



Empowering tea communities in Kenya

Summary of impact to date

Nancy is a mother of four and works as a tea picker. She has been elected Chair of the Saramek Farmers Group which was set up with support from the Empowering Tea Communities Project.

Photo: Rehema Baya/ActionAid

Executive summary

Approximately **300,000 workers** are hired by smallholder farmers in Kenya. The majority are young, landless women (aged 24-35), many of whom are economic migrants from other regions who move to tea growing areas in search of jobs. Workers are typically hired on a casual basis without formal contracts and are paid a piece rate per kilogram of tea plucked.

The informal nature of their employment means they are more likely to face **low incomes and poor working conditions**, and to **lack access to vital public services** such as clean water, safe housing, healthcare, and education.

Research commissioned by Ethical Tea Partnership (ETP) and its partners in 2020 also found **high rates of violence against women** in the smallholder tea sector in Kenya, with weak mechanisms in place to prevent and respond to violence.

The research also highlighted **high instances of children not attending school** who are then susceptible to working as tea pickers. The poor infrastructure in the rural tea zones perpetuates poverty and inhibits farmers and informal workers from accessing opportunities.

Kenyan smallholder farmers and informal workers play a vital role in the international tea supply chain but are largely 'invisible' and their rights are therefore overlooked. This makes them one of the most marginalised groups in the tea supply chain.

ActionAid, ETP, Taylors of Harrogate, Lavazza Professional and the Kenya Tea Development Agency are proud to be working together to pilot an initiative. The pilot is working to ensure that smallholder tea farmers and informal workers on tea farms are empowered to know and claim their rights, improve their livelihoods and prevent gender-based violence.

We are delighted to share this progress report demonstrating the positive changes this partnership has achieved to date. At the start of the programme ActionAid found that **92% of programme participants did not understand the concept of women's rights** and believed that violence against women and girls was a normal occurrence without any recourse. The midterm evaluation confirmed the programme design and approach are proving to be highly relevant to the context and substantively effective.

The midterm evaluation also confirmed that the programme has successfully:

- **Increased awareness of workers' rights and upheld these rights.**
- **Increased awareness of the right to live free from violence, addressed cases of violence, and supported survivors to access support.**
- **Supported community members to advocate for public services.**

With the pilot due to conclude in April 2025 discussions are underway to explore what comes next. The programme partners welcome the opportunity to work with more organisations who are committed to empowering workers and farmers to realise their human rights, end violence, and support a thriving Kenyan tea industry in the next phase of the programme.



Photo: Rehema Baya/ActionAid

Programme goals

Programme goal: Tea growing smallholder farmers and the informal workers that work on their farms are accessing their rights to decent work, freedom from violence and essential services.

The programme aims to:

- **Build an environment where human rights are upheld, protected and respected.**
- **Support women as they work to claim their right to freedom from violence.**
- **Improve access to essential public services for tea workers and their families, including water, housing, healthcare and education.**
- **Improve the livelihoods for smallholder farmers and informal workers.**

Crucially, **smallholder farmers and informal workers have been involved from the outset of the programme** when we worked with them to understand the issues they faced and the impact on their lives, informing the approach. The programme is active in three Kenyan Tea growing communities supplying three factories owned by the Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA) - Ngere in Murang'a County, Olenguruone in Nakuru County, and Kionyo in Meru County.

We are supporting workers and farmers to form groups, understand their rights to a positive working environment, freedom from violence, and access to services, and to mobilise them to claim their rights. Group members now act as Rights Champions, who in turn mobilise and train other community members. Women's Champions have also been trained and are central to ensuring that women know their rights to freedom from violence and can access medical, legal and psychosocial support.

Critical to the success of the programme to date has been the establishment of multistakeholder platforms for dialogue between

workers and farmers groups, tea industry and government stakeholders in each community. The establishment of community led localised reporting mechanisms for the reporting of rights violations has also been essential to ensuring rights violations are escalated through the appropriate channels to be addressed.

Furthermore, we are bringing about structural change within the Kenyan tea sector by working directly with KTDA to assess relevant policies and their implementation, consulting with tea workers on their impact, and contributing to wider efforts to influence national policy.

Our approach

The programme brings together ETP and ETP members' extensive knowledge of and relationships with the Kenya Tea Sector with ActionAid's distinctive **participatory, feminist and human rights-based approaches** to development.

ActionAid understands poverty as a violation of human rights that takes place due to marginalisation and discrimination and works to ensure that people can claim the rights they are entitled to. Therefore, the programme approach centres on building the **active agency** of people living and working in the smallholder tea sector, particularly women and young people. Through the programme they are becoming conscious of their rights enshrined in national and international human rights laws and organising to claim their rights through collective action and dialogue with duty bearers to ensure accountability.

The programme is also guided by [ActionAid's Feminist Principles](#) which seek to shift and transform power to ensure that every person can enjoy a life of dignity and freedom from all forms of oppression. The programme approach supports community members to analyse and confront power imbalances using [ActionAid's participatory Reflection-Action tools](#) which support communities to become more aware and more critical of existing power relations and empowers them to act to challenge injustice and bring about social and political change.

Agnes' story

Agnes is a single mother who lives in Nakuru County, Kenya. She works two jobs, as an environment cleaner and a tea picker. She is the sole provider for her family, her three children and a fourth foster child.

“At the ActionAid training, we were advised on how to address issues with our employers. I was able to sit and talk with my bosses and negotiate a schedule that allowed me to earn a little more. The wage has improved since we were able to speak with our employers who now give us an average of 9 KSh (0.05 GBP) per kilo of tea leaves.” - Agnes.



Photo: Rehema Baya/ActionAid



Photo: Rehema Baya/ActionAid

Nancy's story

Nancy is a mother of four and a farmer in Nakuru County, Kenya. She also works as a tea picker and has been elected Chair of the Saramek Farmers Group. She tells us that being part of the group, which was set up with the support of ActionAid, has had a positive impact on her life and on the lives of other women in her community.

“The training on rights has helped us because we were being mistreated before. Even in public participation forums we were silent, or rarely attended the sessions at all. Now, when the forums are arranged, we attend, and we contribute to the discussions. Even our children have benefited [from the project] because they are all in school. Before, they would stay home to help us pick tea within the farms.” - Nancy.

Outcome one:

An enabling environment exists for women working in the tea sector in which human rights are upheld, protected and respected.

Key achievements under this outcome included:

- A review of key policies at international, national, county and collection center level that are pertinent to tea worker's rights was undertaken and used to influence policy changes. The report highlights challenges and gaps, and provides recommendations to improve the welfare of smallholder farmers and tea workers.
- 53 groups of Rights Champions comprised of 1,474 smallholder farmers and informal workers have been formed. The groups have been trained on their rights as workers and citizens of Kenya and have worked together to identify solutions to common challenges. 90% of the groups have been registered with social services so far and are being supported to access government funding opportunities. The groups have also been trained in occupational health and safety standards and the use of personal protective equipment with reference to certification standards such as Rainforest Alliance.
- Through the Training of Trainers approach the Rights Champions have trained a further 6,042 farmers, workers and community members to understand their rights and the policies in place to protect them, and to mobilise and challenge when those rights are not upheld.
- Three multi-stakeholder platforms have been formed and 202 duty bearers (including representatives from tea factories and government departments) are now meeting monthly with Rights Champions to address issues and implement improvements for farmer and workers.
- Three community led reporting mechanisms through which rights violations can safely be raised to the right authorities have been set up and 164 cases, including cases of child labour, gender-based violence, and land rights violations, have been addressed to date.



John is a retired civil servant and village elder in Nakuru County, Kenya. He attended the multi-stakeholder platforms and supports tea pickers to defend their rights.

Photo: Rehema Baya/ActionAid

“As we meet up [at the multi - stakeholder platform] we have become more comfortable around people in positions of authority. The stakeholder’s meeting has helped bring us together.” - John.

Outcome two:

Women in the tea sector in the three programme's locations in Kenya live in an environment free from all forms of violence against women and girls.

Key achievements under this outcome included:

- A review of national and county level policies in place to protect women and girls from violence has been undertaken and is being used for training and advocacy purposes.
- 144 Women's Champions have trained 2,880 community members including 1,923 women on their rights to freedom from violence and on the referral mechanisms available at local level to support survivors of Gender-Based Violence.
- 231 female survivors from violence have been supported to access medical, psychosocial and legal support, as compared to 20 at baseline, and survivors' networks and support groups have also been established comprising 111 survivors and Women's Champions.
- 485 tea collection centre members received training on laws to protect women from gender-based violence, and how to address it.
- 49 women have been supported to seek justice on violation of land rights. 12 cases involving disinheritance of widows and land violations against elderly parents have been addressed.
- A report on the status of women's land ownership highlighting gaps and challenges was produced. The report contains recommendations in promoting land ownership by women in the three programme areas and is being used to ensure land rights issues are addressed through the multistakeholder platforms.



Photo: Rehema Baya/ActionAid

Zera's story

Zera, left, is a Women's Champion and the convener of the Abogeta West Women's Rights Network - formed as part of this programme to support women and survivors of gender-based violence in the tea communities. Zera received training from ActionAid and since then has trained 1,000 women in her community and recruited more than 30 women into a support group for survivors.

"We have benefited from the [ActionAid] training. We learnt a lot of new things that we didn't know before. We didn't know we had any rights as tea workers, but we were taught about them, and I was happy." - Zera

The Abogeta West Women's Rights Network has been at the forefront of supporting children from vulnerable households to go to school and following up on cases of child abuse and teenage pregnancy. Zera has advocated for menstrual hygiene management kits in primary schools. She further supports survivors of sexual violence to report cases through the referral pathways and the localised reporting mechanism established in Kionyo, Meru County.

Looking forward, Zera is working with other Women's Champions to develop a savings and credit cooperative which will address the issues of low incomes and debts among farmers and informal workers.

Julia's story



Julia is a survivor of domestic violence, an active member of the Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) Survivor's Network, and a passionate advocate for women's rights in her community. Julia left a 22-year long abusive marriage in 2017, when she started to fear for her life and for her son's future.

Photo: Rehema Baya/ActionAid

“A friend who works for ActionAid asked me to go with her to get some counselling. She introduced me to the convener at the SGBV Network, and **that's when my life began to change for the better.**”

When we started the Survivors Network, we began meeting, sharing stories and attending trainings. We are made up of women, most who are working as tea pickers, who experience challenging circumstances. Having attended training with ActionAid, I know how to recognise signs that someone is experiencing abuse.

I want to see more Women's Champions go into the villages to reach more women and help them open up and begin healing by talking about their experiences. ActionAid has helped resolve a lot of cases [of sexual and/or gender-based violence] and enabled women to become aware of their rights.

Individually we are still struggling because of patriarchal norms but **as we grow, we have realised that we are stronger.**” - Julia.

Outcome three:

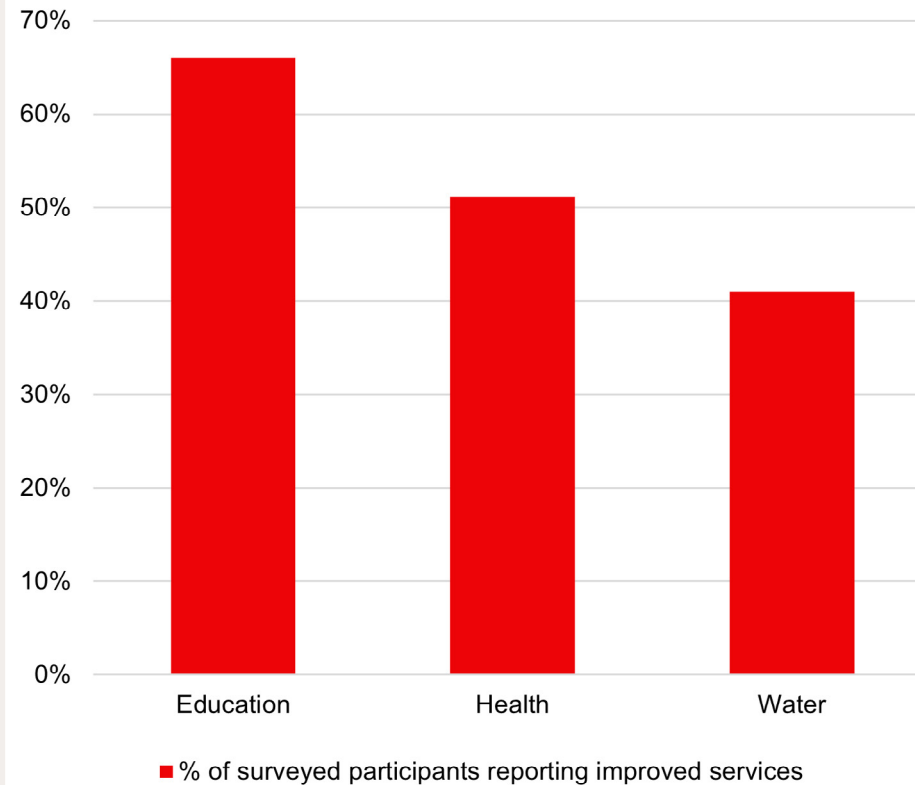
Improved access to gender-responsive public services (housing, education, health, water) for smallholder tea farmers, informal workers and their families.

Key achievements under this outcome included:

- Rights Champions have been supported to develop Community Led Participatory Change Plans, submit Memoranda to County Government for their priority needs and participate in local government planning processes.
- 625 Rights Champions have been trained on budget tracking and their rights to access gender responsive public services. 46 county government officials were trained on gender responsive budgeting and their duty to deliver gender responsive services to citizens, including women, youth, the elderly and the most vulnerable in the society.
- As a result of the advocacy of participants, 16 different actions have been taken by stakeholders at Ward and County levels to improve smallholder farmer and informal workers' rights and 15 commitments have been made by duty bearers.
- Murang'a County Government distributed water meters and ensured piped water connection and Kionyo County Government constructed public toilets to ensure quality sanitation facilities.
- Advocacy by Rights Champions has also resulted in the County Governments allocating funding for community's priority needs including the establishment of two maternity wards in Kionyo, and the construction of four school classrooms in Olengurone
- 420 Rights Champions from Olenguruone attended government forums resulting in the construction and maintenance of key roads in the area.
- A report outlining the high prevalence of child labour in the programme communities has been produced. The report has been used to start a "Back to school" campaign and 131 children have been re-enrolled in school across the three programme locations.

Participants were surveyed half-way through the project to establish the impact the project was having in the communities.

Participants reported benefitting from improved services with 66% of stakeholders seeing an improvement to education, 51.2% benefiting from improvements in health services, and 41% indicating that water services have improved.



Maurice's story

Maurice is the Assistant County Commissioner for Olenguruone in Nakuru County. His day-to-day activities involve dealing with cases, from land disputes to domestic disagreements around child support.

“In so many meetings, we do not have representation from the community groups, but at the multistakeholder platform we are able to hear about what is happening in the communities. My role is to pick up on any issue which might be problematic at community level and escalate the matter. The multi-stakeholder platform has been very helpful to attend, as an administrator.

“Women champions are having a positive impact on other women. The women who have attended trainings know their rights now. They are economically empowered. Women have formed their own groups.” - Maurice



Photo: Rehema Baya/ActionAid

Simon's story

Simon is a Senior Public Health Officer with the Department of Health in Nakuru County

“We are ensuring that all our people in the community have access to healthcare services because it's their right.”- Simon



Photo: Rehema Baya/ActionAid

Wesley's story



Wesley is a tea picker and farmer in Nakuru County. He is also the elected Chair of the local tea buying centre. He has seen great improvements in his community as a result of this project.

Photo: Rehema Baya/ActionAid

“The problems we experienced before the ActionAid project included low wages for the tea pickers and farmers.

Following the training, we were able to come together and question our wages and whether they were fair. We have benefited from the project because **now our wages are higher, and we have noted an improvement in services available for farmers at the factory.**

The ActionAid project has prompted employers to ensure their workers are well. **People now know their rights and have learned how to advocate for themselves.**

The ActionAid training taught us how we could become more independent and care for others as well.

Cases of domestic violence in the community have been greatly reduced. Everyone now knows their rights and in case they are violated, we know where to go to report the incident. Children are no longer allowed to work within the farms or bring tea for weighing at the tea-buying centres. **This is good because it ensures all under-18s go to school.**” - Wesley

Outcome four:

Farmers in the three programme's location in Kenya have improved financial livelihood.

Key achievements under this outcome included:

- We supported 1,474 farmers and workers who are members of the groups to form village savings and loan associations (VSLAs). Working closely with KTDA they have been trained on alternative livelihood opportunities and skills to support income diversification including literacy and financial literacy. The 41 currently registered savings and loans groups are now being supported to access government funding.

Eunice's story

Eunice is an informal worker and a member of the Karangi Women Workers Group in Ngere.

Before the group was formed, Eunice would pluck tea and spend all her proceeds covering basic necessities.

Eunice started saving through the group, initially contributing Ksh 100 on a monthly basis. The group discussed different activities they could invest in including poultry farming. ActionAid provided training and Eunice borrowed a loan of Ksh 2,000 from the group to purchase eggs.

Through the VSLA model she was able to access a loan at low cost and low risk. The first round produced 14 chicks allowing her to begin selling chicks to her neighbours. Eunice is now able to feed her family and cover expenses related to chicken rearing. In addition to her poultry, Eunice has also benefitted from the group's other resources. She purchased vegetable seedlings — kale, spinach, and onions — from the group and planted them at home, providing fresh produce for her family's meals.

Eunice is hopeful that she will expand her business and grow her flock to 100 chickens. She is grateful for the business management training she received from ActionAid and is eager to apply what she has learned to her growing venture.



1,474

farmers and workers have been supported to form village savings and loan associations



Through the Karangi Women Workers Group, Eunice was able to purchase seedlings and has established a vegetable garden where she grows food for her family.

Photo: ActionAid

Conclusion

The Empowering tea communities in Kenya programme has achieved significant results to date in its two and a half years of delivery, most notably in the **increased awareness of tea communities and their newfound ability to advocate for their rights to improved working conditions, freedom from gender-based violence, children's rights to education and essential public services.**

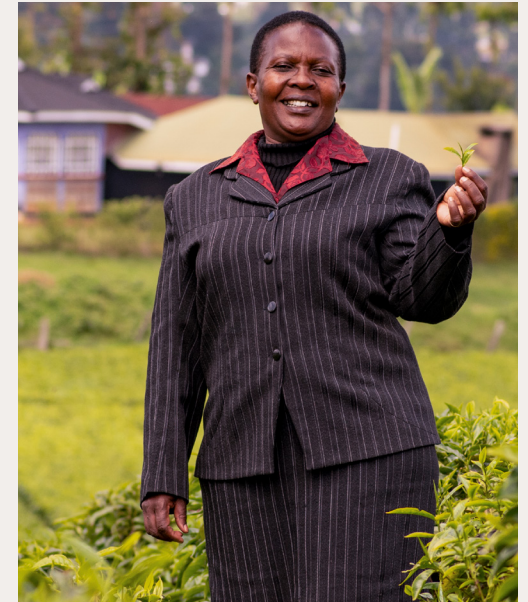
The **Rights Champions** have ensured the reach of the programme is extensive and the groups have provided a supportive network enabling smallholder farmers and informal workers to collectively work together for change. The county government departments have expressed how this intervention is timely and the positive contribution it has had towards creating synergies and making their work easier.

The programme has further potential to influence policy changes and the upholding of business and human rights towards a more sustainable tea sector.

Outcome five of the programme is to establish a sustainable model for scale-up and it is our ambition to scale the approach in the future and to share our learnings with the wider sector to achieve significant sustainable impact across the tea industry in Kenya.

“The programme is the first time we have heard about a plan to educate farmers on workers’ rights. We expect to see major changes with this structure ActionAid is bringing to the tea sector. Employers have value for that kilogram of tea that the worker is picking and they should have even more value for the human being who is enabling them to have it.”

Margaret, Agricultural Officer, Meru County



“The programme has applied unique approaches by strengthening local community structures and providing the community with avenues for engaging in governance and leadership. The project has reached different groups within the communities which has resulted in some immeasurable gains in promotion of rights, organising and leading community mobilisation and advocacy efforts around different issues.”

Michelle Kibwebwe, Empowering Tea Communities Programme Coordinator, ActionAid Kenya



Thank you for your interest in empowering tea communities in Kenya

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Irene is a tea and dairy farmer in Nakuru County, Kenya. Irene is part of the Saramek group, which supports women in the area to make weekly savings.

Photo: Rehema Baya/ActionAid