

Naam Farmers Group, Garissa: Working together to improve the livelihoods of a marginal group.
By CARE Kenya, ELMT
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Naam Farmers group was formed in 2004 by members of a marginalized ethnic group from the Tana River in North Eastern Kenya who have suffered years of neglect, ethnic discrimination and a host of natural calamities such as drought and flash floods which often undermine their attempts to create a sustainable income.

"We are stuck between a rock and a hard place and the only way to survive is to work together, as the Swahili saying goes, umoja ni nguvu (unity is strength)" explains Habeya Zaina Shaeab, the chairperson of the group.

Currently the group has 30 members, the majority of whom are women and an executive committee comprising of nine members. *"We are working towards having more women in the executive as this represents the strength of the women who are ready to take charge!"* she adds *"before, some jobs were only seen as appropriate to be carried out by men, but now we all do our part, and we help each other."*

The group is involved in collective farming, traditional bee keeping, and mat making, supported by CARE Kenya under the ELMT program.

The group received training in beekeeping, group organization, business development skills (BDS), mat making as well as on the establishment of a Groups Savings and Loans scheme.



A member of Naam group at work, weaving a mat / Photo by N. Wassanji

All the members received Institutional Capacity Building (ICB) and BDS training while 15 were trained in beekeeping where they were able to learn about and master modern techniques.

"Initially, the group had three traditional hives and would get about Kshs 1,200 per harvest. Then CARE trained them on how to measure the honey, use the beeswax, about the different types of bees and their roles, and about appropriate food for the bees. They also learned about the different types of hives and how to clean the honey. They came to understand that the Langstroth hives produce more honey and are easier to harvest and transport" explains a CARE projects officer.

The training also involved a field trip to Limuru and to Honey Care Africa head offices in Nairobi, where they learnt of the modern methods being used in action, they also received information on packaging the honey once it has been harvested. In addition they also received 10 Langstroth hives and three harvesting kits from CARE. In addition, the group has also helped a number of other interested groups in the area by explaining the bee keeping techniques they learnt including the Gar Gar, Burrow

and Al Hamdu groups.

Another 15 members of the group were trained on the advantages and organization of group savings and loans, and 14 were trained on improving their already existing mat making venture. In the past, the group sold very few mats, but after their training they have learnt new designs, updated their colour schemes and have started to make bags, hats, baskets, and even table mats.

"Previously we did not understand the value of making or selling smaller items like bags or hats, we mainly focused on making larger items. But now we have realized that the smaller items are the products that sell the fastest, and we are selling more of these so this is what we should focus our efforts on," says Habeya.

According the Habeya, they started selling a new design of bags worth Kshs 5000 (about USD 50) to the local markets and the profit goes to the group's kitty. Each member is then eligible to borrow this money on a loan incase of a family emergency or other needs.

Zuhura Bakari is 35 years old, a mother of two and an active member of the group is very appreciative of the training. *“I found the business skills training very helpful. I learnt how to keep records and about financial recordkeeping, I learnt about the proper way to run a business.”* She adds, *“Before, we made a lot of losses as a group because we sold items and were not able to account for them since we did not keep any records, but now we keep proper records”*

Some women explain that the BDS training was extremely important, not only for Naam as a group, but also for many individuals within the group who also operate their own businesses. Asked how they handle any group differences that arise, Habeya said, *“Any concerns are dealt with through the use of the group constitution. It helps keep us together and to find solutions for any conflict”* .

In a community where the men are usually the main income earners in most families, it is heartening that a woman's increased contribution is appreciated by both women and men. *“Initially, the men didn't like the fact that we worked, but the world has changed, and so they have had to change too. Now they are more accepting and appreciate the work we do and they support us”* says Sofia Abdi Ali, a member of the group.



Members of the Naam Farmer Group/ Photo by N. Wassanji

“We are like a family. The problems of one member are just like my own” says Habeya *“If any individual is stuck, we can hold hands and assist one another. We build in strength and knowledge and our ideas are much better when we get together. Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses so by coming together we can really help each other”*.

The Naam women are not only hardworking, inspirational and kind; they are determined and have dreams for their future and for the future of their children. With this increased confidence and inspiration, and the support of each other they will no doubt go on to improve their own lives and those of their community.

The women smile and shy away but this is *obviously an issue very close to them*. *“Before if we were told to sit we would sit, if we were told to jump we would jump, but now we are strong. We feel empowered, and this means life will be different for our children, they wont have to suffer like we did.”* Sofia continues.

According to Sofia, Last year when her husband could not afford to buy their children Ramadhan gifts, she took money from her savings to contribute, which made her husband more appreciative of her involvement with the group.

The members of the group also support each other; they look after each other's children, and contribute money when someone can't afford their child's school fees. *“We are like a family. The problems of one member are just like my own”* says Habeya *“If any individual is stuck, we can hold hands and assist one another. We build in strength and knowledge and our ideas are much better when we get together. Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses so by coming together we can really help each other”*.

