

Supporting artisans to build export-ready businesses

In our 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 initiatives

PROJECT AT A GLANCE:

EMPOWERING ARTISANS IN KENYA WITH DIGITAL TOOLS, BUSINESS SKILLS AND MARKET ACCESS

Powered by People is a wholesale platform designed for conscious buyers, supporting sustainable small-batch makers worldwide by providing access to global markets through its B2B tech platform. With TRANSFORM's support, Powered by People has empowered handmade artisans in Kenya by helping them scale their businesses, enhance their marketability, and build export-ready capabilities.

THE CHALLENGE

The handmade and small-batch sector has historically suffered from underinvestment, lack of digitisation, and limited access to global markets, despite being the world's second-largest employer after agriculture.

Find out more

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

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THE INNOVATION

Through its partnership with TRANSFORM, Powered by People equipped Kenyan artisans with digital tools, online training, and expanded market access to help them become export-ready businesses. AI-driven digital catalogues increased their visibility to buyers, while tailored learning modules covered export processes, pricing, product presentation, and business development. The initiative also facilitated matchmaking with local and international buyers.

THE IMPACT

As a result, Powered by People equipped 2,476 Kenyan artisans with the digital tools, business skills, and market access necessary to scale their operations, unlocking opportunities for sustainable income generation and enhanced livelihoods. A total of 455 artisans successfully created digital catalogues on Powered by People's platform, boosting their visibility in local and international markets. Additionally, 671 artisans completed close to 100 different learning modules, while 49 businesses successfully secured export orders.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Powered by People aims to secure further investment to continue building the infrastructure, training, and market access necessary to propel artisans forward. Its long-term goal is to drive sustainable growth and lasting impact in the handmade sector.



INSIGHTS:

SHAPING A STRONG WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH ENTERPRISES TO DRIVE MEANINGFUL RESULTS

1. SUPPORT SHOULD BE OFFERED IN MANY FORMS – BEYOND FUNDING ALONE, CONSIDER THE SKILLS YOU COULD OFFER

In the early days, enterprises may not have resources, or contacts for expert advice on scaling a business.

In addition to a financial investment, TRANSFORM matched Powered by People's executives with mentors from both Unilever and EY. They served as an invaluable sounding board to talk through the enterprise's blockers and gain an outside-in perspective to identify a path forward.

2. AGREE ON SHARED OBJECTIVES, BUT BE FLEXIBLE ON THE 'HOW'

Evolving circumstances or new insights may require a shift in direction. Flexibility can open exciting new business opportunities.

As with usual donor-recipient relationships, it was important for Powered by People and TRANSFORM to align on the end goal. However, TRANSFORM's flexible approach to how funding is used meant that Powered by People executed a more strategic business plan in the end. For example, towards the beginning of the project the team identified that onboarding early-stage artisans would take longer than expected. Both parties recognised that it needed to first focus on more advanced artisans who were closer to export-readiness – helping to scale market demand before engaging with less developed businesses.

It is critical that this is also paired with open and regular lines of communication. TRANSFORM benefitted from having frequent interactions with Powered by People as it quickly became apparent when one approach wasn't working and why the enterprise needed to pivot.



3. RECOGNISE METRICS AS SIGNALS OF PROGRESS, NOT THE STRATEGY

Tracking impact metrics is important, but chasing numbers can cause us to lose sight on why it matters, leading to compromised strategies for real, lasting change.

Together with TRANSFORM, Powered by People focused its efforts on the initiatives that would eventually help unlock the project's impact targets. The targets themselves only acted as guiding markers, and TRANSFORM did not put pressure on arduous reporting.

4. LEAVE ROOM FOR CREATIVITY AND EXPERIMENTATION

Rigidity can stifle bold, innovative action that could lead to transformative results.

TRANSFORM embraced experimentation, trusting Powered by People's delivery teams to execute and adapt as needed. This prompted Powered by People to explore AI-powered tools for onboarding and catalogue creation, which hadn't been a part of its original plan. Today, it is an important area of focus and used more widely across the enterprise's operations.



5. BE AWARE OF THE POWER DYNAMIC IN DONOR-RECIPIENT RELATIONSHIPS

As the ones holding the purse strings, funders undeniably have an outsized amount of influence in decision-making but might not be best placed for it.

Powered by People will always know its industry, the work they do, and local context better than TRANSFORM ever will. While TRANSFORM sought to be a champion and interested partner, it made sure that Powered by People maintained control over final decisions.



**We
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TRANSFORM is an impact accelerator that unites corporates, donors, investors and academics to support visionary enterprises across Africa and Asia. Together, we test and scale new market-based solutions that build inclusive, sustainable economies, empower marginalised communities, and drive climate-resilient growth.

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.