

“Power, direction, and hope”: An evaluation of Hand in Hand Eastern Africa’s First Decade

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Hand in Hand Eastern Africa (HiHEA) was established in 2011, undertaking its independent operations as a member of the Hand in Hand network. Its vision as a regional non-governmental organization is to alleviate poverty by supporting the creation of sustainable enterprises and jobs. It focuses on people in rural areas who are active in the informal sector.

As HiHEA approaches its tenth anniversary, this report provides a narrative evaluation of its strategies, successes, and challenges at an organisational and strategic level. It does so by revisiting select projects from the period 2014-2018 together with HiHEA beneficiaries, partners, and national and international staff. Through a process guided by the independent evaluator, these participants explored the story of the context, intent, impacts, and

The evaluation finds that HiHEA’s strategic and multi-faceted approach contributes to profound positive change for many. But it also documents systemic barriers to poverty alleviation that undermine the impact and sustainability of HiHEA interventions.

sustainability of Hand in Hand interventions. They discussed lessons learned, raised questions, identified shortcomings, and developed ideas for the future. The goal was to build from prior evaluations and organisational learning to increase clarity around the crucial questions for the future.¹

Members of rural communities participating in the evaluation process told a story of profound positive changes to which Hand in Hand’s assistance had contributed. Their personal development has led to improved understanding of, and attitudes towards, savings, investment and entrepreneurship. What formerly did not seem possible now can be done. Their community development is evidenced by a greater sense of common purpose and mutual accountability, as well as the strengthening of their networks of mutual aid. Groups are accomplishing what individuals could not. Their business development has taken the form of new and enhanced income generation models and channels. Families are thereby

¹ A note on methodology can be found as an appendix.

improving their food security, access to education and healthcare, and daily lives. Notably, intangible as well as tangible assets are being accumulated that serve beneficiaries for the future whether or not a particular business endeavour proves successful.

This hopeful story, however, is at the same time told with cautions. Farmers and community members, partners, and HiHEA staff noted a number of systemic barriers to economic empowerment that temper these successes. No matter how hard people work, a large share of the new value that they produce is too often captured by middlemen squeezing them with high prices for inputs and low prices for outputs. The government at different levels may also fail to follow through on its promises for the education, technical assistance, infrastructure development, or even fair dealing required for business growth and profitability. Such issues are beyond the capacity of any one self-help group to address. They also accentuate limitations of the current project funding and implementation model in light of such challenges. A range of suboptimal outcomes – in the extreme, group disintegration or inability to access credit at all, to loss of motivation or more commonly the simple inability to move to the next level of performance – are experienced when HiHEA exits a community. All of these factors collectively undermine the promise that if one works harder, smarter, and together with others, one can move out of poverty.

A story emerges of a successful organisation at an important juncture with respect to its aspirations to alleviate poverty in the communities in which it works. Even as HiHEA helps people at a grassroots level to maximize their opportunities “in” the market system, it must also consider how it might work “on” that market system to change those aspects that many experience as hostile and unfair, and that stand as barriers to people’s exit from poverty.

A story thus emerges of a successful organisation at an important juncture with respect to its aspirations to alleviate poverty in the communities in which it works. Hand in Hand Eastern Africa will in any case continue to build from its successes and lessons learned to incrementally improve programmes, for example, by providing new credit facilities to past beneficiaries, or by exploring fee-for-service models for more sophisticated and established groups or businesses. But even as HiHEA helps people at a grassroots level to maximize their opportunities “in” the market system, it must also consider whether and how it might work “on” that market system to change those aspects that many experience as hostile and unfair, and that stand as barriers to people’s exit from poverty. As it does so, HiHEA will be aided by its capacity to foster peace, hope, and caring in ways that beneficiaries report help them to take personal risks, invest scarce time and resources, and strive for a better future.

A hostile environment for the poor

From some perspectives, Kenya has been a development success story over the past decade. World Bank data show that per capita Gross National Income (GNI) has roughly doubled, to US \$1680 by 2018.² The Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) shows slow but steady improvement in overall governance, defined as the provision of the political, social and economic public goods and services that every citizen has the right to expect from their state.³

But these aggregate numbers hide stark divisions in how Kenyans experience development. Data on multidimensional poverty from the Oxford Poverty & Human Development

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Initiative⁴ show that more than a third of Kenyans live in multi-dimensional poverty, deprived of at least a third of the ten factors - ranging from nutrition to schooling to clean drinking water and housing - required for progress towards a dignified life and upward mobility. Another third are vulnerable to falling into multi-dimensional poverty.

The two thirds of Kenyans living outside of urban centres are particularly disadvantaged. About 47% of rural Kenyans live in multi-dimensional poverty, with another 40% considered vulnerable. This is in part of function of where Kenya has invested its national attention. The improvements in the business environment and infrastructure that underpin GNI and IIAG improvements tend to favour large businesses and urban areas. But IIAG data show that the rural sector public management, accountability of the public sector, and corruption that disproportionately affect poor and rural populations as well as small businesses have in fact been trending backwards over the past decade.

The places where HiHEA work reflect the broader Kenyan realities of underdevelopment. Makueni County, for example, is southeast of Nairobi. There the 2013 baseline study for the integrated adult literacy and enterprise training project (IALET) found a wide range of issues contributing to poverty. These included social conditions such as low levels education and poor health as a result of poor access to services. They included economic infrastructure deficiencies including insufficient water supply, poor roads, inadequate markets, and inaccessibility to credit facilities. They included environmental factors such as droughts, floods, and environmental degradation. And they include socio-economic factors, as population pressures that lead to sub-division and sale of land that in turn renders old

² World Bank data and definitions from <https://data.worldbank.org/country/kenya>

³ Ibrahim Index of African Governance data and definitions from <http://iiag.online>

⁴ Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative data and definitions from <https://ophi.org.uk/multidimensional-poverty-index/databank/country-level/>

agricultural practices and traditional livestock breeds inadequate. All of these contributed to widespread unemployment and lack of livelihoods. Due to cultural factors such as early marriages and family preferences to invest in education for boys rather than girls, poverty was notably more acute for women. While Kenya is a large and diverse country, with different areas facing different challenges, even this one example illustrates the intertwined and multi-dimensional nature of the drivers of poverty.

What is perhaps less well captured in such reports is how poverty and its causes are experienced intensely and personally by poor Kenyans as powerful, negative forces. People encounter “consistent, structured marginalization”: on the basis of group identity, social status, or sexual orientation. Government speaks the language of development and to some extent has enacted a positive regulatory framework. But it is seen to play

favourites: by region, political affiliation and support, or social connection.

Furthermore, women within a “patriarchal culture” may be told that

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they are “not supposed to go to school, own property, make independent decisions, be leaders, or even hold identity cards.” The voices of those experiencing deprivation of services and of opportunities seem to matter very little in shaping the agenda of that which is attended to and that which is ignored, particularly beyond the local level. Even international development actors and NGOs may be experienced negatively. They may “talk of empowerment, but be weak in making it happen”. Overall, there is a sense that there are some who matter, and many more who don’t. For the poor in many places in which Hand in Hand Eastern Africa works, the strong message they have received is that they are among those knowingly excluded from the resources, avenues, and decisions for development.

Building blocks for progress

Hand in Hand Eastern Africa was established in 2011, undertaking its independent operations as a member of the Hand in Hand network. Its vision as a regional non-governmental organization is to alleviate poverty by supporting the creation of sustainable enterprises and jobs. It focuses on people in rural areas who are active in the informal sector. HiHEA works primarily to train groups of farmers and to link them to markets for their crops and livestock. It also helps people to develop production and marketing capacities, for example, in beadwork, yogurt, or baked goods, as well as trading enterprises.

Hand in Hand Eastern Africa programmes build from common foundations. First of all, HiHEA outreach makes the organisation known to self-help groups or to other organisations that can refer groups to HiHEA - such groups of 10 to 30 or so people banded together for mutual aid being common in rural Kenya, and encouraged by government as vehicles for

delivering benefits and services. HiHEA enters into an agreement with willing groups and starts with their organisational development. This helps group members to develop critical common understandings, to achieve mutual trust, and to agree on accountability systems that work within their family, community, and cultural contexts. These elements underlie, for example, micro-finance building from group savings, acquisition and management of assets for the common good such as processing equipment, or more complex value chains where some raise chicks that others will raise for the market. They are thus foundational to the success of groups and the individuals within them.

HiHEA then works with these groups to survey the challenges and opportunities of existing and potential businesses. A key value and operating principle of HiHEA is choice: It helps

HiHEA programmes build from common foundations of literacy, group cohesion, business skills, and technical knowledge in partnership with beneficiaries, the Government, and other development oriented agencies and organisations.

members develop ideas that have relevance to their own knowledge, experience, and aspirations, and to their local communities and market contexts. HiHEA then helps group members with their business literacy skills development, as well as technical knowledge specific to the business opportunities they have

chosen to develop: farming, livestock, products, or services. Increasingly, HiHEA helps facilitate access to capital from outside the confines of group savings through different forms of microfinance. In all of this work, HiHEA may carry out activities itself, or enter into formal or informal partnerships with existing NGOs or government agencies that provide microfinance services, specialized training, or social mobilization. HiHEA thus works to build from existing successes, avoid conflicts and harness complementarities with like-minded actors in government and civil society.

One important development from earlier to more recent Hand in Hand Eastern Africa programming has been the integration of basic literacy skills. Not only did HiHEA find that illiteracy was undermining people's ability to benefit from HiHEA training. It was broadly reported to be a barrier to self-reliance and self-esteem. It was an obstacle to being included in community leadership as well as economic opportunities. Those who were illiterate also felt themselves to be more likely to be manipulated or cheated by others. HiHEA in partnership with the Kenyan Government's Directorate of Adult and Continuing Education thus decided to integrate adult literacy training for reading and maths into its enterprise training.

Helping fellow Kenyans to unleash their potential

These Hand in Hand Eastern Africa building blocks for economic progress - literacy, group cohesion, business skills, and technical knowledge in partnership with beneficiaries, the

Government, and other development oriented agencies and organisations - are thus straightforward. Yet they are constructed on a foundational theory of change that is all the same profound.

Whereas most analyses of poverty in Kenya focus only on the gaps - in education, public services, or market access, for example - Hand in Hand Eastern Africa is equally aware of the assets from which even the poorest Kenyans can build. Staff note a natural cohesiveness that comes from community identity and common experience of challenges such as hunger or lack of access to water for households or livestock. There are local norms of behaviour on which people can rely. HiHEA staff recognize that there is in local communities knowledge of the land, what it supports, and of how this is evolving with changes in the climate and in human settlement. Even if they struggle to make more profits, people are already producing crops and livestock that have value to the people around them and those further afield. Staff also respect that there are some who are already recognized by others as legitimate leaders and arbiters of disputes. Even if public corruption and private predation are widespread, there are individuals in all sectors who want to help.

HiHEA's awareness of the assets from which even the poorest Kenyans can build is born of the personal experience of its own staff members. This helps HiHEA to make real its image of accompanying the people with whom it works, "Hand in Hand".

These organisational perspectives are born of the personal experiences of Hand in Hand Eastern Africa staff members.

They spoke fondly of those who had inspired them throughout their lives: to believe in themselves, to not to quit when something was difficult, or to not to let an initial failure stop them from trying again. They told their own stories of entrepreneurship - selling samosas as a side business, or turning the gift of one chicken into a flock - and how these had helped them to pursue education or better lives for their families. They reflected on experiences from which they had learned that even the smallest contribution - a pint of blood to the Red Cross, or a kilogram of cornmeal to a school for the handicapped - could add up to a substantial positive impact. They similarly related how just a little bit of training - learning how to graft a branch onto a tree, or a particular course at school - opened new opportunities. And they told stories of family members and neighbours who were resolute in their belief in the power of kindness, mutual inspiration, and mutual support, no matter how little they themselves had. Hand in Hand staff thus told the story of a passion for working with communities, shaped by the lived experience that, if one can change oneself, one can help others change and together change the community.

This combination of focused programming and shared experience helps HiHEA to make real its image of accompanying the people with whom it works, "Hand in Hand". Its theory of change is not so much that it can engineer business successes as much as that it can help to unleash them. Drawing on their personal stories as well as their professional expertise,

Hand in Hand staff help fellow Kenyans to reaffirm and to build from what they already have within themselves and their communities to grow economic opportunities.

Contributing to multiple dimensions of better lives

Individual participants in Hand in Hand projects shared the experiences that led them to express gratitude for the assistance of Hand in Hand Eastern Africa and to be appreciative of the ways in which it was provided. They told stories that, collectively as set out below, evidenced profound positive changes in personal, community, and business development to which Hand in Hand's assistance had contributed.

More positive attitudes, understandings, and feelings

People reported that investments in their personal development have led to improved understanding of, and attitudes towards, savings, investment and entrepreneurship. Numerous people described a process by which they became convinced that, if they forwent purchases of household goods or clothing, they could look forward through investments in productive assets to a better future. The practical training was identified as a

People described personal changes that helped them share skills as well as feelings of power, direction, and hope with others, bringing lessons and encouragement to household members and others in the community.

“great motivator”. One person's new ability to keep accurate records, for example, made real the possibility that “100 shillings could be turned into 1000”. What formerly did not seem possible became believable.

Positive impacts reportedly spread outside the four corners of the economic development initiatives. People told of taking bookkeeping skills learned with HiHEA into their churches and other civic groups. Particularly those who had gained literacy skills reported feeling competent and confident to participate more fully not only in the HiHEA project, but also in parent-teacher or community meetings.

These changes were not only a result of the content of the training, however. Participants reported that the HiHEA trainer who made a weekly or bi-weekly commitment to sitting with them and teaching them became “a friend” and “part of their life”. This regular, caring contact facilitated the emergence of feelings of “power”, “direction”, and “hope”. These the participants could in turn share with others, bringing lessons and encouragement to household members or others in the community.

Groups accomplishing together what individuals could not

People reported that investments in their group development contributed to a greater sense of common purpose and mutual accountability, as well as to the strengthening of their networks of mutual aid. Whereas groups had taken modest steps before towards collective savings and finance schemes, the HiHEA assistance helped to develop a “remarkable level of trust”. This created greater reliability in repayment and the possibility for more substantial and thus more impactful loans. There was a sense that groups were accomplishing what individuals could not.

Group development contributed to a greater sense of common purpose and mutual accountability, as well as to the strengthening of their networks of mutual aid. Organised groups could better access government services.

As a group, and particularly one now formally organised as a community based organisation (CBO), people were better able to access government benefits such as agricultural extension services. They also reported increased pride. Some started to think of themselves as a cooperative. People increasingly began to check in with each other - not only to ensure that loans could and would be repaid, but to see how businesses and families were doing out of a spirit of genuine concern. Their training and group work were described as “uniting factors”; as a result of the development process with HiHEA, one person assessed their group as being “stronger and at peace”.

Business success contributing to better lives

Individual and group development came together to support business development. This sometimes meant entering a business line that had not been considered before, such as growing avocados for the market or the making and selling soap, facilitated by the opportunity analysis and technical training received. More often, it meant taking current businesses to new levels of performance. This occurred in part as a function of new business skills, such as bookkeeping, and technical knowledge, for example, around methods for

New skills and more reliable connections to markets led to greater profits that supported better homes, better access to education and better nutrition for themselves and family members, and needed health care.

increasing milk production without the need for expensive inputs. But it was sometimes also the function of more reliable connections to markets, whether in the city or with the local school district, facilitated with HiHEA assistance.

As groups and individuals increased sales, some became more able to invest in water tanks, greenhouses, or other tangible productive assets that increased productivity. This in turn

created greater profits that supported better homes, better access to education and better nutrition for themselves and family members, and needed health care.

People also noted the intangible assets that they are individually and collectively accumulating: skills, sensibilities, group structures and processes, professional networks, and so on. Part of entrepreneurship is accepting that some ventures don't succeed, whether because of climate, market, or other challenges. But people relate that these intangible assets cannot be taken away from them. They give people greater confidence that they will be better able to face an uncertain and difficult future.

Limitations within the economics and politics of poverty

Such stories of personal, community, and business development support an assertion of positive contributions by Hand in Hand Eastern Africa to the ability of poor Kenyans whom its programmes reach to improve their lives. Beneficiaries, partners and HiHEA staff, however, all raised a number of cautions. They underlined that these hopeful narratives, although true and perhaps even typical of those with whom HiHEA works, do not tell the entire story. At the same time individuals and groups have found greater courage and capacity to work for their own economic improvement, they and others in their communities confront a variety of negative structural dynamics that continue to hold them in poverty.

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One of the most challenging dynamics reported was the

degree to which HiHEA beneficiaries are unable to capture the full value of that which they are creating through their new and expanded enterprises. In many places, there are “many middlemen” between the farmer and the person who buys their crops or livestock, each taking their cut. These traders are reportedly powerful and well organised, working together to suppress payments to farmers, increase their own profits, and even use illegitimate means to exclude others from the market.

At the other end of the value chain, farmers feel squeezed by high prices for inputs. This can be so bad as to threaten production. One group working to raise poultry noted that “a lot of chicks die” because of the high prices for quality feed and veterinary medicines; others reported that “prices are doubling”, making fertilizer increasingly impossible to purchase. Sometimes the high prices for inputs undermine the business case altogether. Even though there is great need for fresh milk in Kenya, for example, the costs to a poor farmer of inputs may be 35 shillings per litre produced when the price paid to them is only 25 shillings.

Another widely reported negative dynamic is the lack of government attention and resources directed towards the most pressing needs of poor farmers. The result is that, while government policies and agencies may exist on paper, their services are in practice not available to large numbers of farmers. Although agricultural extension services are shown to improve the productivity and profitability of farmers in ways that support national and local development, for example, they are not available nearly widely enough. Government has reportedly not hired agents since 2008, despite the rising population and other pressures on the land that require better practices; the average age of an extension worker is over 55, meaning there may be even fewer in the future. Foot and mouth disease is devastating. It is easily manageable, but the vaccine is not made available. For many poor and rural Kenyans, the agency responsible for adult literacy is similarly unavailable.

This policy and resource neglect extends from services to infrastructure development. Green maize and tomatoes may fetch high prices in Nairobi, for example. But groups report

High input prices, powerful middlemen, and government policy and resource neglect can have devastating impacts on poor people working to improve their own lives, as well as on group cohesion. These factors collectively undermine the promise that if one works hard, smart, and together with others, one can move out of poverty.

them “rotting in the fields” because farm-to-market roads are in such bad repair as to be impassable in the rainy season - exactly when they are most needed. At a larger scale, this rainwater runs into the sea although droughts or even just the dry season will inevitably arrive, as government has under-invested in water harvesting and storage schemes.

Hand in Hand Eastern Africa has in some places included advocacy training in its curriculum; but it is relatively small scale, and in any case, “there are very few examples” even nationally of civic engagement by the poor resulting in a consequential government response.

Beneficiaries, partners, and Hand in Hand Eastern Africa staff relate that these powerful, negative economic and political dynamics can have devastating impacts on poor people working to improve their own lives. Production doesn’t happen; stock doesn’t sell. Even when it does, there is no return on investment to the poor if all the profits are captured by others. Their new knowledge, labours, and investments in enhanced productivity create value, but it accrues to the benefit of others. In some areas, there are stories of people doing better 10 years ago than today. Some people are moving backwards rather than forwards, even if the HiHEA support helps to ease the pain.

Group cohesion can also be undermined. Whether or not profits are made, loans repayments still fall due. In some cases, members report finding themselves taking out additional loans from outside the group under less favourable terms in order to repay their

group, falling further into debt. Or they feel forced to leave the group and its support. There is also something dispiriting about systemic challenges that feel well beyond the capacity of any individual or self-help group to address. They collectively undermine the promise that if one works hard, smart, and together with others, one can move out of poverty.

Asking the more difficult questions

The stories of positive impact tempered by those of systemic challenges lead Hand in Hand Eastern Africa staff to recognize that they have the responsibility - and the opportunity borne of their successes to date - to reflect more deeply on their strategies, successes, and challenges at an organisational and strategic level. Together with beneficiaries and partners, they began to frame the questions that would help to shape HiHEA and its work as it moves from its first into its next decade of work.

Questioning whether HiHEA stays with communities long enough

The question asked most often was, “*When should HiHEA leave?*” The stories told by HiHEA beneficiaries, partners, and staff accentuated the limitations of the current project funding and implementation model in light of a difficult economic context. The relatively short project cycles mean that some groups are not yet at a sustainable level of trust or self-management before HiHEA exits. Groups “lose spirit”, “stop meeting”, or “start to disintegrate” when their teacher leaves. Other groups reported that they were still in the phases of literacy training or group formation, and never got as far as accessing credit for business growth before their work with HiHEA ended.

Still other groups felt that they were more steady, but that they felt ill equipped for what lay ahead. “The car is still driving, but we’re not sure there’s a steering wheel to change course,” they said, in a “world changing day by day”. Others expressed frustration that they were

The relatively short project cycles mean that some groups are not yet at a sustainable level of trust or self-management before HiHEA exits. Other groups were more steady, but lacked the necessary ongoing support to move to the next level of performance and to take the next step away from poverty.

ready, but lacked the necessary ongoing support, to move to the next level of performance - and therefore to take the next step away from poverty. Most all beneficiaries believed that, with greater access to capital, more profitable but investment-heavy ventures such as beekeeping would come into reach. But these were not available to them once HiHEA exited.

As one answer to this question, Hand in Hand Eastern Africa will incorporate lessons learned and incrementally improve programmes. For example, HiHEA is already starting to provide

new credit facilities to past beneficiaries. It is exploring fee-for-service models for more sophisticated and established groups or individual businesses that would allow it to continue its support along established patterns. It is working with commercial credit providers to help them make their offerings more relevant and accessible to poor and rural Kenyans. Thus HiHEA can find ways to deepen and lengthen its relationships with groups, and also to develop new partnerships.

Questioning whether current approaches alone can alleviate poverty

But the question of when HiHEA should exit a community, staff realised, is tied to one far more fundamental: *“How high is our horizon?”* Prior Hand in Hand Eastern Africa evaluations report that HiHEA has touched a large number of lives. It has perhaps even made most of those lives better in some meaningful way. But the stories told by staff, partners and beneficiaries underline that many past beneficiaries are still acutely poor, and that many more remain vulnerable to food insecurity as well as to gaps in healthcare, education, and other basic necessities of a dignified life.

Additionally, HiHEA works primarily through pre-existing self-help groups, a number of which had a pre-existing degree of organisation and sophistication. For example, they had

Many past beneficiaries are still acutely poor, while many more remain vulnerable to food insecurity as well as to gaps in healthcare, education, and other basic necessities of a dignified life. And some even more vulnerable people are not reached by HiHEA at all.

already engaged in group savings schemes, acquired access to irrigated land, or developed a seed bank. This approach has distinct advantages, as such groups have a long history in Kenya, are accepted by farmers and communities as a vehicle for assistance, and are

congruent with government policy. But this model means that even more vulnerable people with even less social and economic capital may not be reached by HiHEA projects at all.

Thus, if Hand in Hand Eastern Africa seeks to help a number of poor farmers make important improvements in their lives, then it has found avenues for doing so. But the data and analysis suggest that, if HiHEA truly aspires to help alleviate poverty in the communities in which it works, then it still has a long and challenging road ahead.

HiHEA has in its first decade focused on working “in” the market system, helping poor farmers and rural communities to maximize their income generation opportunities. But that market system, the evaluation and reflection process highlighted, is often unfair and hostile to many of the poor; no matter how hard or smart they work, they are subject to forces that undermine their progress and keep them at risk of sliding backwards.

HiHEA will therefore in its next decade need to consider additional avenues for working “on” the market system. Only when that system is re-engineered to dependably provide poor farmers with quality inputs at fair prices, fair value for outputs, appropriate government support, and guaranteed access to markets will they be able to realise their aspirations for increased income, asset accumulation, and poverty alleviation through their own industry and mutual support.

As an organization that aspires to help alleviate poverty in the communities in which it works, HiHEA will need to look at ways the market system can be re-engineered to dependably provide poor farmers with quality inputs at fair prices, fair value for outputs, appropriate government support, and guaranteed access to markets.

There is also a moral hazard should HiHEA shy away from working “on” the system. If the primary thrust of its work remains the provision of literacy training, agricultural extension, or other services which the government is by law meant to provide, then HiHEA risks becoming implicated in the perpetuation of that system itself.

Asking whether to go deeper rather than broader

These reflections led to the question, “*Should we be going deeper?*” Much of Hand in Hand Eastern Africa’s thinking about expansion has been about how it might take its existing models to more self-help groups. At the time of this evaluation, HiHEA was running 21 programmes in different parts of the country, each touching many groups, with plans for more. But might there be greater value to a more modest geographic focus, with a more ambitious programme of intervention? Some people reflected on the potential opportunities of a ten year horizon in each place that HiHEA worked. It might allow for identification of, and more help directed towards, the most vulnerable and those who were not yet organized. It might allow for long term coaching support to CBOs and their leaders, even if with a lighter touch as their capacities developed. It might allow for just-in-time technical interventions to support, for example, better planting or harvesting.

There may be greater value to a more modest geographic focus with a more ambitious programme of intervention.

Place-based rather than project-based thinking and planning might additionally help to address challenges of information and analysis.

Currently, it is nearly impossible for Hand in Hand Eastern Africa to justify the time, expense, or technical challenges of comprehensive, time-series household and market surveys in the communities in which it works. Yet granular insight is required if an entire community is to lift itself out of poverty: which families face or exit from which aspects of poverty over time, which economic opportunities are emerging and which might be closing, which interventions have had the most sustainable impact and which seem to lose people along the way, and which market

relationships are leading to just and sustainable value creation and which are not. Longer-term presence in a particular place might allow HiHEA to help imbed such data collection and analysis into its network self-help groups, creating a more direct, reliable and virtuous cycle of analysis, strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Asking how to build just and sustainable value chains

A related question that emerged was, “*Can we help build just and sustainable value chains?*”

There are small scale livestock producers in one area currently buying expensive feed from middlemen, for example, who should rather be buying grass directly from poor farmers in another area. It was noted that this does not work in the abstract, however; a particular seller needs to be connected to a particular buyer. There is also value to be created through concentration of efforts. Growing cabbages or tomatoes, for example, requires specialization of knowledge and of capital investments. But there need to be dependable sales channels, lest the failure of the market lead to food insecurity and economic disaster for the farmers. A system where one group produces chicken feed, another raises chicks, and still another raises chickens for market can in theory create more value for all. But turning this theory into reality requires an articulated system as well as trust within it. All of these value chain interventions would require a different nature and degree of planning and coordination than that which HiHEA has so far enabled.

The building of just and sustainable value chains would require a different nature and degree of planning and coordination than HiHEA has so far enabled.

Asking how to catalyse fair and effective structures and institutions

This in turn led to the question, “*What structures and institutions might help?*” People noted that Kenya in general lacks strong institutions to support poor farmers. There may be many agricultural cooperatives, some even operating at relatively large scale. But with their leaders appointed by government, they often suffer from the same challenges of corruption, politization, or inattention to the needs of the rural poor as the public sector.

Some therefore suggested that other models might work better. For example, there are already in Kenya some socially-oriented commercial farms that work with their neighbours. They provide production purchase guarantees that provide subsistence farmers the

Kenya lacks strong institutions to support poor farmers. Catalysing them would require economic and enterprise capabilities that are quite different from those of HiHEA or its partners today.

confidence to pursue specialization and allow them to seek capital for investment. These larger producers source reasonably-priced inputs for themselves and for others. And they hire their own agricultural extension workers to help smallholders to

improve productivity and quality. They may be big enough to become the market connection for thousands of farmers.

No one believes, however, that such a model would be easy to replicate. It would require acknowledgement of a role for larger and more sophisticated economic actors. It would require ways of fostering collaboration, common understanding, and just resolution of disagreements between these players and existing CBOs. It would therefore require economic and enterprise capabilities that are quite different from those of HiHEA or its partners or programme participants today.

Considering how to navigate politics

Longer, whole community interventions, the intentional re-engineering of value chains, and the consideration of stronger structures and institutions in the service of poor rural farmers in the places in which Hand in Hand Eastern Africa works raised a final question: “*Can we navigate politics?*” As people imagined these building blocks of systemic change, new words came into the conversation: “Leadership development.” “Networks of CBOs.” “Mobilization and organization.” “Advocacy.” “Alliances.” But these concepts require recognition, people reflected, that it is not an absence of government or markets that makes it hard for people to emerge from poverty in Kenya today. Rather, there are governance and markets that work for the few rather than for the many. Working “on” that system as well as “in” it will inevitably create conflict with those middlemen, government officials, and larger enterprises who greatly benefit from the current system. Steering through these waters towards a more just future for the rural poor would require distinct skills and sensibilities, as well as new kinds of alliances. In a country in which the government can freeze the bank accounts or cancel the registration certificate of an NGO from one day to the next, it also carries decided risks.

Steering through fraught political waters would require distinct skills and sensibilities, as well as new kinds of alliances.

Ready for the next decade development

These are profound questions without clear answers. Each presents dilemmas that must be confronted and managed. Does HiHEA have a sufficient foundation to make progress on such difficult issues?

It would seem so. Hand in Hand Eastern Africa has attracted staff with strong personal assets. Beyond their technical and managerial skills, they bring to their work their own experiences of inspiration, learning, entrepreneurship, and the power of community. Through a great deal of staff continuity, HiHEA has also accumulated institutional memory, and built a remarkable network of trust with beneficiaries and partners. These facilitate

discussions of the contexts in which HiHEA works, program logics, theories of change, and operational challenges. They mean that HiHEA can more easily, responsibly, and effectively deploy resources from its funders and other allies to works intensively and intimately with community groups, producing a variety of positive changes in the lives of group members and their families. Additionally, there is a growing commitment within the organization to monitoring and evaluation - not only to the technical aspects important for quality assurance and accountability, but to the value of intense and critical reflection that will help the organization to move to a higher level of strategic insight and focus.

Can this all add up to greater impact in the decade ahead - maybe even to an exit from poverty for the communities in which Hand in Hand Eastern Africa works?

It can, people reflect, if the Hand in Hand Eastern Africa organization lives by the same principles and practices that it uses to help others. To the extent that HiHEA aspires to address systemic market issues, its proven building blocks for practical progress will help:

HiHEA has a sufficient foundation to make progress on difficult challenges and dilemmas, drawing on the principles and practices that it uses to help others.

organising groups for mutual support in which HiHEA takes part with partner organisations; working together to understand the challenges of economic injustice and opportunities for greater

inclusion; rallying resources and planning for action beyond the capabilities of HiHEA or any other organization alone; seeking coaching and encouragement from those who have gone before; and progressively building deeper trust and mutual accountability with one another.

The dynamics shouldn't change as HiHEA turns some attention from the positive development of poor rural farmers and their self-help groups to itself and its own network. Practiced in the same spirit of peace, hope, and caring that help CBOs and self-help groups to succeed, these approaches will help HiHEA to take its own personal risks, invest its scarce time and resources, and maintain its energy to strive for a better future.

Of course, Hand in Hand Eastern Africa staff point out that they have another reason to feel confident about the decade ahead. "The successes belong to the farmers, who already do so much with so little," they reflected. "We just help a bit, and they do wonders. Just imagine if we can help a bit more."

Appendix: Methodological notes

The methodology chosen for this long-term strategic review was a Theory of Change Evaluation. Such an evaluation builds from understanding of the context in which an organisation aspires to facilitate positive change; mapping of the dominant dynamics working for and against that change in the external environment; clear articulation of the organisation's logical and practical foundations for the approaches it took; plotting of interventions; assessment of impact (whether positive or negative, expected or unexpected); and reflection on the strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in the strategies undertaken in light of those. It is therefore an approach that is particularly well-suited to more strategic and forward-looking evaluations.

It is also an approach that helps to address two relevant evaluation challenges. First of all, it allows for available, credible quantitative and qualitative data to be highlighted at the same time it accounts for the fact that much desirable data could not be collected. It would be too expensive, too time consuming, and probably too unreliable to attempt to reconstruct today baseline and timeline series data that would allow one to state with confidence the exact change in circumstances for thousands of HiHEA beneficiaries and their families over the project periods and up until today. Neither is sampling a straightforward option, as one cannot assume that the people one can reach are representative, and intensive resources would be required to trace and collect data from a truly random sample.

Secondly, the evaluation approach is particularly helpful in contexts where one is assessing contributions to impact. Changes in beneficiaries' lives, positive and negative, are not solely the result of HiHEA interventions; indeed, in no case could it be argued that HiHEA was the dominant force in the accumulation or loss of assets or income in poor rural lives that are also shaped by personal initiative, the physical environment, the political economy of poverty, family and community assets and liabilities, the interventions of churches, community groups, and government agencies, and many other forces. In such cases, rigorous inquiry into the context, dynamics, programme logics, and outcomes can help informed observers to make reasonable attributions of causal contribution.

This evaluation took place over a three month period from February through April 2020. It included review of extensive extent planning and monitoring and evaluation documentation, interviews with Hand in Hand Eastern Africa leadership and their international partners, two workshops in Nairobi with HiHEA staff, and six field consultations in three locations with HiHEA beneficiaries, partners, and staff.

Two projects were identified as anchors for the analysis. The first was Enterprise Development for Rural Families. For this project there was a midterm evaluation in 2012 and an end evaluation in 2013. The second was Integrated Adult Literacy and Enterprise

Training. Phase 1 was evaluated in 2016. Some beneficiaries ended their training after Phase 1, while others went on to continue in Phase 2, evaluated in 2019. While these projects took place within different time frames, they were both targeted to the core goal of HiHEA: rural enterprise development tied to broader markets. Participants did not limit their reflections to these projects; but having a core data set helped to ground conversations and analysis in particular realities, and to allow different interview cohorts to interact with each other more coherently.

The narrative storytelling approach allowed more meaningful participation in the evaluation process by staff, partners, and beneficiaries who spoke different languages, came from different backgrounds, and had varying experiences with evaluation processes. Through telling, listening to, questioning, and adding to stories, a broader and more diverse group of people could participate in the triangulation and collaborative assessment of data from a variety of sources. This helps to improve the reliability of findings and actionability of ideas that emerged. Additionally, the narrative approach was used to synthesize and present consensus perceptions and ideas from a broad range of participants, in the spirit of an extended focus group.

Altogether, more than 50 people shared their experiences, perspectives, insights, and ideas during the process. While discussions were in all cases broad ranging, beneficiary groups focused on questions about what they had anticipated from HiHEA, what they experienced, what unfolded for them after the project, their plans for the future, and their perceptions of the interrelationship of all of these with their project experience. Partner groups focused more on questions of the local context, dynamics of poverty and development, major thrusts of economic growth, and how the Hand in Hand project intersected with those. This narrative report then underwent a number of revisions as contributors reflected on and discussed iterative drafts. While the author in his professional judgement believes its conclusions to be reasonable and accurate in light of the available data and collaborative analysis, the narrative is very much a group effort.

The independent evaluator therefore extends his heartfelt thanks and appreciation to the people with whom he worked in Kenya. It is their courage, enterprise, and commitment to a better future that provides the foundation for this report.