



Building skills and making viable products

In our new Insights Series, TRANSFORM shares successes and learnings from our projects to:

- Help the SME and entrepreneur community gain knowledge and learn from our projects
- Showcase to funders what can be achieved through impact-led initiative

PROJECT AT A GLANCE:

WORKING WITH YOUNG CREATIVES TO DESIGN CIRCULAR PRODUCTS

Kenyan fashion brand, **KikoRomeo** puts sustainability at its core, striving to create longevity in each garment by using handmade and hand-dyed fabrics as well as hand-carved trims, sourced from the African continent.

MESH is a Kenyan start-up that provides an online community for entrepreneurs in the informal economy, connecting young entrepreneurs with businesses needing creative talent.

THE CHALLENGE

80% of workers in Kenya work in the informal sector, as 'formal' jobs are limited¹. Many young women with creative skills (designers, tailors, dressmakers etc.), haven't had the training they need to earn income from working in the informal sector. At the same time, Kenya sees vast swathes of textile waste, with over 900 million items sent to Kenya from around the globe in 2021².

THE INNOVATION

TRANSFORM supported MESH and KikoRomeo to upskill young women to help them create sustainable and commercially viable fashion and household products, made from textile waste. The MESH platform connected 19 young women with the label, providing them with high-value training and work opportunities. KikoRomeo gained new, skilled workers and creative ideas.

THE IMPACT

KikoRomeo and the young women successfully collaborated to design a small collection of products from recycled textile waste. This included bags, laundry bags, make-up bags and tie-dyed trousers. Both learned new skills they can take forward into further informal and formal employment.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Having tested how the products sold in KikoRomeo sales outlets over the Christmas period, the team believe the most viable product to be the crochet bags, which they plan to sell internationally and in Kenya.



Find out more

Collaboration is key to scaling social enterprises. Learn more about the successful programmes that other enterprises and funders have delivered together. [Read more stories here.](#)

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¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5afacd43ed915d0df4e8ce4d/Jobs_in_Kenya.pdf

² <https://cleanupkenya.org/mitumba-waste-report/>

INSIGHTS: WORKING WITH WOMEN IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR

1. FLEXIBILITY IS IMPORTANT

It's common for family demands to come first with many of the young women being primary caregivers.

A certain flexibility needs to be built into the business model to cater for caregiver needs. For example, building more time into supply chains and deliverables.

Keep two-way communications open and regular to understand where changes might be needed to accommodate for caring and other responsibilities.

2. ACTIVELY THINK ABOUT HOW TO INCLUDE WOMEN

It's key to ensure your business reflects your employees and your ethos.

MESH has done considerable work to ensure that they create a gender-sensitive space, with female membership of their platform having climbed from 25% in the early days to 50% today.

They found it important to make sure that content always features female voices and faces to ensure that women see role models and examples that they can relate to.



3. CREATE A SAFE SPACE

Make well-being and safety a priority.

Counselling and meditation classes were offered to women as often events in their personal lives took a toll on them and their working day. Classes offered a safe space for the young women to support each other on both a personal and professional level and meditation before classes helped reduce stress. The project received great feedback on the classes as it provided a new space/channel to deal with stressful situations.

Ask for regular feedback on work-life balance initiatives.

4. A MAKER'S SKILL IS AN EXPRESSION OF THEIR CREATIVITY

Especially for the younger, Gen Z makers.

They love to experiment and sometimes this can cause issues when the production process requires standardised products to be made multiple times. Be clear on what you need, what can be customised and what cannot.

However, for some of the makers, seeing the products they made being sold was confidence building, and one maker had a crochet top they produced showcased at Lagos Fashion Week.

INSIGHTS: MAKING COMMERCIALLY VIABLE PRODUCTS FROM WASTE

1. THE DESIGN PROCESS WITH RECYCLED MATERIALS REQUIRES LOTS OF TIME

Making new products out of waste materials requires more time than with virgin materials due to time for testing and adjustments.

KikoRomeo played around a lot with the design of their crochet bags and settled on a Tunisian stitch for the body of the bag and decided on leather handle finishes which were handstitched to give a professional finish.

Keep testing and allow changes to the designs.

2. NOT ALL MATERIALS WILL WORK

Recycling and re-using materials requires a bit of trial and error!

The project found that cotton t-shirts were easier to upcycle than synthetic materials like polyester which frayed when cut and was hard to dye if stained. For the project's crochet bags, they introduced sisal into the crochet made out of t-shirt scraps to make the bottom of the bag firmer.

Designs and materials may need to change depending on what does and doesn't work.

3. RECYCLED CONTENT TO NOT FEEL SECOND-HAND

By talking to designers and influencers in Paris Fashion Week, Nigeria and Kenya, it was determined that although the industry was open to recycled content, the look and feel of the product needed to be high quality so as not to be able to tell that the material is being reused.



“When you work as a designer in Africa, you have a very waste-conscious mindset as resources are fewer. You look at what you can make with your off-cuts that can be sold and used again. We could have run the narrative that we simply made products out of used materials. However, to truly upcycle you need to examine and alter designs.”

Ann McCreath, KikoRomeo



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Combining grant funding, business insight and research, TRANSFORM is advancing the development of innovative business models to help solve global challenges. It was established in 2015 and is led by Unilever, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and EY.