

Women's Empowerment through Access to Markets

Maasai Women Development Organisation (MWEDO), Arusha, Tanzania

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About this research

This case study was developed as part of a research initiative undertaken by the University of Oxford to develop measurements for evaluating the impact of Walmart's Empowering Women Together (EWT) program. EWT focuses on bringing small businesses owned or led by women into the Walmart supplier base, thus opening a large market to them. This process usually must be done gradually, normally beginning with selling limited orders online, to avoid overstraining the capacity of these businesses.

The suppliers currently in the EWT system are very diverse in terms of business model, size, capitalization, networks, and industry. They are located in 12 countries on four continents. A significant number are social enterprises or work through a social enterprise as an agent. Even the for-profit EWT suppliers often have a social, health, or environmental mission.

Designing the measurements that will appropriately gauge the impact of the EWT effort, therefore, is a challenge. We have visited or interviewed substantially all the EWT businesses in North America and East Africa in preparation for setting up the assessment system. We have seen already that the measures one might normally expect to be central, such as sales increases or number of employees, could actually be misleading and certainly must be counterbalanced with other equally weighted indicators. The differences in infrastructure, available support networks, and even work culture between the two regions raise several serious questions about the viability of some frequently used metrics. Since the field of women's economic empowerment is still very young, there are few fully tested measures that seem appropriate in both of these very different parts of the world. We are further concerned that, since measurement standards often have the effect of guiding future actions, poorly designed assessments might also lead to distorted and ill-advised business decisions.

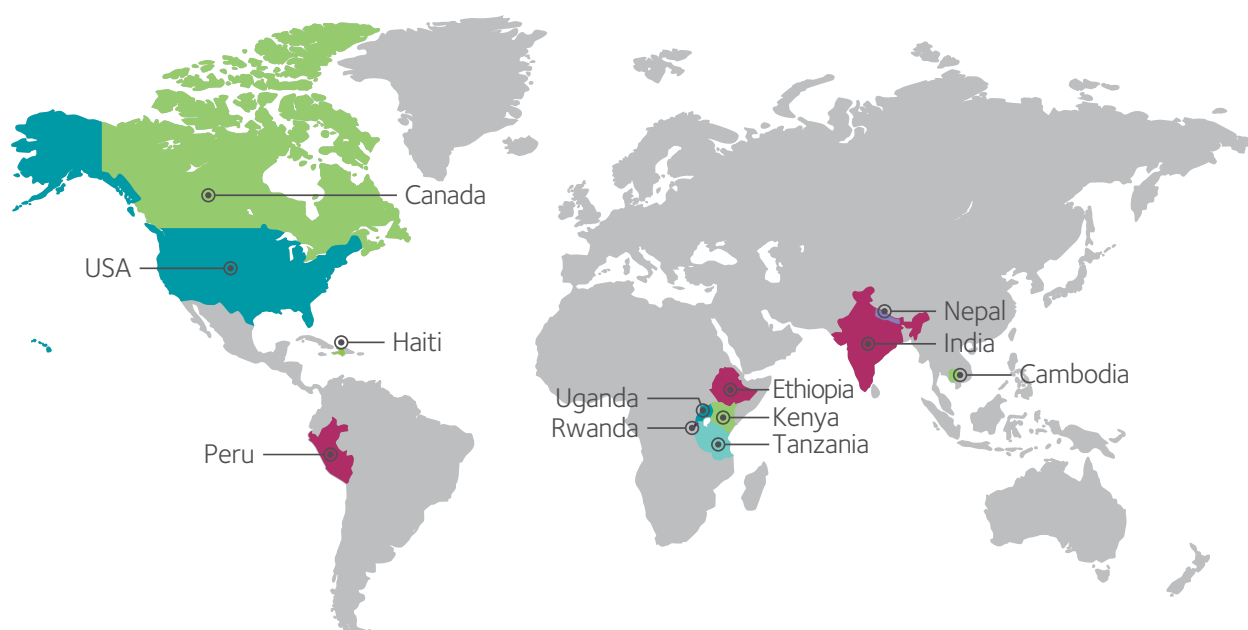
Setting the measures thus must be done very carefully. Through this Maasai Women Development Organisation (MWEDO), Tanzania case study, along with the companion Katchy Kollektions, Kenya case study and the Women's Bean Project, USA case study, we intend to illustrate the questions that arise in designing appropriate metrics, while also showing how the difference in local conditions affects business potential. An additional companion piece that surveys current literature and practice in measurements relevant to EWT—such as in the arena of women's economic empowerment or women's entrepreneurship—provides insights about the questions that must be considered.

About Empowering Women Together

Walmart's Global Women's Economic Empowerment Initiative pledges to source \$20 billion from women-owned businesses in the US, to double the sourcing from women in international markets, and to train nearly one million women in job skills, all within five years. The Empowering Women Together (EWT) program, launched in March 2013, is one part of this larger initiative.

EWT works with small women-owned businesses to connect them in a sustainable way to Walmart's customer base, thus giving them market access they might not have otherwise. The intention is to help these small businesses grow but also to have a positive impact on the employees and their families. The businesses currently engaged in the EWT program range from innovative startups in Northern California to traditional artisan groups in Tanzania. Because of the wide range of products and producers, creating a sustainable value chain for women, especially those at the base of the pyramid, is far more complex than Walmart envisioned originally. Attention to identifying and removing barriers has been intensive, but caution must also be exercised in order to avoid damaging livelihoods. The EWT system has therefore grown more slowly than anticipated. Multiple partnerships, with NGOs, governments, and other businesses, are likely to be required in order to make it possible for the women to engage with a multinational retailer. Business units within Walmart also often must cooperate in new ways to make this effort possible. It has become clear that a number of global systems, finance in particular, will have to be adapted if women-owned businesses are to be meaningfully included in the global marketplace. In sum, the progress is gradual and the challenges considerable, but the potential for meaningful change is great.

Empowering Women Together countries





This Maasai woman, holding a cell phone pouch she has made, works from Longido, a town 80 kilometers to the north of Arusha, home to one of the 150 village-based membership groups of MWEDO.

Maasai Women Development Organisation

The trading relationship that Empowering Women Together initiated with the Maasai Women Development Organisation (MWEDO), working through Global Goods Partners in New York, illustrates the importance of cultural differences in planning and assessing market-based programs to empower women.

Policy questions can also be surfaced through this case. Cultural objections to interventions on behalf of women are still commonplace in international discourse, for instance. Further, a false dichotomy between a “rights-based approach” and “economic empowerment” is also often posed, with the implication that following one necessarily means sacrificing the other. Finally, the challenges faced by indigenous cultures are often blamed on the intrusion of a “market consciousness”—such is particularly claimed in the case of the Maasai—making a market-based approach to ending poverty or empowering women unwelcome.

These are all important issues, but are more complex on the ground than ideological posturing allows. This case exemplifies the tragic pull between cultural sovereignty and women’s empowerment, as well as the interdependence between economic autonomy and human rights. We begin, therefore, with a description of the Maasai culture and follow through with a focus on the conditions specific to the women, then proceed to show how these interacted with the Empowering Women Together project. Afterward, we will return to our primary focus on measurement, emphasizing the way that local conditions may muddle the metrics.

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The Maasai way of life

The Maasai are among the most familiar African groups in the eyes of Western tourists because of their distinctive dress, including elaborate beaded ornaments, and the proximity of their lands to the great parks and wildlife reserves of Kenya and Tanzania. However, behind the picture postcards, the Maasai are locked in a struggle to preserve their culture and livelihood, constantly grappling with challenges from the modern economy and even their own national governments.¹

As a group of nomadic pastoralists, the Maasai are believed to have arrived in northwestern Kenya from southern Sudan sometime in the 15th Century. The Maasai were a proud and fierce people who disdained farming and farmers. Their tradition measured wealth in cattle and children, seeking to maximize the number of each. Believing God put cattle on earth for them alone, the Maasai were inveterate cattle rustlers. Thus, over the next three centuries, they expanded their ranges in support of growing herds and populations, displacing other peoples in the process. By the 1800s, they controlled a vast space across what is now Kenya and Tanzania, including some of the most desirable land as well as important wildlife habitats.

Beginning about 1900, confrontations began between the Maasai and national governments—first, British colonial rule and, later, African national authority— that were focused on land use and animal protection. Traditionally, the Maasai herded cattle freely, letting them feed across vast ranges that were untitled, but controlled and protected by their own warriors. This practice was incompatible with the notion of private property typical of the modern economy, but also was seen by governments to pose an ecological threat.

British colonialists first began trying to remove or constrain the Maasai in the name of protecting African wildlife. In the post-independence period, there was further concern about potential damage to the savannah itself from constantly grazing cattle. African governments have also been keen to improve agricultural productivity, a goal that often conflicts with the practices of pastoralism. Several programs, such as group ranching, attempted to encourage the Maasai to manage their land use and control the size of their herds by selling off cattle. However, the goal of maximizing children and cattle meant that the Maasai sold only what livestock they needed to meet basic needs—and both the herds and the human population grew toward a point where many believed the lands could not sustain them.

¹ Catherine Dolan, a co-author on this case, is an Africanist anthropologist on the faculty of the School for Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. For this case, we drew on her expertise, but we also reviewed available material on the Maasai. Key sources included: Dorothy L. Hodgson (2001), *Once Intrepid Warriors: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Cultural Politics of Maasai Development*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Thomas Spear and Richard Waller, eds. (1993), *Being Maasai: Ethnicity and Identity in East Africa*, London: James Currey. Daniel Brockington (2001), "Women's Income and the Livelihood Strategies of Dispossessed Pastoralists near the Mkomazi Game Reserve, Tanzania," *Human Ecology*, 29 (3). Jacqueline S. Phillips and Navaz Peshotan Bhavnagri (2002), "The Maasai's Education and Empowerment: Challenges of a Migrant Lifestyle," *Childhood Education*, 78 (3), Spring. Mara Goldman and Jani S. Little (2015), "Innovative Grassroots NGOS and the Complex Processes of Women's Empowerment: An Empirical Investigation from Northern Tanzania," *World Development*, v. 66. We have also drawn from online sources such as the Maasai Association website (<http://www.maasai-association.org>) and IRIN reports on female genital mutilation among the Maasai which include first person reports from the women themselves (<http://www.irinnews.org/>).



The tall Maasai warrior, wrapped in red cloth, dressed in beads, and carrying his spear, is an emblematic image in African tourism. The Maasai people, however, are struggling to survive and to preserve their culture. The beaded necklace, cuffs, and head ornament shown here are examples of the prized craft at the center of this case.

Photo: Dietmar Temps/Shutterstock.com

Other efforts were made to persuade the Maasai to convert to agriculture, but the traditional disdain for farming led to resistance. Historically, the Maasai have seen themselves as the dominant culture in the region and they still believe they represent an ideal. This belief in their own superiority is justified, in their view, by their purely pastoral production and even by their superior aesthetic in beadwork. Non-pastoral livelihoods are seen as inferior, contaminated, and even morally deficient and the beadwork produced by such groups is seen in an equally contemptuous light. Given this attitude, it is not surprising how vigorously the Maasai have resisted changing their livelihood to one that, from their vantage, signifies a fall from grace.

Over many decades, the government has progressively appropriated Maasai lands to create national parks, hunting concessions, and wildlife reserves—as well as to sell parcels to foreign investors. As a result, the Maasai have been displaced many times and the land they can use has dwindled. In Tanzania, the Maasai were eventually confined to the Ngorongoro Conservation Area. The rest of the story is similar to that of the indigenous peoples of North America. Some Maasai integrated into African society, becoming educated and engaging in the modern economy, but others remained on reserved lands and were ultimately reduced to extreme poverty.

Today, the Maasai continue to be at loggerheads with the Tanzanian and Kenyan governments and to fight against the encroachments of modernity on their culture. Their resistance takes many forms, including refusing to send children to school and deliberately miscounting their population for the census. Other aspects of Maasai culture, especially the treatment of women, are rising as points of conflict with international ethics, global development goals, and world health concerns. Despite these travails, the Maasai have remained a cohesive group and they have played a leadership role in the emergence of indigenous rights as a concern for the United Nations.

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The Maasai have a profoundly patriarchal culture. World history shows that dramatic cultural change sometimes provides opportunities for women to gain freedom and autonomy, as well as to escape dangers, in a way that is not otherwise possible. Hence, this moment could offer the potential for improvement in the gender circumstances. At the same time, however, poverty has made Maasai women one of the most vulnerable subgroups of eastern Africa and, in turn, many children are at risk.

Sex and gender among the Maasai

Young Maasai men are still called “morran,” which means “warrior,” and they are brought to maturity through a series of rituals designed to produce a regimental sense of purpose and cohesion. Little boys are taught to care for and herd cattle, as well as goats and sheep, from a very early age. They are toughened through physical trials, including beatings. In the past, boys were required to kill a lion before they could become men. Though the practice has been banned, lion-killing still occurs and still brings praise and celebrity.

When a boy nears puberty, he is gathered with boys of a similar age into an “age-set”—a group of males who will live together for the rest of their lives. The all-male age-set, as opposed to the nuclear family, is the basic unit of the Maasai social structure. The age-set is initiated in a ritual circumcision, done by knife without any anaesthesia. The boys are expected to show no response to the pain, to prove their courage and toughness to the community.

Once initiated, the group of young warriors lives together in a circle of 30 to 40 huts built for them by their chosen “mothers,” women who are married to other men, but who are not necessarily the biological mothers of the warriors and may even be their own age. The young men then form their own compound, or “kraal,” in which they live for ten years without marrying. They do not herd cattle, but act as a security force, and they still carry the clubs and spears that have marked the Maasai for centuries.

The next rite of passage is into senior warrior/junior elder. The young men may now marry, but first must prove they have not had sex with any woman who is married or ritually eligible for marriage. A final passage is into the status of elder. The elders are the ultimate authority for the clan, but there is also a high priest and an extensive body of oral law. Each elder can marry many women, but males continue to live with their age-sets throughout life.

Elaborate beaded ornaments are produced that mark age, stage, sex, and membership at each point in this series of ritual passages.

Maasai females also undergo circumcision at about the time of puberty. A girl’s clitoris is removed, by knife and without anaesthesia, in the belief that she will otherwise be unable to control her sexual urges, thus compromising the morality of the community and possibly introducing disease. The girl, too, must endure the circumcision without showing response to the pain.

Once a girl is circumcised, she has become an adult in the eyes of the community. She is seen to be ready to have a family and so her marriage is arranged quickly. The Maasai still exchange a “bride price,” in which the suitor pays the father for the bride. Indeed, these events are so tightly related that the suitor often also pays for the circumcision. An uncircumcised female is not considered marriageable and, at the least, will command a lower bride price for her father.

Since girls are marriageable at puberty, but men may not marry until they become elders, there is always a substantial age difference between husbands and wives. It is not uncommon for a very young girl to become a second or third wife to a much older man. Marriage usually puts an end to the girl's education—if she is in school at all. Because international disapproval for female circumcision (often referred to as “female genital mutilation” or “female genital cutting”) has brought pressure to bear on the Maasai practice, this particular ritual has gone underground. Often, parents will remove their daughters from sight of authorities well before puberty in order to circumcize them in private. In this way, girls 10 or 11 years old become marriageable.

The Maasai have been unreceptive to contraception, especially condom use. Semen is thought to have positive health effects on women. It is normal for girls to begin having children while they are still in their early teens. Multiple wives, of ever-younger ages, helps ensure the increase in a wealth of children. The trade of daughters for a bride price that is usually expressed in cattle, not cash, helps men to build herds.

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As noted above, young warriors are not allowed to have sex with women who are ritually eligible for marriage—that is, with any female who has been circumcized. They are, however, allowed to have sex with girls who have not yet been circumcized—that is, with girls who have not yet reached puberty. Thus, there are also premarital sexual alliances with substantial age differences between males and females. The issue of a girl's age, however, is made less important in Maasai culture by the fact that females are defined by and affiliated with the age-sets of their husbands—they do not have their own age-set.

Female circumcision and marriage rituals are also accompanied by elaborate beaded ornaments made specifically for the purpose.

Men do not live with their wives, but instead in a separate dwelling with the men of their age-set, built by the women. Every wife also builds a home for herself within her husband's kraal and maintains a sub-household consisting of her children and any other dependents. Little girls are taught early to help with their mother's duties, which are primarily the preparation of food, the building or maintenance of housing, milking cattle, and doing the beadwork for the rituals. The Maasai housing structures originate in a design intended to facilitate nomadic movement, rather than structural permanence. The homes are small loaf-shaped dwellings (roughly 12 feet wide, 16 feet long, and 5 feet high) structured on poles that have been interwoven with branches and daubed with a mixture of dung, ash, sticks, and human urine. These dwellings do not have electricity, plumbing, or toilets. The sub-households organized under each wife will eat, sleep, and socialize in these small huts, as well as store their possessions there. People and livestock are protectively fenced into the kraal, using acacia thorns, to keep out wild animals and intruders.

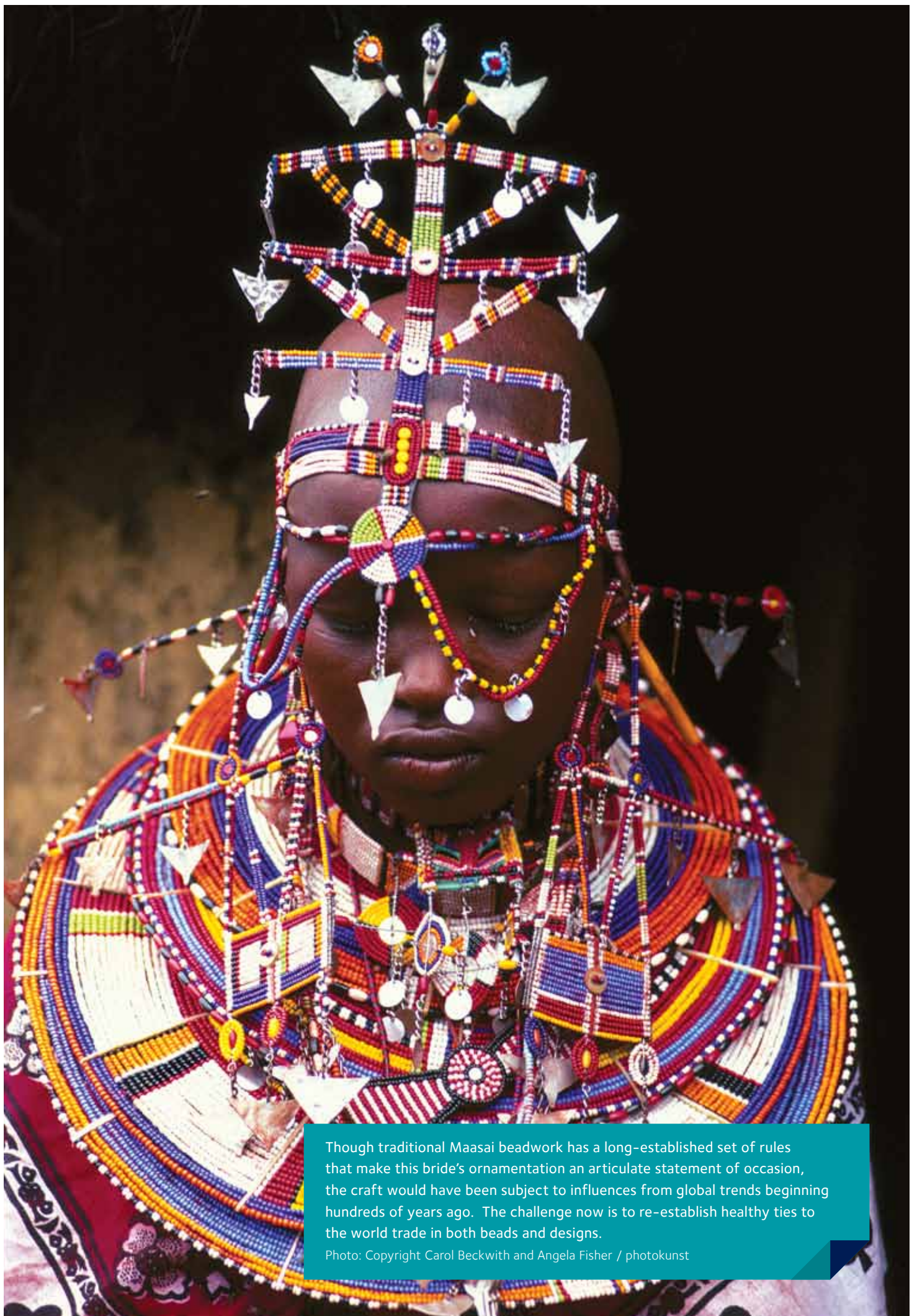
Women in the Maasai economy

Female responsibility for food *preparation* seems to have evolved through the strife of displacement to become a responsibility for food *provision*. In turn, general financial responsibility for children's welfare, including their education, is increasingly placed on the women. While men migrate with cattle or leave to find employment in towns, many Maasai women are now permanently settled, managing the household by tending cash crops and selling food, charcoal, livestock, milk or beadwork. As one woman told us, "Mostly nowadays it's women who take care of the family, very few men do take care of their children and give them food." Women often turn to petty trade in order to provide food, going into the local market to sell small items that they grow, make, or buy.

It is often said that cattle are the wealth of Maasai men, but beads are the wealth of the women. However, if there is no market for the craft, the beads are not, practically speaking, a form of wealth. Until tourism came to East Africa, there was no market for Maasai beadwork at all. Instead, the objects were produced strictly for a ceremony, each uniquely crafted for that specific purpose. Now, many Maasai women have recognized that selling beaded objects, especially to tourists, might create a stream of income for their families. They even join together on their own to open stalls in tourist areas. However, the market for these traditional handicrafts quickly became saturated, a pattern common for such objects around the world. For at least twenty years, accounts of life among the Maasai have included women asking outsiders to help them find new markets for their beading.

Maasai women suffer from considerable disadvantages in their quest for market viability. Despite many initiatives to improve girls' education among pastoralists, only a tiny fraction of Maasai girls reach secondary school. Adult females are usually illiterate and innumerate, both significant liabilities when trying to engage in trade. Further, they often cannot communicate beyond their own ethnic group. The Maasai have their own language, "Maa," as do many other African subgroups. However, in most countries, there is a "connecting" language, or *lingua franca*, that is taught in schools so that the various groups will still be able to communicate. In Kenya and Tanzania, the connecting language is Kiswahili, but because Maasai women often have not gone to school, they are frequently unable to speak it. Since they cannot communicate outside the community, Maasai women are understandably apprehensive about their vulnerability to being cheated in the marketplace.²

² Mara Goldman and Jani S. Little (2015), "Innovative Grassroots NGOs and the Complex Processes of Women's Empowerment: An Empirical Investigation from Northern Tanzania," *World Development*, v. 66.



Though traditional Maasai beadwork has a long-established set of rules that make this bride's ornamentation an articulate statement of occasion, the craft would have been subject to influences from global trends beginning hundreds of years ago. The challenge now is to re-establish healthy ties to the world trade in both beads and designs.

Photo: Copyright Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher / photokunst

To engage with an international market, they would need to speak at least one other language, probably English, and they would need access to communications technology, which would require both skills and infrastructure that they simply do not have. Maasai women also have limited mobility, especially in the most remote villages. Travel is done by walking and the distances are great. A woman is able to pursue economic autonomy only insofar as she is home to cook, clean, and care when needed—and she often must have permission to leave. Wife-beating is commonplace and accepted; returning home late from an outing often brings on an incident of domestic violence. Traditionally, women who were gone for more than a day might find themselves barred from their homes when they returned. So, each woman's ability to participate in the market is also a function of her distance and her family obligations.

Though Maasai women are becoming *de facto* heads of their households, this change has not been accompanied by more rights or increased control over decisions, including where to live and when to work. Maasai women have use of cattle only through a male relative; they do not own stock themselves. Title to land, a big issue for many women around the world, is a slightly different matter for Maasai women, since the core challenge to their whole culture is that they have limited rights over land. Maasai females usually have no other assets they can transfer or sell. They are excluded from inheriting wealth and have very little access to credit. Though the 1999 Tanzanian Village Land Act recognizes equal rights for men and women to own and dispose of land, customary norms that stipulate that all property belongs to the husband continue to prevail.

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Women are also marginalized from politics and public life, seen as playing a supportive role to men who exercise full authority in the clan and wider society. Thus, despite many changes in the community, women continue to confront an uneven playing field in Maasai culture. Nevertheless, the women's efforts to adapt and survive could make an underlying change in the economic basis for the Maasai, even as the men continue to pursue pastoralism. Whether the women find a way to provide will be what makes the difference for future generations.

Women in Tanzania

Women are critical to the development of Tanzania, comprising over half of the labor force. Yet while the government has made progress toward gender equality, women continue to be excluded from meaningful economic participation. Though nearly 90% of women are economically active, only 4% of women, compared to 10% of men, are in formal employment. Women hold less than a third of nonagricultural jobs.



To some degree, women's exclusion is the result of their lower levels of education. Female adults have an average of 4.5 years of schooling, while their male counterparts have 5.8. Enrollment in primary school has improved significantly, but females still lag behind at the secondary level: whereas 9.2% of men have reached secondary school only 5.6% of women have. Significantly more women than men have no education at all.

Women are thus pushed into informal, small-scale entrepreneurship, where earnings are low and unpredictable. While women own 43% of small enterprises in the country, only 8% of women-headed enterprises have received bank finance in contrast to 30% of their male counterparts. Only 5% of Tanzanian women have any account with a formal financial institution. Bank loans, which require titled land as collateral, are out of reach for most women: only 8% of Tanzanian women hold individual titles to land. Lengthy and complex business registration procedures and tax administration also favor larger, typically male owned businesses, often making it impossible for women to get started. Booz & Company's Third Billion Index ranked Tanzania 113th out of 128 countries when measuring support for female entrepreneurs.

Tanzania			
Index of Gender Conditions	Measurement Agency	Tanzania Rank	Total Nations
Gender Inequality Index 2013	United Nations Development Program	124	187
Women's Economic Opportunity Index 2012	The Economic Intelligence Unit	95	128
Gender Gap Index 2014	World Economic Forum	47	142

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Founding MWEDO

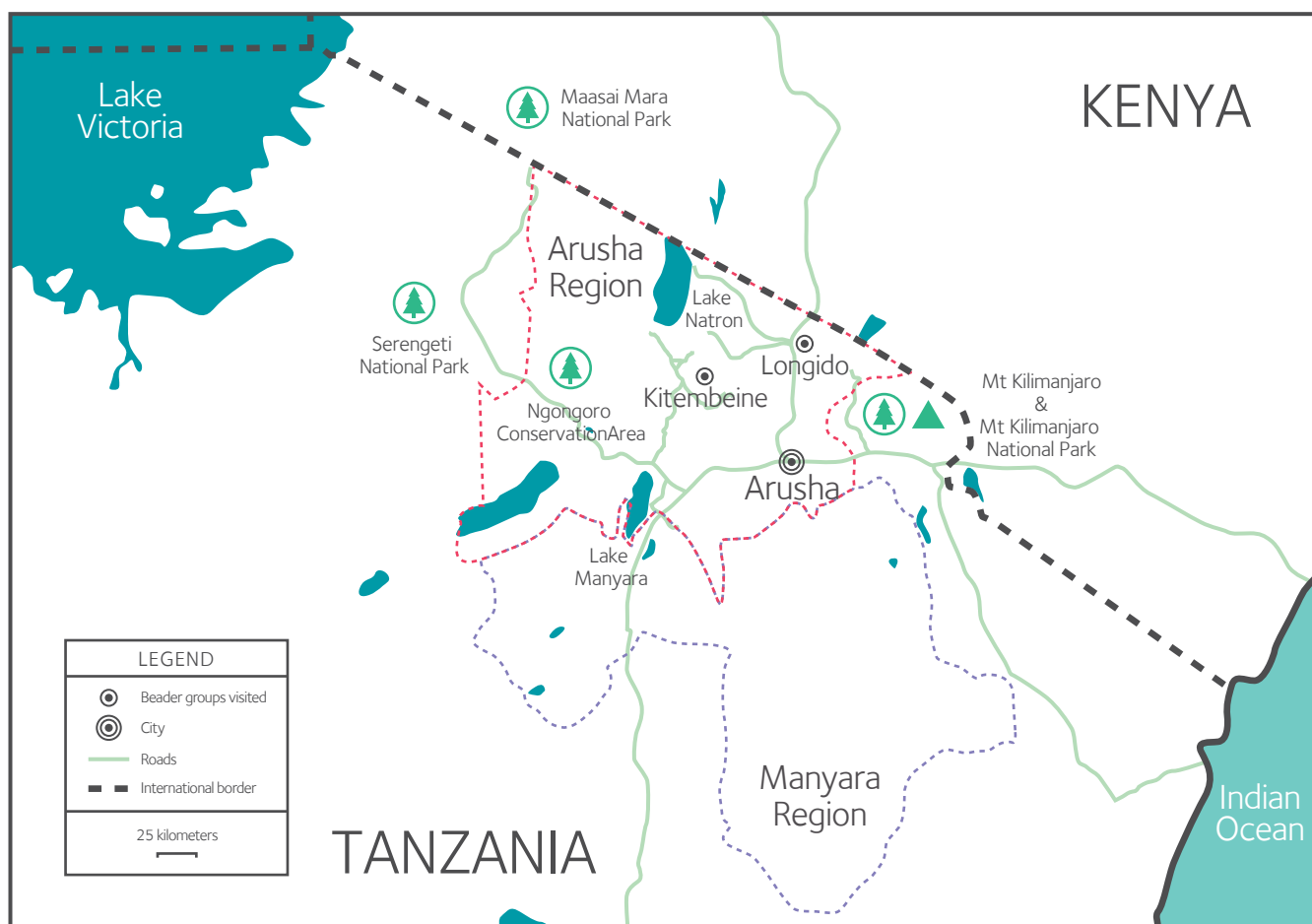
The impetus for an organization specifically for Maasai women grew initially out of the 1990s indigenous peoples' movement at the United Nations (which includes Native Americans, Australian aborigines, and other disenfranchised native groups) rather than from a women's rights initiative. As the indigenous peoples' movement grew, it became increasingly evident that the objective of preserving traditional culture sometimes conflicted with honoring the rights of women. For instance, female genital mutilation and early marriage are core aspects of Maasai culture, but produce serious harm for females.

As a direct outcome of this conundrum, MWEDO was founded in 2000 by three Maasai women, Ndinini Kimesera Sikar, Josephine Simone, and Maria Kaheta. All of them had become educated, built successful professional careers, and accumulated international experiences. Ndinini, in particular, had been active in the indigenous peoples' movement and had built, as a result, an important network at the international level. Like many educated Maasai, the three still felt a sense of belonging to the group and a social responsibility to help those who were still entrapped in poverty.

The founders of MWEDO began by holding community meetings and focus groups in the Maasai districts. In these gatherings, the women expressed their concerns about insufficient health services, few educational opportunities, as well as their limited rights to livestock, lack of inheritance rights, and inadequate opportunities to earn cash. Out of these sessions emerged a social mission to tackle gender inequalities by fostering programs in education, health, and enterprise development. The collective decision was that MWEDO would be a grassroots membership organization, owned by Maasai women and underpinned by a constitution. The credo was simply, "women have equal rights within the society."

Today, MWEDO remains a women-led organization with regional headquarters in Arusha, Tanzania. The NGO is currently comprised of over 5,000 women, who are organised into 150 village-based membership groups in the pastoralist regions of Arusha and Manyara. Each group pays an annual membership fee of 5,000 Tanzania shillings (US\$3) set by members themselves. MWEDO has two sites of operation, a head office with a fair trade centre and café in Arusha (ten employees), and a healthcare center in Kiteto District (eight employees).

Initially, the need for financing was a roadblock to getting programming off the ground. MWEDO survived its early years through the voluntary efforts of its founders, who spent their evenings working out of a small room loaned by a friend. The breakthrough came when Ndinini leveraged international connections formed through the indigenous peoples' movement to arrange a meeting that resulted in funding from USAID Tanzania. Eventually, this success was followed by further funds from UN Women, Global Fund for Women, the Steven Lewis Foundation, the Flora Family Foundation, and the African Development Fund. From the start, the international community has figured prominently in the MWEDO story.



MWEDO has its regional headquarters in Arusha, Tanzania, with membership groups in the pastoralist regions of Arusha and Manyara.

In its early years, MWEDO focused on rights. As Ndinini explains, “We felt like most of the women in the community, they are faced with many challenges, but one of the major problems was they were not really able to access their rights to many, many things, including their human rights.” It soon became apparent, however, that being unable to claim rights was directly tied to economic dependency and that the organization needed to shift the rights-based approach to include an economic empowerment agenda. “We felt like the minute a woman has income, she can make all these sort of decisions because she holds the money.”

Three interrelated pillars for programming emerged. The first was education. In 2005, the organization developed a program funded by USAID (the Empowerment through Literacy Education Access Project) that helped adult Maasai women to learn basic Kiswahili, spoken and written. Feedback from the women pointed specifically to their increased ability to function economically, as an outcome of learning to speak the *lingua franca*.³ The literacy program was subsequently extended to include education on HIV and land rights, as well as training in business skills with funding from the Flora Family Foundation and the Global Fund for Women.

³ Goldman and Little.

The experience has increased the importance of girls' education in the eyes of the membership. Through support from donors as well as Maasai community members, MWEDO now offers full scholarships that fund the secondary school education of pastoralist girls and manages a girls' secondary boarding school in Arusha. Remember, however, that the economic burden of keeping a Maasai girl in secondary school must include not only school fees, but the opportunity cost of trading her for cattle. Thus, addressing education and human rights issues without attention to the underlying economic inequity will be unlikely to be effective.

Access to health is the second pillar. In 2003, the organization launched its maternal health and HIV /AIDS services program. In collaboration with state and village authorities, as well as peer health educators and community workers, the program focuses on raising awareness of how customary practices increase the vulnerability to HIV infection. MWEDO also supports a health centre in Kiteto and facilitates home health care services in remote Maasai villages. As other programs have learned, however, women must have control over money in order to go to health clinics.⁴

So, MWEDO's third pillar is to strengthen economic capacity and autonomy. Seed grants are provided for group income-generating projects, as are training in leadership and business skills. MWEDO's flagship women's economic empowerment program, which was launched with support from the US-based African Development Foundation, supports small-scale farming, livestock management, and handicrafts including beading. Each program requires women to form groups to borrow, trade, and work, rather than receive loans and goods as individuals.

The effectiveness of the economic programs has been magnified by MWEDO's work teaching literacy and raising consciousness about rights—thus all the activities contribute to the ultimate goal of helping Maasai women. Though each pillar was bringing important changes, the MWEDO founders nevertheless became increasingly convinced that empowering women economically was the most effective tactic. They also knew they had to move beyond small scale projects with limited market potential to enterprises that could connect women to outside markets if the women were going to earn substantial incomes. They decided to focus on building the beadwork into an international enterprise.

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⁴ Linda Scott, Mary Johnstone-Louis, and Catherine Dolan, "Pampers/UNICEF: Part 2," appendix. University of Oxford, 2011.

Beads in world trade

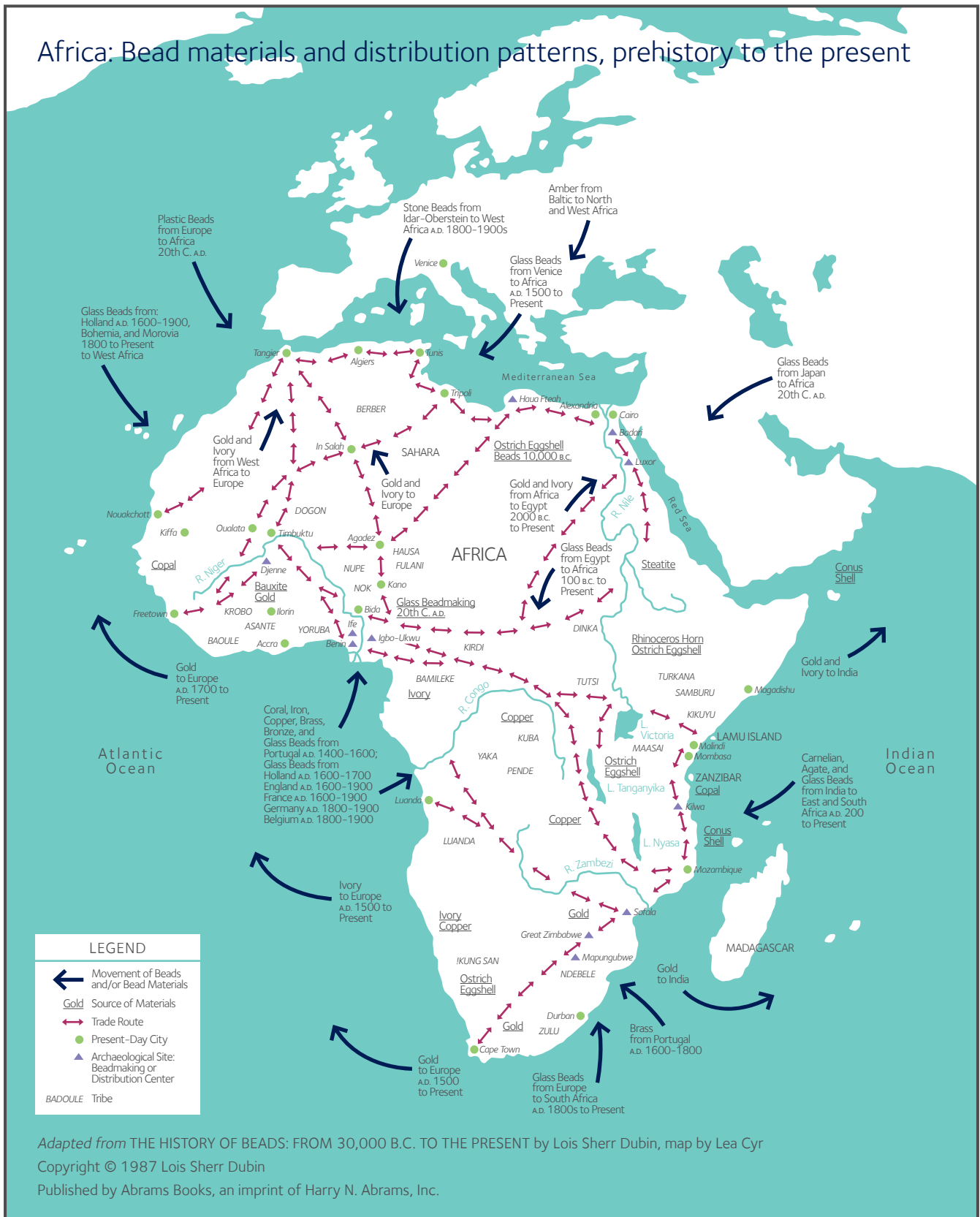
A prejudice among some in the academy and in international development treats markets as a purely modern and profit-driven development. In this way of thinking, traditional cultures must struggle to protect their aesthetics and practices from corruption by trade with the global economy. In truth, however, trade among human communities is a very old phenomenon. Connection to the routes of commerce, coupled with the ability to ride the trends that drive trade, produces prosperous communities, while isolation often only leaves poverty and vulnerability. Ironically, the oldest documented example of long distance trading is in beads and the Maasai probably participated in this exchange for hundreds of years, but have since seemingly become disconnected from the flow of both materials and trends.

Modern humans were distinguished from their predecessors, the Neanderthals, by their cognitive power, a faculty we can now see in the material creativity that marks their emergence archaeologically. Indeed, the first beads appeared with *Homo sapiens* and have been made and used by every human community since, worn as often to express status, gender, age, and even religious belief, as to beautify.⁵ Experts argue that the early appearance of beads represents the first glimmer of symbolic thought because different colors and shapes of beads were used to stand for concepts like “married” and “courage.” In the Maasai culture, beading long ago reached a language-like level of subtlety, not only because different beads and colors stand for concepts, but because rules for order and spacing act much like a grammar. Like every other tradition of beading, however, the Maasai aesthetic did not develop in isolation, but in conversation with other, sometimes distant, cultures.

The history of beads is inseparable from the history of trade. This is true not only because beads have been a common form of money, but also because the desire for exotic materials and innovative techniques in beads has, for thousands of years, pushed people into trading with other communities. For instance, excavations from the Upper Paleolithic period found beads made from a variety of materials not available nearby, obtainable only through long-distance exchange networks covering several hundred miles. By 6,500 BCE, interregional routes had been established and beads were a major commodity. Over time, a pattern emerged in which the more popular bead materials or techniques spread around the world, in the process establishing new trade routes. In a very concrete sense, the emergence of world trade has been paved with beads.

⁵ For the history of beads, we are relying on Lois Sherr Dubin (2009), *The History of Beads: From 100,000 BC to the Present, Revised and Expanded Edition*, New York: Abrams. For the specifics of the Maasai aesthetic, we are also relying on Klumpp and Kratz, cited above.

Africa: Bead materials and distribution patterns, prehistory to the present



The history of beads is inseparable from the history of trade. Beads have been a common form of money. However, the desire for exotic materials and innovative techniques in beads has, for thousands of years, motivated trade with other communities.

Today, it is not uncommon for identifiable types of old beads to be found in places separated by very long distances, on different continents, and across seas from their point of origin. For example, antique Venetian beads can be found today in the *mporo* marriage beads created by pastoralists in Kenya, but also in the New Age jewelry made by hobbyists in the United States.⁶

The arrival of new types of beads in any setting usually has a dramatic impact on the local designs for ornaments. The African appetite for novel beads was noticed by 19th century European merchants: they found that if the ship returned with the same type of bead popular on a previous trip, Africans were already bored and wanting something different. Equally, new and attractive beading motifs have been exported from one place and imitated around the world. Thus, beadwork, while it may appear fixed and traditional in any one place at any one point in time, is in fact one of the world's most fluid and communicative art forms—an outcome of the cross-cultural connections that carry beads and designs from one community to another. Indeed, rigid adherence to set designs may suggest that a culture has become cut off from other societies or is for other reasons stagnant.

In African history, beads and their trade make an early appearance. Some of the oldest beads, discovered in Kenya, were made from ostrich eggshell about 37,000 BCE. The earliest known glass beads originated in Egypt about 3,400 BCE and were traded southward toward Sudan, where the Maasai originated. Ancient East African sites yield glass beads made in India between 100 BCE to 200 CE, indicating a long-standing trade relationship between the continents. By 400 CE, large shipments of beads began arriving in Africa, brought by Indian, Middle Eastern, and European merchants. Most foreign trade occurred in a few coastal centers, such as Kilwa, off the coast of Tanzania; from there, beads moved along internal trade routes, carried by African middlemen. This period of trade created huge African empires for which beads were both an important industry and a significant feature of adornment. At the end of the 15th century—about the same time that the empires of West Africa began to trade with Europe—a group of Muslim city-states along the coast of East Africa became part of an Indian Ocean trading complex. The Maasai lands would not have been isolated from this trade, but instead would have been right in its path.

The bead trade eventually had negative consequences in Africa. Having seen many gold beads in Africa, the Europeans began to exploit the continent in search of gold, as well as of wealth in many other forms. The elaborate internal trade routes were then used to move slaves in exchange for beads. Eventually, the old caravan routes were replaced by railways and roads under colonial control. The point here, however, is not to claim trade never has negative consequences, but to establish that the bead trade is very old, wholly commercial, irretrievably international, and that it has constituted the map of the global economy from the beginning, even in Africa.

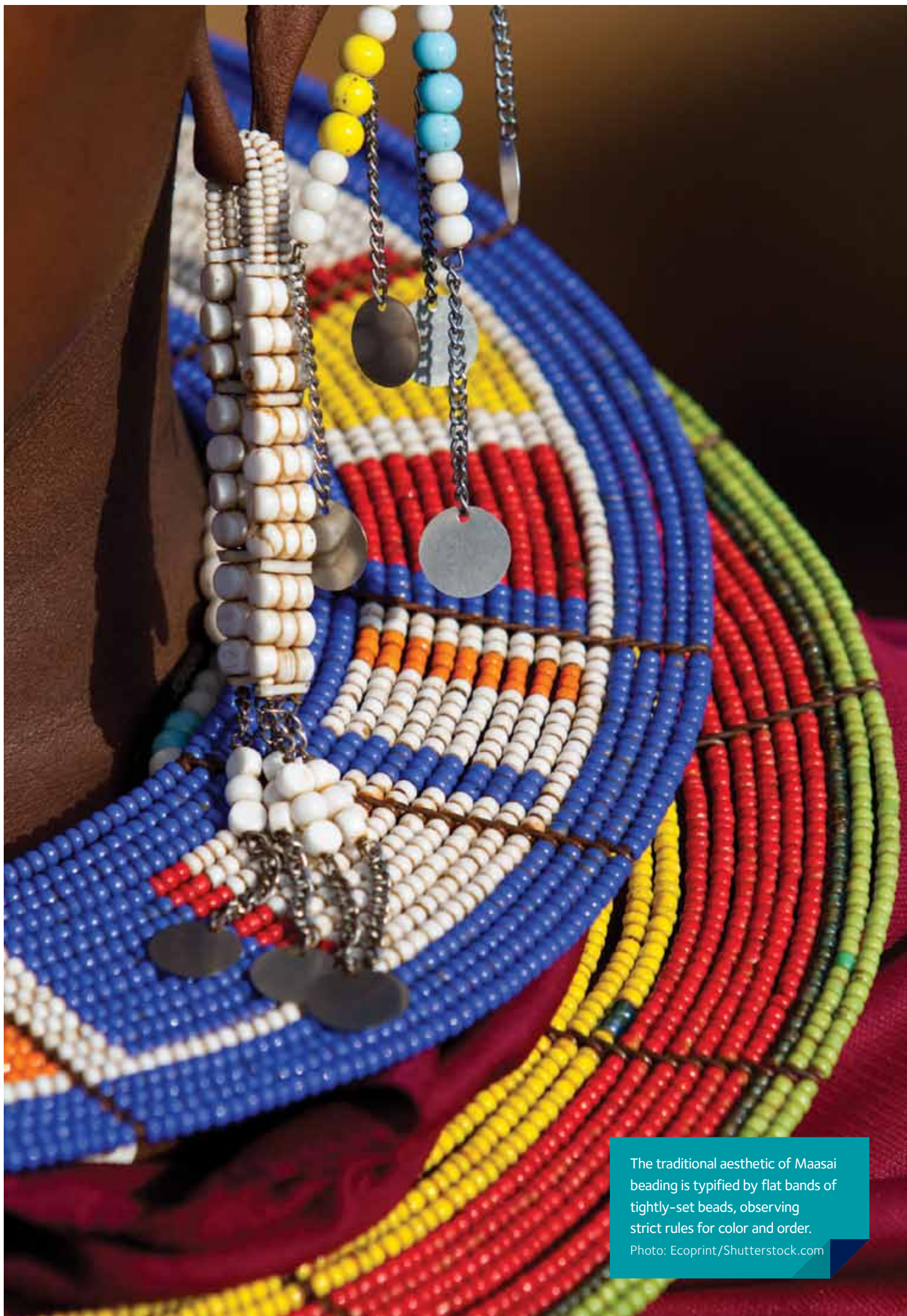
⁶ Belinda Straight (2002), "From Samburu Heirloom to New Age Artifact: The Cross-Cultural Consumption of Mporo Marriage Beads," *American Anthropologist*, 104(1): 7-21.

In spite of the colonial domination, the peoples of Africa all eventually developed into heavy bead users and the variety of practices is very wide. Nevertheless, bead experts argue that African practice has a distinctiveness that inheres partly in the community-based nature of the art. The forms and patterns are so determined by group standards that neither the artist nor the one wearing the beads are necessarily expected to express personal inspiration or unique style. The nomadic tribes, in particular, have long been known for their extensive and elaborate use of beads for both ritual and the display of social categories. The prominence of beads in nomadic life is thought to happen because a mobile culture has less interest in storing large or heavy objects that hold value. So, as the thinking goes, their wealth has been stored in beadwork.

A great influx of European glass beads in the 19th century coincided with a period of tension among the various ethnic groups of East Africa, during which distinctions among them hardened. The slightest variation in beaded adornment came to point to ethnicity (the use of a turquoise bead meaning Kipsigis or Nandi, a pink one pointing to Kikuyu). To the extent that there was enmity or a perceived pecking order, the use of a particular color or style might be adopted or shunned. Perhaps because of their asserted cultural hegemony, the Maasai aesthetic had a substantial impact on neighboring groups, who imitated and adapted it to their own work. Since their beadwork is an expression of their own felt superiority, however, the Maasai saw such outsider variations as evidence of ineptitude.

If Maasai women were to sell their products outside pastoralist communities, the beadwork would have to engage again with the global dialogue of beads, adapting to other tastes, other uses, other peoples.

Encouraging a new approach to beading among the Maasai would be no simple task of production. Introducing innovations into this beadwork would break long-standing artistic rules, potentially threatening the sense of pre-eminence and even causing offense, as any challenge to deeply valued human aesthetics inevitably does. Nevertheless, it was clear to MWEDO, right from the start, that if Maasai women were going to sell their products outside pastoralist communities, the beadwork would have to engage again with the global dialogue of beads, adapting to other tastes, other uses, other peoples. These changes might at first be experienced by the beadworkers as unintelligible or ugly. However, adapting current practices was the price of re-entering an ancient market as viable participants.



The traditional aesthetic of Maasai beading is typified by flat bands of tightly-set beads, observing strict rules for color and order.

Photo: Ecoprint/Shutterstock.com

Engaging the modern market for beadwork

By reconceptualizing Maasai women's wealth as being imbedded in their intricate skills, rather than thinking the beads *as such* were capital, the legendary "wealth in beads" might be unlocked. MWEDO's decision to focus on the Maasai beadworking skill also had practical logic:

- Beading is "women's work" and thus somewhat protected from male interference and appropriation.
- The work could add value and differentiation in a way that is not possible with the agricultural commodities the women were also trying to sell.
- The beads are not perishable, are easily stored and transported, and, if not sold, may be used again in a different piece.

At the same time, however, there were also practical challenges. The need to innovate would demand focused training and supervision. The women were also unused to the marketing orientation that was required. Instead of making whatever they knew how to make and offering it for sale, hoping someone would buy, they now had to create things to order and even learn to anticipate what the buyers might want.

"That took a long time at the beginning of the project. . . . getting women to really understand that. . . . they're actually producing for the customer. . . . It's different from just producing because you want to use it for your dances. . . . now you are producing because you want to get an income out of it and because it's a business, you want to do it as a business. So we started introducing the different aspects of a business, how do you maintain your products so that they sell better, but also how do you keep even small records of what you do, so that at the end of the day you know how much you have made and all that."

Ndinini Kimesera Sikar, co-founder, MWEDO

Furthermore, at this point in history, the Maasai live at a remove from urban centers where trade is easily conducted. This distance would make organizing the work, obtaining supplies, and communicating with customers difficult. Finally, family obligations would present barriers for scheduling large projects.

Engaging the international market. In the first years of the beading program, MWEDO concentrated on helping the women who were already selling beads to tourists passing by on the road from Arusha to Nairobi. The strategy was to reorient the market approach from selling traditional beadwork toward developing a "more consumable item." After about a year, their initial success was rewarded by a grant from the Global Fund for Women, who connected MWEDO to specialty craft stores such as Africa Crafts and Swahili Products in New York. These stores, as well as a couple of boutiques in Italy and Sweden, began to place occasional orders.

Another breakthrough occurred in 2008 when the African Development Fund gave 275 million Tanzanian shillings (about US\$150,000) to increase the capacity of the beadwork groups. With this money, MWEDO was able to hire a design expert and a production manager, as well as provide more business training for the beaders. The grant also enabled MWEDO to build the fair trade center, with its shop and café. This

institutional presence provided a flow of funds that could be used as working capital, but also increased the visibility of the new beadwork within Arusha, which in turn led to orders from hotels and lodges in wildlife parks in Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar.

The African Development Fund also brokered an order from Macy's for Christmas ornaments. The request was for beaded spheres and three-dimensional stars. Maasai beadwork tends to flat patterns (though these are often later wrapped around something three-dimensional, like an arm or a staff). So, creating objects in three dimensions (not to mention making something suitable for the annual ritual of a culture on the other side of the world) was a big challenge. However, this very need to adapt to tastes and practices in another place, while also offering a sense of novelty, is at the core of the world bead trade—as it has always been.

By reconceptualizing Maasai women's wealth as imbedded in their intricate skills, rather than thinking beads *as such* were capital, the legendary "wealth in beads" might be unlocked.

Though the American market does offer large volumes, it is highly seasonal and organized along strict expectations for timely delivery and quality control. These expectations sometimes conflict with rhythms on the ground. Consider that the Macy's order came during the summer dry season. This is the time when the cattle are herded to other pastures and markets. Even if women choose not to migrate with the livestock, they still spend a great deal of time during the day fetching water and attending ceremonies. At this time of year, the rituals alone can cost a group a whole day in the production schedule. Yet the deadline was a hard one because of demands made by a more distant ritual occasion: a shipment of Christmas ornaments that arrives in New York on December 26 is hard to sell.

Organizing the beading groups. Over the past ten years, however, MWEDO has built a pretty workable system and international orders now account for 40% of their business. About 500 women engage in the beadwork, representing roughly 10% of the total MWEDO membership. Some reside within commuting distance of MWEDO's Arusha headquarters, but there are eight groups scattered across the remote pastoralist districts of Arusha and Manyara. Each group has a distinct expertise, specializing in the design and beading of particular objects such as table mats, bags, or jewelry. Orders for earrings, for example, are distributed among the five groups renowned for stringing the long and intricate earrings of the Maasai.

Each beading group has full autonomy to decide if they will accept a job and how many women will work it. An elected leader manages orders and oversees the production process. When an order is placed, women come to a local village center to collect the required materials, walking as much as two hours under a hot sun to do so. Some take the materials home if they have childcare or domestic responsibilities—otherwise, there might be undesirable repercussions. Almost all women prefer working together at the center, however, because they can share skills and enjoy the company of others. When there are orders, the women will sit beading for five to six hours, five days a week.

MAASAI WOMEN



FAIR TRADE CENTER

-  Unique Home Décor
-  Collectable dolls
-  Leather goods
-  Traditional style jewelry
-  Christmas Ornaments
-  Fine art & crafts
-  Fabric & clothes

MWEDO



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Connections to the international community made it possible to begin selling to foreign buyers, but also to establish a café and center where work could be displayed to potential buyers from local hotels and resorts.

Training and innovation. New buyers consistently required products of shapes, patterns, and color combinations that were foreign to the Maasai. Ndinini remarks, “Like someone can even just download something from the Internet and say, ‘I want this beaded this way. It’s a butterfly!’ These women don’t make things out of butterflies, so they don’t really have butterfly shapes in their beading.” The relatively larger orders from international buyers, often one item executed in several colors, make it worthwhile to learn new designs, but each significant departure from the established ways of beading demanded careful training. A system for imparting new techniques to the women, even in the distant villages, had to be devised.

MWEDO’s new in-house designer now translates the concepts and helps the women learn to make the products. When an order for an unusual pattern or shape comes in, he calls in a couple of representatives from each group and conducts intensive training, sometimes lasting three or four days. These women then take all the materials back to their home group and teach the others the technique.

An important responsibility for group leaders, therefore, is to select those who will participate in the training. To go to the training, women need to be able to leave their households for up to four days, an absence that is not always supported by their husbands and that challenges women’s customary gender roles. However, the women covet the opportunity to attend trainings despite the household tensions and cultural objections that can ensue. MWEDO covers the cost of transportation, lunch, and accommodation. They also compensate trainees for their time, enabling women to return home with cash in their pockets, extra food for the family, and having had a chance to meet Maasai women from other communities.

The organization must also provide ongoing training and supervision of the production process to ensure workmanship. So, the designer visits each group on rotation to check progress, provide technical assistance, and troubleshoot problems that arise, such as shortages of particular materials or potential delays. This attention reduces the risk that women’s beadwork will be rejected for failing to meet customer standards or that MWEDO will miss a shipment deadline.

Finding trade partners. The people at the African Development Fund recommended that MWEDO try attending international trade fairs. The first was in New York City in 2008. When the MWEDO team arrived, they were dismayed to see how crowded with competitors it was: there were small businesses from other African countries such as Ghana and Uganda who were also trying to sell jewelry, beadwork, and similar objects. Fortunately, a friend at the Huairou Commission for Grassroots Women had arranged an introduction to Global Goods Partners, an NGO specializing in helping grassroots women’s organizations with social enterprises do business with American retailers (see Global Goods Partners, pp. 32–35).

After passing the Global Goods Partners’ screening application, MWEDO sold about 400 items to them. These products were subsequently offered on the Global Goods Partners website, where they were seen by Dana Towsey at Walmart. In 2011, Global Goods Partners contacted MWEDO to discuss a potential order through Walmart’s Empowering Women Together initiative.

Assessing capacity

Working with the world's largest retailer was a good credential to have for future business and the promise of a large order very attractive. However, the prospect immediately raises questions about pricing and capacity. To understand MWEDO's parameters for a volume order, it is helpful to look first at the current cost structure, including the potential for savings by purchasing in volume, and then at the limits posed by labor.

MWEDO sets the price for each item to be made, often in consultation with the groups who will produce it. MWEDO takes a flat 30% to cover central costs of sample production, training, quality control, financial administration, and logistics. The cost of materials, which MWEDO purchases and provides to the beaders, varies, but averages about 20% of the wholesale price. As we have detailed in the accompanying case on Katchy Kollektions of Nairobi, one of the continuing challenges for African entrepreneurs is the paucity and unpredictable availability of supplies, from cloth to dyes to beads.

MWEDO buys beads from Art Beads in Arusha, a seller with a virtual monopoly on the local market for beads. Because of Art Beads' dominance, there is little flexibility on price, as well as limited variety in the types of beads available. To qualify for volume discounts, you need a bead order for about US\$25,000. Thus far, MWEDO does not receive orders large enough to get such discounts. If MWEDO wants a different kind of bead than what Art Beads is carrying, they must buy from a source in Nairobi, which adds to cost. These limited sources are a function of the region's relative disconnectedness from the global market at this point in time.

Price and production times for MWEDO jewelry

Item Type	Range of Price to Maker in Tanzanian Shillings (TZS)	Range of Price to Maker in USD	Produced per Day	Average Income Per Day (USD)	Average Hourly Wage (USD)
Earrings	500	0.27	2 to 5	4.29	0.57
	4,000	2.18			
Bracelets	1,500	0.82	3 to 5	4.92	0.66
	3,000	1.64			
Necklace	25,000	13.65	.2 to .3	3.41	0.46
Tablecloths	10,000	5.46	1	5.46	0.73
Placemats	5,000	2.73	3 to 5	10.92	1.46

Note: Exchange rate was taken on January 22, 2014.

After materials (20%) and administrative (30%) costs are covered, MWEDO budgets the remaining 50% to go to the women's groups. Payments are allocated to each group according to the number of hours estimated to make each piece and then split among the members. Notice in the table on the previous page that, when you adjust the sales figure per item for the time taken to produce it, the higher priced items are sometimes less lucrative. Beaders can make two to five pair of earrings a day, for instance, but the payment can vary from 500 to 4,000 Tanzanian shillings (TZS) each. On average, bracelets generate a little more income than earrings—between 1,500 to 3,000 TZS each—and beaders can make three to five per day. Necklaces take three to five days to make and generate 25,000 TZS each. Non-jewelry items such as key rings or phone holders and small dolls are less lucrative, but tablecloths bring in 10,000 TZS each and can be made up in a day.

The allocation of item price by hours worked results in a varying hourly rate for labor. The implicit wage is thus quite low, especially by developed nation standards. It is important to bear in mind that this is a population struggling on less than \$2 a day, so work that pays \$5 to \$10 a day is meaningful and can make a very big difference in living standards.

All of this depends in the first instance on what has been ordered and how many. Orders tend to be small—maybe 50 earrings—and unpredictable. Thus the income to the business, as well as to workers, is actually sporadic, not smoothed out as a steady revenue stream or an hourly wage.

There are also working capital considerations. Some customers pay 100% at the time of ordering, but many others pay on delivery or much later. MWEDO's working capital funds, from the fair trade center and also from membership dues, can be used to cover the cost of purchasing materials, training, and transport while customer payment is outstanding. If an order is too large for the core fund to absorb such costs, MWEDO draws temporarily from other program budgets until payment is received. Because of this flexibility, the women can be paid in cash on delivery and, since MWEDO pays for materials, beaders are never out of money for the work, as they sometimes were in the Katchy Kollektions case.

Visualizing these relationships in a scenario also helps us understand capacity limits, as well as what kind of volume would be required for full-time, year round work. So, for example, an order large enough to merit a materials expenditure of US\$25,000 (the amount needed for a volume discount) actually would put quite a strain on production. Assuming the order was for the most lucrative item (placemats) and the materials represented 20% of the sales price (54.6 cents per mat), we would estimate that an order for 46,000 mats would be needed to qualify for the discount. If all 500 women were put to work full-time to produce that many placemats, it would take them five weeks, working five days a week, to complete the order. To provide full-time work for a year, nearly half a million tablemats would have to be ordered. Such an annual purchase,

at \$2.73 per item, plus the cost of materials and administration, would come to about \$2 million—a very large order. It would require substantial revolving capital, probably too much to be absorbed by the other programs. Banks in Tanzania will not lend against orders—you have to have title to land so that you can pledge it as collateral. Funds may be available through organizations like Kiva, but the size of the gap is larger than microcredit usually will fill. So, the limit on capacity is not just labor and materials, but capital.

Outside observers often expect that the intention should be to quickly “scale up” grassroots women’s groups like MWEDO so that they could work full-time to sell in the Walmart stores, not to fill small orders online. It is important to be aware of what achieving that objective would entail. Walmart has 4,399 stores in the US alone. As we have seen, if all 500 MWEDO women worked full-time for five weeks on an order for placemats, they would produce about 45,800 mats, which would be just about ten for each store. Doing that year-round introduces the working capital requirement we have just outlined and would only produce the same ten placemats per store, over and over. To populate a meaningful display of objects, in seasonal colors and trending styles, for the Walmart stores year-round would require capital, personnel, and training that is well beyond MWEDO’s current capacity—even trying to do so might destroy the delicate balance of programming that is key to the organization’s success. The interruptions of dry and rainy seasons, cultural ceremonies, family obligations, unreliable sources, quality control, and training demands that might take time away from production. The women dream of a stream of orders that would equate to full-time employment, this kind of work would be pretty repetitive and inflexible.

Outside observers often expect that the intention should be to quickly “scale up” grassroots women’s groups like MWEDO so they could work full-time to sell goods in the Walmart stores, not to fill small orders online. It is important to be aware of what achieving that objective would entail.

There are other women who can bead among the MWEDO membership and they could be brought in. This additional workforce would take time to organize and would lower the average income per woman, as well as potentially pose quality control issues. And, it would be unwise to build up unless there was certainty about the continuity of orders. Beefing up production would at least reduce the strain of the workload. As it is, some women complain about the stress from fixed deadlines. Their capacity to meet MWEDO’s timetable is often in conflict with daily tasks—maintaining the household, livestock rearing, and selling goods in the market—that compete with beading during daylight hours. Because Maasai homes have no electricity and paraffin is costly, beading is rarely undertaken after sundown. Still, women push themselves to meet deadlines, in part because they believe it makes future orders more likely, but doing so can take a toll on their physical health. All reported experiencing eye strain and back pain when beading intensively to meet deadlines.

The thing that I hate [is when] you can be given a little bigger order than usual and little time to complete it. You will be told to deliver it fast. You might have done it but you will be very tired. So those are some of things that we encounter as challenges. It will force you to work a little harder to finish. So you will be doing it, but under pressure.⁷

Timing pressures can also produce tensions within the group. Individual women are aware that a failure to meet a deadline will have implications for everyone else. Those who fall behind are perceived as slowing the group down and those who rush as skimping on quality, each threatening the earnings of the group as a whole, since MWEDO does not pay for beadwork that is faulty or late. Where particular items are rejected, deductions are taken from the groups' total earnings rather than from individuals.

The beadworkers themselves, however, are very keen to have large orders and see getting big customers as their answer.

You know when a big order comes then we get good money. But when the order is small then the money is also small because we will make in a group. If there is a small order I will bead a few, she will bead a few and won't then the pay be also small? But if the order is big and we all do it, don't you see the money will also be good?

It is not something big but to pray for them to get a bigger market. . . . I mean if it is possible for it to like an employment. Whereby every day I would be going for work.

The attraction of working with Walmart is the implicit promise of high volumes. In truth, though, building a business based on a single item, or anything ordered by only one customer, is not advisable or probably even possible. Eventually, there would need to be variation to satisfy the market's desire for novelty. And MWEDO's enterprise would be at constant risk of going under if the customer switched to another supplier or just decided they didn't like the placemats any more.

⁷ These comments were made by MWEDO members we interviewed. As is the normal practice in academic research, we have anonymized all respondents, except principals who have agreed to be identified. Such reporting practices are common constraints imposed by ethical guidelines involving human subjects.



A key challenge is for the beaders to invent designs for items such as placemats that will fit with tastes and uses in American households. It is difficult for them to do that because, among many other reasons, they have no experience with American culture.

Global Goods Partners

Joan Shifrin and Catherine Shimony both finished their master's degrees at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and afterward went to work for foundations funding programs that alleviate poverty in developing countries. Through their work, Shifrin and Shimony developed lasting relationships with a significant number of women's groups around the world, each focused on a social mission, such as bringing health or education to poor communities, many of whom supported their activities by making and selling craft items.

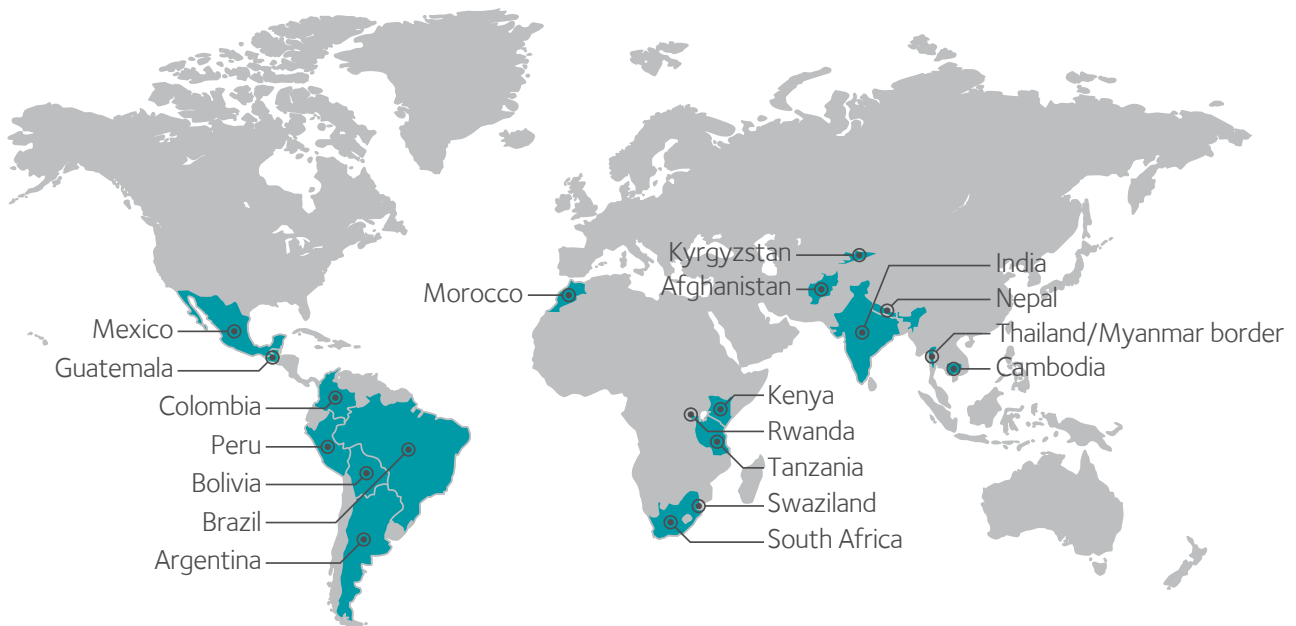
Shimony and Shifrin were inspired by the women they met whose family situation and dynamics had been positively affected by their ability to earn income through craft production. They felt that their own experiences and relationships could make a unique contribution and that they were ready to go out on their own. Supported by grants from the foundations where they had worked, the Global Fund for Children and the American Jewish World Service, as well as private donations, they opened Global Goods Partners (GGP) in 2006. Today, Global Goods Partners earns 70% of its annual revenue (now about \$700,000) from sales and the remainder from donations.

From its beginning, the intention of Global Goods Partners was to assist female artisans by connecting them to the US consumer market. Several key conditions govern operations:

- Products would be purchased from the women's groups at fair trade prices, for which Global Goods Partners provides a clear calculation method. All costs must be reflected in this price.
- Each artisan group must have a social mission that benefits women. These might include education programs, violence prevention efforts, or reproductive health initiatives, for instance.
- Production and selling of products must be a priority for any partner—the business cannot be an afterthought. That's because the objective is not merely to offload whatever craft items might be casually produced, but to design and market objects desirable to international customers in a way that can ultimately provide stable, long-term income to the producers.
- The goal for each relationship is autonomy for the local producers. To work toward this end, Global Goods Partners requires that each transaction be conducted in a professional way, meeting international procedures and standards as closely as possible, so that partners can learn to stand on their own.

Performance and compliance expectations for their partners are made very clear from the outset. Groups included in their network must submit a comprehensive application and are carefully vetted. Today, Global Goods Partners has a network of forty partner organizations in twenty countries, of which seven were originally part of the Shifrin/Shimony portfolio of relationships.

Global Goods Partners' network



All the groups produce craft items in which traditional methods are used in contemporary designs. Global Goods Partners buys the craft items, paying at least half in advance and the rest on delivery. The goods are shipped to the US at their expense—usually by air—and unpacked by the six-person team in New York. Objects are checked for quality, then stored in a Queens warehouse, a facility that gives Global Goods Partners a small amount of space to store their inventory and ship orders to customers at a reasonable price.

Initially, Shimony and Shifrin intended to sell their products exclusively to consumers online. Over time, however, retailers of various types—fair trade merchants, boutiques, museum stores—approached them to acquire product. The company made a strategic shift, becoming a wholesaler to retail customers. They still bought and stocked products for their own e-commerce, but operations were revamped to accommodate wholesale needs.

In the early days, a compelling mission was often enough to sell artisan products to consumers who wanted to “do good” through their purchases. Market demands have shifted now and the products must appeal on their own merit, even when selling through fair trade and other traditionally purpose-driven outlets. From the outset, shepherding the product design and production process has been an important part of the Global Goods Partners operation.

“People don’t realize what it entails to have a successful craft enterprise and to enter into a sophisticated market like the US. I get all the time from very smart people around the globe, saying “Oh, would you represent this group?” And, “Here’s a product they’re making.” And I look at the product and I think, “That product wouldn’t do well on the street corner in New York City, let alone in a nice boutique.”

Catherine Shimony, co-founder Global Goods Partners

Global Goods Partners gradually came to act more in the capacity of intermediary between buyers and producers, helping to translate concepts first into samples and then into products—and negotiating the many gaps in expectations.

US retailers want products that are trend-right and made from interesting materials. They want novelty in the products, which requires a constant stream of innovation in both techniques and supplies. They are also unaccustomed to tolerating any variation in specifications, quality, or timing. Very few US buyers have developing world experience and therefore simply cannot envision or understand what these demands ask of such environments. Similarly, the groups on the ground often find American market demands inscrutable, because they have never been in the environment where their products will be sold. Expectations can be unrealistic and the disappointments bitter.

For instance, communicating complex or subtle design ideas, often along with new techniques and material preferences, is hard to do using a limited window of electronic media and thin commonalities in language. And, though the traditional skill set on which the artisans' trade is based may be an important cultural practice, it may also limit their horizons for innovation. "The customer wants a specific product they see that's beautifully merchandised online or they see other people carrying it or they see it trending and they're just like 'wow, this is beautiful,'" says their in-house designer, "but I always have to say, 'well, let's check with the artisans.' For us to do something that may be a little more modern and very out of their comfort zone, we have to go in and figure out how we can train them to do those things. So that's a whole process. It could be very extensive or it could be, we teach one person over Skype and that person can teach everyone else." The particular type of product may seem strange to the local groups—they may have never seen a similar item in use. The materials required to get a desired color, texture, shape, or effect may be unknown to them, unavailable in the region, or too expensive for purchase.

Even after painstaking effort, a sample produced by this process may not approach the item in the client's imagination. In the US fashion market, it is common practice to generate a sequence of samples with the full expectation that some will be successful and others not. But the difficulty and expense of producing samples under such tenuous conditions as the local women's groups face—and then getting no order—can leave the artisans feeling ill-used.

If the order is placed, there are still production and delivery hurdles to overcome. Just as detailed in the accompanying Katchy Kollektions case, the partners face uncertain supplies and, in some cases, local indifference to deadlines. They are also much more vulnerable to systemic interruptions (storms, earthquakes,

power outages) than are US suppliers. Clients without developing country experience often do not understand: “No matter how much I try to explain on behalf of our artisans, it’s really hard for clients to see where they’re coming from unless they’ve actually met with the artisans, spoken to them, or have been to visit them at their workshops and have seen their living and working conditions.”

Global Goods Partners tries very hard to achieve the pace required to work with American retailers. They do this, in the first instance, by impressing upon their partners the need to meet deadlines, but it sometimes is hard for the local craft groups to understand why there is such a hurry. “Because the artisans also don’t understand how we work. It’s the same thing: if they came over to the States and saw how we work, I think they’d get a little blown away. But for our artisans to work with us, they have to try to somewhat understand that. . . . Not even opening their mind to that difference has closed doors for artisans because they can’t catch up with us or they can’t understand how we do business. It’s the amount of work per week that we put into our jobs and the sense of urgency for product, for deadlines.”

Despite all these challenges, more than thirty partner groups have been added to the network and, over the years, fewer than five have been lost. The reason for severing relationships is usually that the income-generating aspect of the organization is not being given enough attention. The challenge of adapting to the design, scheduling, and quality expectations demands focus and effort. Many social mission groups just sell whatever traditional crafts they make—but these cannot be sold because they don’t appeal to the American market.

“We are presented with these amazing women’s rights organizations that we definitely want to support with an income stream through craft, but it’s not possible if the product doesn’t have the capability of becoming a strong product in the US market. Or, if we recognise early on from our application form that the craft enterprise piece of what that organisation is doing is a minor, non-priority item, it’s just not going to do well.”
Catherine Shimony, co-founder, Global Goods Partners

As further indication of the success achieved by this careful, but tough mentorship, a number of their partners now work with international buyers directly, having now learned the ropes of how to interface with this market well enough to go out on their own.

Both EWT and Global Goods Partners are working toward the economic empowerment of women and both envision a gradual model in which small enterprises are brought on board the global market. Neither envision a sudden, potentially destructive, jump into mass production for Walmart stores, but both hope that their efforts will eventually lead to bigger business for the organizations they engage.

Walmart Ethical Sourcing Audit

All Walmart suppliers must pass an audit ensuring that their manufacturing conditions meet international standards for safety, labor practices, and environmental impact. Many requirements seem simple and basic from the perspective of the developed nations. For instance, there must be exit signage and extinguishers placed appropriately for employees to find and use in a crisis. There are standards related to the electrical wiring, the width of exits, and the swing of doors. Workers must be able to prove that they are of legal age to be employed. Hours must be clocked and payments must be standardized. Children may not be present.

Many developing-country EWT businesses are very small. Owners may struggle to pass the audit because, for instance, expensive structural changes are needed (e.g., widening a door) or because their workers typically don't have birth certificates.

Compliance must be verified by an independent auditor operating in that country. Walmart pays the cost of the first audit (about US\$3,000) for an EWT supplier. However, some suppliers in developing nations experience multiple audit failures. The production for Walmart is then delayed, so the business gets no benefit from the relationship while implementing what may be costly changes and must pay for each repeat visit. Once the company passes the initial audit, they must still undergo annual renewals for which they must pay.

The audit process is becoming a significant and controversial barrier among EWT suppliers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, but is seldom problematic for those in North America. However, having passed the Walmart audit, the business does gain a credential that appeals to other potential clients from developed nations. So, successfully demonstrating this compliance can lead to more business. Thus, the ethical sourcing audit, though painful and expensive, is another mechanism through which a relationship with Walmart can exert a positive business impact.

The impact of the Ethical Sourcing Audit

Producing an even flow of orders to fill a retail environment such as the Walmart stores likely requires a modern factory set-up, rather than a grassroots village effort. The ethical sourcing requirements are thus predicated on such a workplace and are intended to avoid the abuses that can occur in factories. Unfortunately, when these same restrictions are imposed, unabridged, on an organization like MWEDO, the results can be inappropriate.

To determine whether MWEDO met the conditions demanded by the ethical audit, a team of independent auditors from Kenya visited the central facilities in Arusha and travelled to all eight groups, including Simanjiro district 250 kilometers out of Arusha. Several groups were visited twice.

As has happened with other developing country suppliers to EWT, the setting yielded compliance puzzles, even though the Walmart audit is considered to be a basic international standard. Since the women often work in an open space in a village with no plumbing or electricity, requirements for lighted exits and backup electrical systems were pretty irrelevant. Fortunately, the auditors were sensible enough to recognize the limits of the context and required only a few adjustments. Pit latrine toilets were installed, even though the normal living arrangements do not include toilets and the Maasai still practice open defecation. Global Goods Partners paid for first aid kits, though they were reasonably sure the supplies would be used for something else—materials of all sorts are too scarce to let them sit by “just in case.” Dustbins and gloves were purchased for removing production waste, even though the only supplies are beads (which are not wasted) and wire—and any waste was probably subsequently dumped into an open communal pile (and later burned), as is the normal practice in rural Africa. The women were all given thimbles and asked to wear them, a request that did not sit well with a culture that already has a long-established tradition of beading without them.

Though the women essentially work by the piece, MWEDO’s system of allocating the time normally taken for each piece and paying on that basis passed the requirement for an hourly wage. We are not sure what happened about women taking materials and working at home—this is not allowed under the guidelines and may have been overlooked or unclear to the auditors.

The big problem came with trying to establish the age of the workers, who must all be 18 or more to meet these standards. Young people in rural Africa are sometimes small for their age because of poor nutrition. And it is common for them not to know their age because the community does not keep records. Tanzania does not issue identity cards—and even if they did, the Maasai might resist getting them. Most of these women knew the approximate year they were born, but some who claimed to be of age did not look old enough to the auditors. Since there was no official documentation, the auditors wanted to disallow them.

MWEDO acknowledges that Maasai women tend to marry and have children young, but argues that such girls are in need of livelihood activity as much as older women are. Ndinini remembered: “Two or three women looked young to them. So they actually wrote that in the report, that the women are below eighteen, and so they are considered as children. And so child labor and, you know, they had all these issues. [But] these are women with children. . . . Even though they might be sixteen, because I cannot prove that they are not, but they definitely have a reason why they should be part of the group and they need to earn in order to give something for their children.”

In the end, MWEDO settled on using election cards as documentation, which many women have, in part because of MWEDO’s rights programs. Bear in mind, though, that if a woman does not have an election card, it may be because she is very disempowered at home and so excluding her from the group on that basis only magnifies her distress.

The ethical sourcing audit requirements envision a very different kind of culture and workplace and thus, even with the best of intentions, can penalize the very people the intervention is designed to benefit.

Though readers will understand why Walmart must require compliance with these standards, we want to use this chance to remark about how these requirements, which envision a very different kind of workplace, exclude people in a culture that has no infrastructure and engages in practices, such as child sex and early marriage, that severely disadvantage females. Thus, in this case, the standards penalize the very people the intervention is designed to benefit.

Selling through Walmart

"We had seen their stuff on the Global Goods website and it was absolutely beautiful," remembered Dana Towsey, the buyer for Empowering Women Together, "It felt very current and saleable to the Western market." The Walmart team asked Global Goods Partners to work with MWEDO to develop a \$25 necklace and an \$18 beaded box with matching earrings. The EWT team actually thought this price was at the top of what would appeal to the Walmart consumer. Even so, they were pleased with the ultimate styling of the product and were optimistic about the prospects with MWEDO.



Buyers at Walmart were pleased with the styling of this necklace, but consumers did not buy it.

For this order, the materials comprised a much larger percentage of cost than is the norm for MWEDO, about 30% rather than 20%. The cost breakdown is set out in the following table.

Cost breakdown

Pricing components	Necklace	Earring Box Set		
		Earrings	Box	Set
Materials	6.00	2.40	2.70	5.10
Labor	8.00	3.00	3.00	6.00
MWEDO Margin	6.00	2.45	-	2.45
TOTAL	\$20.00	\$7.85	\$5.70	\$13.55

Transportation costs paid by Global Goods Partners added another 35% of what was paid to MWEDO because the shipment was too small to go any way except airfreight. Upon delivery in the US, the jewelry must then be quality checked, packaged, tagged, given bar codes, and so forth by Global Goods Partners. The very small and unassuming office Global Goods Partners maintains in New York has to be paid for—and the employees must be compensated. However, once these costs were added to the price, the total exceeded the target for Walmart. Someone had to give up a bit of profit to make the transaction work. On this trade, Global Goods Partners sacrificed for the sake of future potential and transferred the objects to Walmart with a margin added that is less than a third of what they normally charge.

In the end, the necklace went online for \$30, as did the boxed set of earrings, both a high price for Walmart consumers. Unfortunately, once EWT launched, none of the fashion jewelry on offer, including the MWEDO pieces, did well. Dana had ordered a few hundred of the MWEDO set, in three colors, but sold only a few. Everyone was crestfallen.

Walmart deals with products that don't sell by marking them down. Today, the MWEDO necklace is still offered online for the clearance price of \$14. Note that this price is well below MWEDO's cost to produce the necklace, but Walmart has still been unable to sell the inventory. In the end, the product must move through to the consumer or the entire process is a failure and cannot be repeated. For this reason, styling and pricing must meet the demands of the market.

In the end, the consumer must buy the product or the entire process is a failure that cannot be repeated. For this reason, styling and pricing must meet the demands of the market.

The cost structure of MWEDO and the price sensitivity of the Walmart shopper currently make a partnership between EWT and MWEDO unworkable. So, Global Goods Partners is now working with MWEDO to try to improve their capacity and find ways to reduce the cost of materials. It may be possible that costs eventually can be reduced enough to re-engage Walmart. However, an alternative approach would be to try to sell the beadwork at a higher price through a channel where customers are accustomed to paying more. Such a strategy, however, will require developing more innovative designs and more varied sources of beads, as well as a branding story.

Branding the beading

A casual look at other US sites selling beaded jewelry gives us some perspective on prices. The items sold by Women's Bean Project, for instance, are also handmade and also have a good story to appeal to consumers. Their prices are, on average, slightly lower than the MWEDO offering on EWT. If you look at Etsy, an online site where American artisans, mostly women, often sell beaded jewelry, you can see a very wide range of prices, some much higher and some much lower than the MWEDO offering. On J. Jill, a fashion site that appeals to professional women, there are always simple beaded items on sale, but the prices run nearly twice what EWT was asking for the MWEDO items. On Anthropologie, also a higher-priced site, there are quite a few "ethically sourced," artisanal necklaces and they run from \$50 to \$200. Sundance Jewelry Catalog offers an array of artisanal jewelry, some with semi-precious stones or made with gold and silver, but the prices are a multiple of ten over MWEDO's.

These Halloween earrings sell for only \$12 on Etsy. The image is digitally produced and capped with a round epoxy tile. The appeal is not precious stones or intricate work, but an attractive, seasonally-appropriate picture. The market knowledge behind this offering is something the Maasai women would be hard-pressed to acquire.

Photo: Halloween earrings by Tereasa Brooks, Blue Rose Beadery, on www.etsy.com



The higher priced necklaces on any site tend to use either silver or stone beads (such as jade) or novelty beads. Such beads add substantially to cost and would be hard for MWEDO to source. However, the beads are only part of the picture. The rest is design and narrative. The pieces on each of these sites will often include a blurb about who made it, how, and why. Though they are not usually aggressively branded, the “story telling” behind each piece is important.

None of these stories is as compelling as the one the Maasai women have to tell, in our view. And here we do not just mean that the Maasai are in need, but we believe the story of their culture and its long-standing tradition of beading, as well as its widely admired aesthetic, is something that could be made very attractive to upscale consumers.

Global Goods Partners is now working with MWEDO to try and develop a brand. This will require product design development, in addition to obvious things like naming, story, and graphics. The women themselves are beginning to suggest design innovations of their own. So far, these have been appropriate only to the local market, but the change in orientation and the engagement of the Maasai imagination is an important watershed.

Maasai women must come to understand the global market well enough to support a branded line and the entire enterprise will need a stronger connection to the world supply of beads.

Indeed, currently, a key challenge is to maintain ownership over new designs. This is difficult to do for several reasons. One is that traditional handicrafts are by nature an open source activity. Whether you look at quilting or needlepoint or any of a myriad of handicrafts, the history consistently is that an attractive pattern will be imitated and adapted, sometimes spreading far and wide. This is especially true of beading and, after all, people in Africa have been imitating Maasai beading for centuries. Further, the Maasai beading itself is a communal form: groups of women make the beads together for each occasion, according to design rules set by their culture. So, to be suddenly trying to claim ownership over a design probably goes against local common sense and long practice. Nevertheless, it is a good sign that other groups in Arusha have been snooping around, trying to see designs MWEDO is developing. They must admire the work and believe it is marketable: nobody steals bad designs.



These new products have been developed in collaboration with Global Goods Partners, as part of continuing efforts to develop a branded strategy for MWEDO.



Ripping off designs is a behavior that is rampant in the global market, anyway. You also see fads rippling through designs and colors repeatedly in the fashion pages. Designers in the developed nations deal with such issues with all kinds of attempts at trademark protection (not usually possible with something like, say, the colors in a necklace) and by constantly innovating. Ultimately, the key for MWEDO will be to develop a consistent stream of distinctive, appealing work attached to a respected trademark. But the Maasai women must come to understand the global market well enough and the entire enterprise will need a stronger connection to the world supply of beads.

Women's economic empowerment

A branded strategy is the opposite of the trudge to produce mountains of the same thing for sale at a cheap price. However, a branded approach often does not scale as quickly. Thus, such an approach is not often seen as a viable path for projects focused on helping the poor. Much of the push to scale is rooted in the sense of urgency to help populations under severe stress. So, in addition to evaluating the business circumstance, it is important to look at the impact on the women.

We spoke to 30 Maasai women in Arusha, as well as in two rural villages, Ketumbeine and Longido. This is a small sample and the conversations were arranged by MWEDO, so there is a potential for bias. However, a recent study of MWEDO published by Mara Goldman and Jani Little in *World Development*, has findings that are consistent with our own observations, which gives us more confidence about the accuracy of what we were told.⁸

Given the unpredictable stream of orders, insufficient to count as full-time employment, it was not surprising that all the women have to keep up other income-generating activities and accept help from other family members in order to make ends meet. The beadwork, alone, is not sufficient.

Though MWEDO's payments to the beaders are calculated as an hourly wage for purposes of reporting, in truth payments are made when orders are delivered. This means that engaging in this project does not produce a steady income stream, but instead a series of lump sum payments. The larger, less frequent payments were nevertheless appreciated because the timing of payments often has coincided with dry season, when their resources are even more constrained, or with lump payments for children's school fees. The money from the beading also vastly exceeds the other income streams available to the women.

When they [the orders] are taken away, at the back of my mind I know money will come and it will be used for the kid's school fees or if I have a problem. It helps me.

You know this money I get from beading, it comes when you are broke. It comes when you are hungry.

Beads have more money, because even if you wait maybe for a month. . . . when it comes you get it once, like fifty thousand, but this other small business of sugar you hardly even get one thousand once.

⁸ Goldman and Little.

The seemingly random pattern of payments does contribute to the general sense of uncertainty, however: “You cannot be sure because you can stay for so like two months without any work. . . . There are times when there is work and there is time when there is no work. ”

Women do have freedom to determine how their MWEDO money is spent largely because beading, as “women’s work,” lies beyond the purview of men. As expected, beading carries none of the risks of gender-shared work such as cash-cropping or tending livestock, over which women exert little control.

You see what is still keeping our children alive is the beadwork we are doing here through your organization, because even the cows that we have as the Maasai they do not use them for taking care of the children, they [men] don’t give us any authority to use the cattle to feed our children. If it was not for this God blessed organization we would be dead.

Married women often continued to negotiate expenditures with their husbands (about half our sample were married and the rest were mostly widowed). Some said their husbands valued them more since they began beading for MWEDO and that the additional earnings helped to diffuse marital tensions.

It is because when we get orders it gives me a chance to work. When I do the work then I get money. When I bring this money home, it brings peace at home and my husband feels he is not alone.

Whatever profits I make here it helps me buy flour for my family and to also pay for our children’s education. . . . the school fees too. It makes me feel confident because even my husband is happy. He feels I am no longer his burden.

Tellingly, nearly all married women claimed to be shielding a portion of income for their own use, for example, by opening bank accounts. Over half had formal financial accounts, a surprising number given that the Maasai are customarily averse to retaining cash as an asset, viewing livestock, rather than currency, as a buffer against future uncertainties and obligations. Also of interest is the changed attitude toward land ownership that has resulted from the MWEDO experience:

We have all the knowledge through this organization and regarding land too. I have the knowledge that land is sweet. It is like food that doesn’t spoil. I got the knowledge of land from MWEDO. . . . We know that you if you build on a land your kids will feed, you will build on the land and it will bring you money to send your kids to school when you rent them out and have a title deed. We have been trained how to make payments. We have received advice on how to get the forms that you fill in and all the processes to go through until the land belongs to you.

In Goldman and Little's study, the women were getting title to land by putting both their husband's and their name on the deed. This joint ownership made the innovation acceptable to the men; however, one woman reported to them that she had hidden the paperwork from her husband so that he could not sell the plot and take the profit.

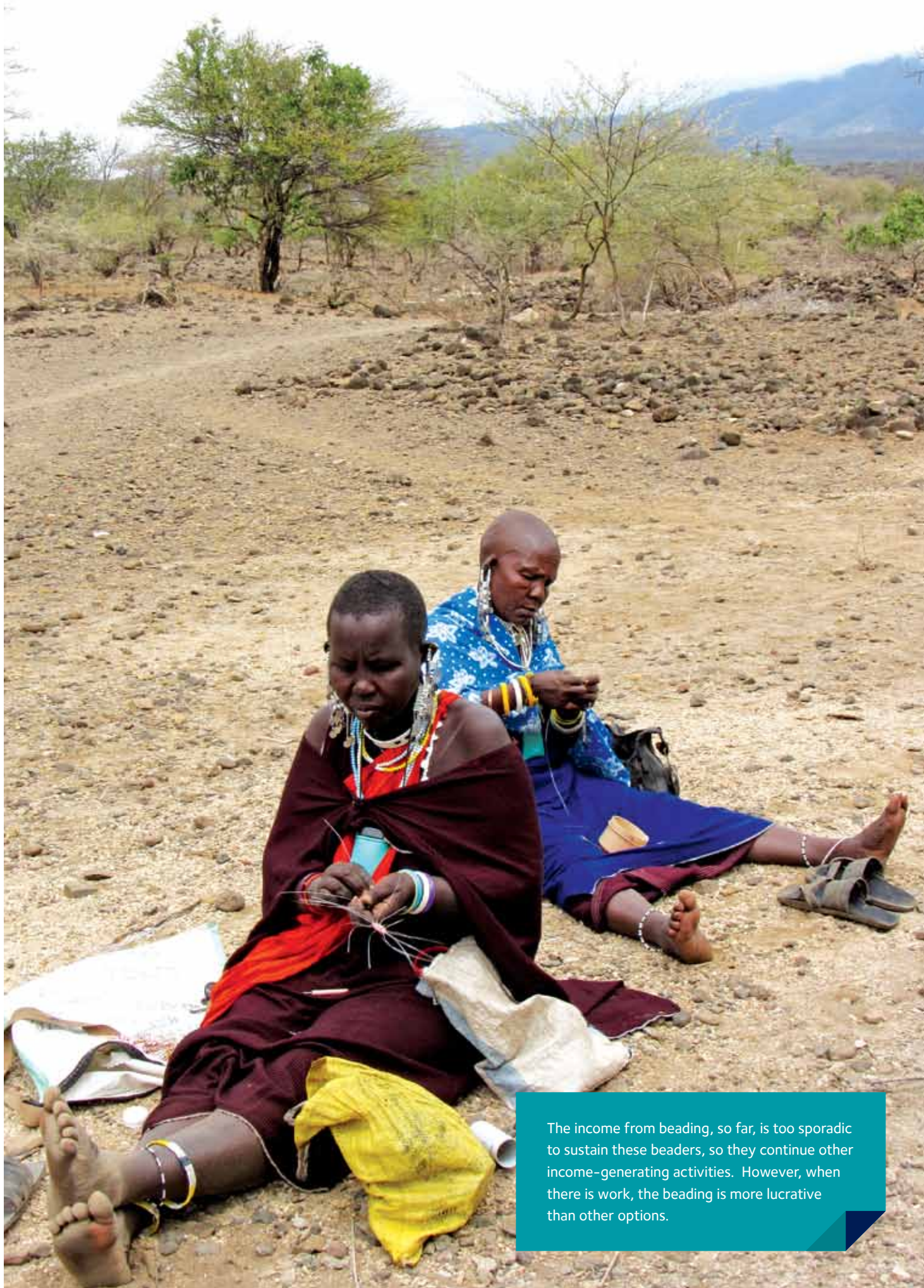
MWEDO's combined emphasis on group economics, financial planning, and capital investment also seemed to encourage the women to attend more closely to the uses of their money. Again, this finding is consistent with Goldman and Little. We found that most women are involved in group savings activities oriented towards accumulating durable assets or investing in small businesses. Some operate deposit and savings accounts with the village community bank and pool their income to invest in a shared asset, such as a sewing machine or land to grow vegetables to sell, so that they can expand their business and earn more.

Other groups maintain a communal fund from which women, each in turn, are loaned money to meet household needs, whether making their housing structures more permanent or meeting medical expenses.

We have an agreement that from every order we work on here we shall contribute 10%. . . . to keep it as savings. We keep it in a bank account. . . . With the money that we have in the account we usually look at. . . . everybody [who] has problems back at home. You might need to borrow the money to go and farm, you might need money to go and do something like maybe taking your child to school, then you might borrow money from that account. We will lend you the money so that you will go and fulfil that need, after that then she can return the money with a little interest.

Since the poor are especially vulnerable to sudden financial emergencies, a fund that helps to even out such needs is of value.

The financial benefits of the MWEDO project are therefore not limited to the payments for orders, but extend to the future earnings that may come from investment as well as the savings safety net. However, these longer term benefits would not be possible had MWEDO not already laid the ground work of financial awareness, as well as literacy and rights work. Remember, however, that having land rights doesn't go very far if you don't have the money to buy property. The tendency for the economic development discourse to parse economic empowerment from a rights-based approach seems artificial in this, as well as many other, concrete instances.



The income from beading, so far, is too sporadic to sustain these beaders, so they continue other income-generating activities. However, when there is work, the beading is more lucrative than other options.

Along with improvements in the well-being of their households, women's status within the community has visibly increased.

We know because when there are functions in our Maasai community, like when there is fundraising in a certain place they send us a letter of invitation to assist. We see that we are respected because even the leaders of this area now recognize us unlike before. They inform us of any important issue that affects our community.

Thus, political empowerment helped the women economically (for instance, in giving them election cards that allowed them to work), but the economic empowerment in turn is affecting the women's political standing. Everywhere in the world, money and power are closely tied. We should not be surprised when the same pattern appears among the rural poor.

Everywhere in the world, money and power are closely tied. We should not be surprised when the same pattern appears among the rural poor.

In the end, there does seem to be something one might call "empowerment" happening among the MWEDO membership, even if their dream of "employment" is still beyond grasp. To a large degree, this empowerment is the result of the portfolio of work already done by MWEDO. This preparatory platform seems a key distinction of this arrangement and the impact on outcomes is probably very important. Thus, even if the exchange relationship with EWT had been fully successful, it would be specious to attribute the empowerment effects solely to that relationship.

Measurement challenges

In this case, the order made by Walmart was small and is likely not to be repeated, at least in the near future. This decision results from a realistic and considerate assessment of the three partners' current position and says nothing about whether EWT might be successful with another Global Goods Partner or whether MWEDO can make it by selling to other outlets. Nevertheless, there are several measurement lessons to be learned and these strongly echo the findings from our companion cases, Katchy Kollektions and Women's Bean Project.

Network effects. The complexity and interrelatedness of MWEDO's programs suggests to us that a model of collective support, with attention from a variety of partners (local and international), each focused on the domain of concern for which they are best suited, is more likely to be successful than the prevailing model, in which a single funder with one program looks for an isolated outcome to measure, regardless of what else might be going on at the site. However, methods for actually measuring networks of this complex and heterogeneous nature have not been developed.

Impact on the entrepreneur. In most cases, assessment programs for women's entrepreneurship look first at the health of the business and its impact on the owner, then on the impact on her employees. Here, however, the female members/employees "own" MWEDO as a collective. The founders are a group of three women who were already advantaged by education and contacts when they began their endeavor: they were confident women, starting from a substantially empowered position, who chose to use their good fortune to help empower others. Throwing Ndinini, Maria, and Josephine into a pool of other entrepreneurs to measure their increase in confidence, or their improved ability to educate children, seems inappropriate. If we thought these three women were unique or even that they were outliers, we might be less concerned. But the nature of the movement to empower women economically will likely mean that many of the entrepreneurs in the system intend to help others. Indeed, among all three cases we have written up, as well as a substantial percentage of those we visited, at least half of the entrepreneurs were in business to help other women.

Employee impact. Normally, economic development interventions focused on supporting women as entrepreneurs measure the number of employees as an indicator of success, sometimes also including their average wage as a measurement. Counting the number of employees or measuring their incomes is, in MWEDO's case, potentially very misleading. Though we know there are 500 women in the overall group, they do not all work on every project and they share payment collectively. Their "wages" vary a great deal depending on orders—an average of a fictive hourly wage would be an unrealistic report of what is happening on the ground.

Furthermore, other financial outcomes may be as meaningful as wages. Reinvestment of group earnings into other assets is a practice with long-term benefits that should be accounted for in the metrics. Opening bank accounts is an important outcome, as is the increased financial literacy. It seems that arriving at a set of metrics relating to two or three financial outcomes should balance too great an emphasis on wages. These, however, could not be attributed solely to the actions of any one donor or customer.

In setting goals for moving forward we must ask ourselves whether we are satisfied with “employment”—even dull, repetitive, low-paying jobs—as a proxy for “empowerment,” or whether it is worth the wait for enterprises like MWEDO to build their heritage into a brand, thus allowing their members to be artisans, rather than just workers.

Accounting for disadvantage. In approaching the task of measuring the impact of an intervention on behalf of Maasai women, we are also confronted with the challenge of accounting for a disadvantaged subculture. Even within the fairly bleak picture for women in Tanzania, the Maasai are an outlier. Because they begin from a point of illiteracy and innumeracy, not even able to speak to people beyond their community, their starting point is behind even the felons and drug addicts helped by Women’s Bean Project. Some adjustment to the outcome metrics should probably be made for specially challenged and at risk populations.

Isolating the economics. Where would we draw the line between outcomes of economic empowerment versus the other programs? In measurement tools as well as intervention tactics, it is important to recognize that “empowerment” is something much more complex than “employment.” Key factors in the gender situation among the Maasai are very salient as rights issues: female genital cutting, early marriage, domestic violence. However, several of these phenomena are thought best fought by making it possible for women to earn, thus to become autonomous enough to avoid negative marital arrangements. It does seem to us that a major objective for women’s empowerment, whether the program is about rights, economics, education, or health, should be a reduction in the incidence of threats, like early marriage and intimate partner violence, to the wellbeing of women. Thus, the degree to which women can exercise rights for themselves should be monitored as an outcome of economic autonomy. We feel a battery of measures covering key points of safety and basic rights should probably be a standard part of metrics for all women’s empowerment programs, including this one.

Time to impact. Most donors expect to see the impact of a program within 12 to 18 months. Realistically, however, the kinds of outcomes most likely to indicate substantive change would not appear that quickly. One solution is to convince the international donor community to adjust their horizons to something more feasible. Another option would be to develop a set of psychometric measures that could be used to, for instance, anticipate a woman’s emotional readiness to exercise her rights. Standard scales for confidence, self-efficacy, or mastery would be useful in this regard, but these have seldom been tested sufficiently, especially among relevant populations, to provide reference points for evaluation.

Push to scale. The desire to get quick results and the propensity to dismiss any program that does not scale to commodity proportions seems extremely problematic to us. As we have tried to illustrate, a rush to scale MWEDO’s beading project might derail the carefully built system that makes the overall effort to lift up the women possible, while pushing the beaders themselves into a mode of work that the world has long since deemed undesirable. The beading done by Maasai women is not just repetitive, mindless drudgery, but an art form. If the point is to monetize the knowledge these women have, then reducing it to machine status is utterly counterproductive. A measurement system that focuses exclusively on rapid business growth would do exactly that.

Conclusion

Expecting a single economic program, no matter how strong the sponsor, to rescue a large population from poverty, is naive. There are about a million Maasai living in Tanzania and Kenya, of whom perhaps half are females over the age of twelve. MWEDO's bead-making project is reaching 500 of them and still having only an intermittent impact on the ability to provide food. Even if one were to push very hard toward a high volume business, which we do think is unwise, you could never expect this one activity to provide a livelihood for a thousand times that many women.

The size of the challenge is not the only reason such an expectation is a problem. This imagined scenario contradicts the way markets work. Healthy markets circulate a diversity of goods and services. A one-commodity culture, whether that commodity is necklaces, tea, or T-shirts, is not going to be economically healthy. Indeed, this reliance on one commodity is already too often the problem in much of Africa.

Equally unrealistic, however, is the notion that bequeathing abstract rights on a group of women as completely disempowered as the Maasai will be enough to set them free. The concerted efforts from several international groups, focused on education, health, and economics as well as rights, have been necessary for MWEDO to make the considerable progress that they have. We believe bundled programs and multiple sponsors, each with their own expertise, will be necessary for success, whether in Tanzania or in any other country where women are poor and disadvantaged.

While the conditions faced by Maasai women are particularly severe, it is worth noting that the pattern of their subordination within their own society bears disturbing similarities to those endured by women all over the world.

The argument that the isolation, disenfranchisement, and mistreatment of women is ever a matter of unique cultural heritage that should be protected and continued is becoming harder to make. The idea that Maasai women should suffer so that their culture may be preserved, as if under a glass dome, flies in the face of our knowledge of gender norms as a systemic world problem.

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Like war and disease, the subordination of women appears to be one of our species' more sinister aspects, not a matter of local eccentricity. Rather than treat these instances as a mildly embarrassing feature of another's culture, we perhaps should be more firm in our stance that "women's rights are human rights." Any notion of "human rights" held back from half of humanity is a contradiction in terms.

Notice also, that the changes in economic practice being enacted here—getting title to land, opening bank accounts to hold cash—not only alter the gender inequality that typifies traditional Maasai culture, but also reconfigure their economic assumptions about how to hold wealth and assert ownership. We should not, on the one hand, hesitate to intervene on behalf of women out of consideration for a culture where they have no rights, yet simultaneously overlook the way poverty alleviation and other "social good" measures also fundamentally change the culture.

Empowering Women through Market Access

This case study was developed as part of a research initiative undertaken by the University of Oxford to develop measurements for evaluating the impact of Walmart's Empowering Women Together (EWT) program. EWT focuses on bringing small businesses that are owned or led by women into the Walmart supplier base, thus opening a large market to them. Through this Maasai Women Development Organisation (MWEDO), Tanzania case study, along with the companion Katchy Kollektions, Kenya case study, and the Women's Bean Project, USA case study, we intend to illustrate the questions that arise in designing appropriate metrics, while also showing how the difference in local conditions affects business potential. A companion piece that surveys current literature and practice in measurements relevant to EWT is being compiled and will also be made public.

Saïd Business School

Saïd Business School is one of the world's leading and most entrepreneurial business schools. An integral part of the University of Oxford, the School embodies the academic rigour and forward thinking that has made Oxford a world leader in education. The School is dedicated to developing a new generation of business leaders and entrepreneurs and conducting research not only into the nature of business, but the connections between business and the wider world.

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