

It Takes a Village to Make a Cup of Coffee



If you have ever enjoyed a cup of Tanzanian coffee, you have a village to thank for helping you start your day on a good note.

After oil, coffee is the second most highly traded good in the world. This means, your coffee travels many miles before it reaches your cup. Its journey begins in the hands of passionate farmers. They play a vital role in the coffee value chain and the economies of coffee-producing countries. This is particularly true for Tanzania where smallholder farmers produce 90% of the nation's coffee.

However, there are many challenges that Tanzanian small-scale farmers face. These include poor access to knowledge and training on improved farm practices and how to adapt to the effects of climate change. Farmers also struggle when it comes to improving the quality and quantity of their yields and adding value to their coffee. They find it difficult to access genuine agricultural inputs and are at the mercy of volatile market prices and middlemen. As many of them make their living from growing and selling coffee as their main cash crop, these challenges can prevent them from being able to improve their living conditions and educate their children to give them a better future.

Stronger Together

To overcome these issues, coffee farmers from the same village join forces and form licensed/registered coffee cooperatives to sell their coffee in bulk. In Tanzania, cooperatives are called 'AMCOS' which stands for Agricultural Marketing Cooperative Society. Through an AMCOS, farmers can receive more beneficial prices and terms because, with larger volumes of coffee, they can directly access export markets instead of going through middlemen. AMCOS' also offer their members several services, including access to agricultural inputs, training on improved farm management practices, savings and loan schemes, and the ability to add value to their coffee — to achieve an even higher payoff for their hard work.

Leadership



Like any large organization, what makes an AMCOS run smoothly is strong management and a good governance structure. The size of an AMCOS depends on the number of coffee farmers in the area/village where it is located. This means AMCOS' can be quite large, with hundreds of members. To make it easier to deliver services to that many people, each AMCOS is broken down into smaller groups of about 30 farmers called Producer Organizations (POs). The POs elect their own leadership and every month PO leaders meet with about 8 AMCOS board members to discuss the progress of the PO's activities which include training, distribution of inputs, saving and loan schemes, and other services.

One of the objectives of International Coffee Partners (ICP) in Tanzania is to strengthen both AMCOS' and the POs through their leadership. The ICP project's implementing partner, Hanns R. Neumann Stiftung (HRNS) takes AMCOS board members through training modules on cooperative governance. Key topics included are the cooperative structure and election of leaders which happens every three years, management principles, and policy development. AMCOS leaders are also linked to genuine input suppliers and trained on how to directly export their coffee. Additionally, ICP supports AMCOS leaders to invest in value addition facilities that their POs can use.

At the PO level, ICP supports the establishment of Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) and provides farmers with training on good agricultural practices, organizational development, business principles, and gender/youth interventions to boost participation of women and young people in farmer organizations. Gender-balanced leadership is strongly encouraged to empower women and attract more female members — after all, women do the majority of agricultural labor.

A thriving farmer organization: Konkwe B PO



Some of the leaders of Konkwe B PO

In Mbeya, Southern Tanzania, Konkwe B Producer Organization (PO) stands out for its strong, community-led transformation and commitment to gender-balanced leadership. Formed in 2018, the PO—comprising around 45 members and operating under the larger Nsenga AMCOS network—began collaborating with the ICP project in September 2021. Since then, members have actively worked to strengthen their organization, drawing on training and peer dialogue to identify and pursue their own goals. Within just eight months, they nominated and elected new leaders, with women now making up over 50% of the leadership team. This shift, led by the members themselves, challenges longstanding cultural norms around gender roles in the predominantly patriarchal community. The change reflects not only increased awareness sparked by ICP’s gender sensitization sessions, but also the PO’s own commitment to inclusive leadership and equitable decision-making.



Mwajuma Mgala.
Chairwoman of Konkwe B
PO



Asha Mwampasha,
Secretary



Daniel Kabuja, Treasurer



Queen Mugoela, Farmer
Trainer

The inclusive leadership at Konkwe B PO has led to greater participation of women in training sessions on improved farm management—an outcome driven by the PO’s own efforts to make these spaces more accessible. Women leaders, responding to the needs of their peers, collaboratively adjusted group policies to better support female members, contributing to a notable increase in attendance and the adoption of good agricultural practices. The growth in female membership has brought new perspectives and energy to the group. While the PO does not yet have a physical office, members confidently gather under a tree for their meetings, which always begin with collective contributions to their Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) scheme. Since electing a female secretary, members themselves have noted improvements in transparency and accountability, particularly in how savings are managed—clear reflections of the group’s commitment to self-driven progress and inclusive governance.



Members making contributions to the PO’s VSLA scheme



The PO’s weekly meetings with high female attendance

“Our female leaders have all the qualities we need. They are trustworthy role models in the community and good coffee farmers that contribute tons of coffee. When we started the PO in 2018 there were only 10 members, but our Chairwoman has increased the members to 45, many of them are female members. We are now one of the largest and most successful POs in Nsenga AMCOS.” – Daniel Kabuja, Treasurer Konkwe B PO

ICP’s achievements

An internal evaluation of the ICP project in 2020 revealed a significant increase in women’s leadership across farmer organizations in Tanzania, with women now holding 39% of leadership roles. This shift reflects growing momentum from within the cooperatives themselves. Nsenga AMCOS, for example, is among the first in the Mbeya region to elect a female board member—an achievement made possible by the commitment of members who are increasingly recognizing the value of inclusive leadership. Building on this progress, more women have since been elected into leadership positions across the eight POs under Nsenga AMCOS.

ICP continues to collaborate with POs and AMCOSs as they strengthen the services they offer their members. In Mbeya, all supported POs have independently established schemes to improve access to essential farm inputs, benefitting nearly 1,500 households across Mbeya Rural, Rungwe, Ileje, and Mbozi districts. So far, 121 POs have expanded services to their members, and 15 AMCOSs have successfully come together to sell their bulked coffee through Tanzania’s national auction—marking a step forward in member-led value chain participation and cooperative resilience.