium, about US \$0.20 per pound, which is intended to fund social and economic investments at the community and organizational level.

Consistent production and quality control standards are crucial parts of Gumutindo's work. The cooperative is also one of the founding members of the Joint Marketing Initiative involving several certified Fairtrade and organic coffee producer organisations in Africa, and Twin, a UK-based development organization. Working together, they have built a larger customer base and established a stronger bargaining position.



GALS training uses drawing, rather than the written word, to map out problems and aspirations. Many of the women have low literacy skills, but find they are able to draw what they mean easily.



Stores of coffee in the Gumutindo warehouse wait to be exported.
Photo: B. Leifso

Coffee growing is extremely labour intensive. Gumutindo's farmers harvest the cherries by hand, selecting carefully to ensure good quality.

Gumutindo's organic washed Arabica coffee beans are commanding about US \$1.50 per pound in December 2013. That price includes both an organic premium and a Fairtrade premium. It's a better price—but it's still less than half of what the same coffee commanded a few years ago.

Harvest Time

Regardless of the low price, the coffee is ripe and must be picked. The harvest, nearly finished at lower elevations, is only getting started near the top of Mt. Elgon.

Coffee growing is extremely labour intensive. Gumutindo's farmers harvest the cherries by hand, selecting carefully to ensure good quality. Most of the cherries on Jenipher's trees are deep and brilliant red. Jenipher would like to have started earlier on the picking, but her deep engagement in Gumutindo's governance had taken her for a week to a partner's meeting in Uganda's capital city, Kampala. Now, time is running short.

Fortunately, Jenipher's community comes together to help. A shifting number of women—it's almost exclusively the women in Uganda who do the farm work—gather around, tackling one tree at a time.

Their movements are practiced as they pull down and pin the higher branches between them, plucking the ripe cherries quickly and dropping them by the handful into a large bowl. When a tree is stripped, the bowl is carried to the next tree, then the next, until it threatens to overflow. Conversation and laughter overflow, too, as the women swap news. It's local gossip mostly, laced with sorrow or saucy humour as the subject requires.

The women work cooperatively to help each other harvest the coffee, which also provides an opportunity for talking and laughter.



While most trees look healthy from a distance, some are ruined by coffee berry disease, an endemic fungus that can severely curtail yields. But even on the trees that appear to be thriving, heavy with ripe berries, most have small sections where berries have withered and blackened before ripening. It's yet another worry that Jenipher grapples with, the spread of this blight. She hopes her trees will withstand it—new coffee trees can take four or five years to begin producing—but it's another reason why she's diversifying what she grows. She points to the space between some trees where the round heads of cabbages are taking shape.

Interplanting other edible plants, like cabbage, cassava and beans, is one of the strategies that Gumutindo teaches its farmers, along with proper care of the coffee trees and the use of organic fertilizers. The vegetables help to increase the sustainability of the soil, anchoring and enriching it while also providing more income options—and more food on the table.

When all the bowls are brimming with coffee cherries, the women carry them atop their heads back to Jenipher's homestead. Here, she will sort out any unripe or substandard cherries before taking her coffee to the nearby Bunabudde Primary Society office. The society itself is only a few years old, and its establishment owes much to Jenipher's leadership and determination. Previously, she says, she and her neighbours had to carry their coffee many kilometres to sell.

Inside those cherries are two hard green seeds that the world knows as coffee beans. The cherry must be pulped and the beans dried—a process that is faster at Gumutindo's large, modern factory. From there, Gumutindo will bag, label and export the coffee. It takes about 2,000 cherries—or 4,000 beans—to make just one pound of coffee, and a good tree will only yield a few pounds a year.



A tree stricken with coffee berry disease is lost income and a source of great worry.



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Jenipher's morning's harvest (above). At Gumutindo's processing site in Mbale, another group of informal women workers sort dried coffee beans for quality. Photo: B. Leifso



The women in Jenipher's society welcome visitors with a rousing song and dance meant to make the visitors feel welcome, and understand how important the relationship is.
Photo: B. Leifso

In Praise of Learning

So much work to do, and so many things to worry about. Those burdens, however, are not as apparent when the women come together to sing.

It's two in the afternoon and a warm breeze washes over the Bunabudde schoolhouse where about 40 women, one man and a multitude of children have gathered. They offer jubilant songs of welcome for visitors, their harmonious voices rising above rhythmic clapping. And then they sit to speak about what empowerment training has meant to them.

Faced with daunting twenty-first century macroeconomics and still encumbered by a long history following traditional roles, it seems improbable that a few training programmes, some shared knowledge, could have a significant impact. But the women of Bunabudde are adamant that it has. Jenipher, a well-respected community leader, begins by noting that she believes the new learning can benefit the whole village. "From these trainings, things will get better. We'll rejoice."

She talks of her own experience. Because she has been involved on the cooperative's board and as chair of her primary society, she has had frequent occasion to leave the mountain to attend meetings and training sessions in past years. Twice, in fact, she's gone to London to represent Gumutindo at Fair Trade organization meetings.

However, she recalls that her travels were often greeted—by both men and women in the village, within and outside her family—with suspicion. This is because in the past, there was so much resistance to change.

Today that is changing, she says. “Our women are thirsty to work with anyone who can help them learn.” Around the room, women nod and murmur their agreement.

A cordless microphone appears and is passed around so the women can share their own stories. Many have taken the GALS training, which relies heavily on drawing pictures to examine relationships, since many women are not literate. One woman remembers her reluctance to learn. “I thought: how can I draw when I cannot write?” Soon, however, she discovered she could draw and that the pictures made learning easier.

Another woman takes the microphone. “These are not just pictures. They tell us about how to do things better.” She goes on to note that before they formed these groups, there was gossip and mistrust. Now women are sitting together, learning from each other.

One woman recalls a time when she would have to steal coffee from her husband to feed her family—coffee she had grown and picked, but that was owned by her husband. Now, she says, “Women are having a change in the way they are doing things.”

Another notes: “People were skeptical. Husbands didn’t like us to go.” She adds, “The women are good at learning things but the men don’t always come. You see—we have just one man here.”

That man stands to tell his story. He used to drink a lot, he admits, while his wife harvested the coffee. He would sell what she’d picked and drink away the earnings. But he participated in the GALS training, stopped drinking so much and says he sees how much better it is to work together in life, rather than let her do it all on her own.

Another man has joined the group and he signals for a chance to speak. All eyes are on him as the microphone makes its way over. He talks of the economic value he has found in belonging to the Gumutindo Coffee Cooperative—he receives not just a better price for his beans but information on how to save, to put something aside for the future.

But there’s more. He also wants to say he is thankful for the gender and empowerment training because this, he says, is bringing harmony to households. In the past, he recalls, husbands and wives were doing their own thing. “Now it is more collaborative.”


Harmony: it’s a theme that runs throughout the rest of the meeting. One woman says there had been a lot of conflict in the past, but now relations are much more harmonious. Another remarks that husbands are “softer”.

And finally, as the meeting draws to a close, an older woman rises to say that she too is enjoying more harmony at home. In fact, her husband has given her a little piece of land on which to grow her own vegetables to sell.

The meeting hour is over. Jenipher rises and the community follows her, this natural leader, singing and applauding as they file from the schoolhouse. Out in the afternoon sun, the vistas are incredible and so much work waits to be done.



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A photograph of three women standing in a coffee plantation. The woman on the left is wearing a green and yellow patterned dress and is smiling while holding a branch of coffee with red cherries. The woman in the center is wearing a purple and yellow patterned dress and is laughing joyfully while holding a branch. The woman on the right is wearing a pink and white patterned dress and is smiling while holding a branch. The background shows rows of coffee trees with green leaves and red cherries. A large tree trunk is visible on the left side of the image.

About WIEGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global action-research-policy network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. WIEGO draws its membership from membership-based organizations of informal workers, researchers and statisticians working on the informal economy and practitioners from development agencies. For more information see www.wiego.org.

Jenipher, her eldest daughter Jackie, centre, and her best friend Phoebe show off coffee that is ready to harvest.