

HOME-BASED WORKERS, COLLECTIVE ACTION AND EDUCATION: THE JOURNEY OF NGALO BUWEREZA ORGANISATION, UGANDA



Betty Lunkuse's background is rooted in environmental management, women and gender issues. She trains women in her community to make handmade jewellery, weave baskets, plant bananas, rear local poultry breeds, and form groups to rear pigs. Recently, the women ventured into pineapple value addition by making organic pineapple jam. Betty's passion for working with women to enhance their social and economic well-being, while protecting the environment, connected her to Ngalo Buwerezza Organisation where she serves as the National Coordinator, overseeing the organisation's operations.

Introduction

Most of the developing world's materially poor who work, earn a living in the informal economy. In many instances, their work is characterised by low earnings and poor working conditions. This article explores the establishment of Ngalo Buwerezza Organisation (NBO), an organisation registered in 2022 and launched in February 2023, which organises and supports home-based workers in Uganda. Home-based workers, like other informal workers, have no formal legal or social protections. This article emphasises the role of workers' education in strengthening the capacity of NBO members to deal with socio-economic issues within their communities.

What is a home-based worker?

Home-based workers are workers who produce goods or services for the market either from within their own homes or from somewhere within their communities. They are either self-employed own account workers or sub-contracted workers or could be both¹. All home-based workers face numerous challenges such as low incomes, delayed payments, unreliable supply of raw materials, and inconsistent and/or cancelled work orders. Although largely 'invisible', home-based work represents a significant share of urban employment in many countries, especially for women, and the resultant income provides crucial support to their households. In Uganda, home-based workers' work includes many things, such as making crafts, basket weaving, cloth stitching, tailoring, crochet handbag production, hand washing of clothes, jewellery production, bee keeping, crop/fish/poultry and pig

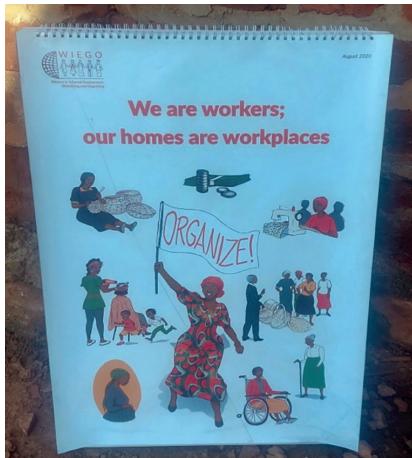
farming, solar drying of fruit, vegetable growing, pottery, and making briquettes.



Ngalo Buwerezza Organisation timeline

In 2018, with the support of Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)², home-based workers engaged in sensitisation efforts that highlighted their value and contributions, for example how their work contributes to the national economic coffers; their rights as workers; and their unique challenges as informal workers. This also served as a way to mobilise the workers toward building collective power.

The sensitisation was based on a manual: *We are workers; our homes are workplaces*.



Following the sensitisation sessions, home-based worker leaders began planning for a home-based workers' network in Uganda.



Home-based workers planning the network.

An Interim Working Committee made up of seven members was selected to oversee its creation. The Committee began by visiting key regions of the country with the task of mapping home-based workers. Home-based workers were identified in the Central Region in the areas of Entebbe, Kayunga, Jinja, and Mpigi.

As the network expanded into more regions, additional Interim Working Committee members were appointed, bringing the total to 19. The members continued conducting mapping³ exercises in the new areas. Throughout 2019, further sensitisation activities were extended to all regions.



Recruitment and sensitisation exercises within communities.

In 2020, despite challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, members continued to reach out to others through virtual communication, such as WhatsApp. Workers shared how COVID and lockdown were affecting them and this led to the drafting of an open statement⁴ addressed to government asking for its intervention.

In May 2021, members agreed to formalise the network by registering with the Uganda Registration Services Bureau (URSB). Through their organisations, members contributed funds for registration. A Registration Committee, made up of four members,

with consultation from the Working Committee, was appointed to oversee the registration process. The registration process began in June 2021, starting with the requirement to select a name for the organisation. After some discussion and debate, the name Ngalo Buwerezza⁵ (Hands and Services) was chosen, in recognition of the products and services the workers provide using their hands.



Membership recruitment continued between April and July 2022 under the theme 'we are workers; our homes are workplaces'. Supported by WIEGO, NBO held its first national workshop in Kampala from 5th-7th February 2023. The workshop brought together home-based workers from across Uganda, building solidarity and creating a shared understanding of NBO's objectives.



NBO first national workshop.

Leaders from 121 groups worked on the first draft of the NBO constitution and mandated the Working Committee to advance the work geared towards achieving NBO's goals. This led to the opening of an NBO bank account overseen by a Finance Committee comprising of the Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer, with members contributing joining fees. A member-led process was then carried out across NBO's seven operating regions to develop the next draft of the constitution, which was approved and adopted by the NBO General Assembly in March 2025.

Today NBO has a total membership of 122 groups representing 4,300 home-based workers in Uganda.

Working together and the role of worker education

NBO demonstrates the power of collective action. NBO is a good example of what happens when people come together and work collectively and collaboratively. Through organisation, workers who work in the informal economy and face considerable challenges, struggles and hardships, can combine their knowledge and skills. Together they can command a common voice for recognition, build contacts with other organisations, and access valuable information and support, for example (as mentioned above) working with WIEGO when doing the sensitisation activities. NBO receives support from HomeNet⁶ Africa in areas such as increasing visibility of its products and market access, including through the development of a product catalogue.

Most of the products that the workers make are produced and sold collectively - small groups in a community agree to an arrangement specific to each group. These self-help groups not only help members earn a living - they also build unity. Other examples of collaboration include skill-sharing when members come together to share information about the various activities and initiatives they are involved in, for example solar drying of fruit and vegetables to extend their shelf life and creating broader sales avenues beyond local communities.



Spice growing.



Scholastic book production.



Fruit and vegetable solar drying.



Production of liquid soap and shoe polish.

Worker education has played a significant role in the formation, success, and strength of NBO. Below are some examples:

- Union membership

Recognising the importance of visibility, unity, and collective power in advocating for their rights, NBO members joined the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (ATGWU) in June 2024. This led to youth participation in the Young Workers Camp held in Gulu City in August 2024, which focused on the green economy, skills development, and enhancing

opportunities for young workers. The camp featured inspiring talks, collaborative workshops, and practical insights into how trade unions operate.



NBO Executive Committee members signing into the ATGWU.

- Engagement of members with disabilities

NBO members living with disabilities met with the ATGWU to gain practical insights into trade union functions. The ATGWU has demonstrated a strong commitment to engaging with members living with disabilities, working to better understand their needs, and ensure their full inclusion within the union and workforce. One NBO representative was elected to the union's committee for informal workers with disabilities.

- Social protection advocacy

NBO became a member of the Social Protection Platform Uganda and some members participated in a focus group discussion on digital social protection organised by the Africa Platform for Social Protection on 14 August 2024. They also engaged in dialogue on implementing the Ugandan National Social Protection Policy (2015). Through this policy, which affirms that all citizens are entitled to social protection regardless of their employment status, the government recognises the need for social protection for informal workers. However, this commitment remains largely unmet, leaving home-based workers exposed and vulnerable.

More recently, home-based workers have been encouraged to join the goal-driven savings plan of the National Social Security Fund⁷ which allows informal workers to choose how much they save, when they contribute, and the length of their savings period.

Conclusion

The journey of Ngalo Buwerezza Organisation reflects the strength, determination, and resilience of the home-based workers it represents. Despite facing numerous challenges and hardships, NBO stands as a powerful example of what is possible when workers unite around a shared purpose and take collective action. NBO has built a space for members to organise, advocate for their rights, and work toward improving their livelihoods. The article emphasises how vital worker education is in making all of this possible.

Endnotes

- 1 **Self-employed** home-based workers assume all the risks of being independent operators. They buy their own raw materials, supplies and equipment, and pay utility and transport costs. They sell their finished goods mainly to local customers but sometimes to international markets. Most do not hire others but may have unpaid family members working with them.
- 2 **Sub-contracted** home-based workers (called homeworkers) are contracted by individual entrepreneurs or firms, often through an intermediary. They are usually given the raw materials and paid per piece, but cover many costs of production: workplace, equipment, supplies, utilities, and transport. They typically do not sell the finished goods themselves, and often do not know where or for whom the goods will be sold.
<https://www.homenetinternational.org/about/home-based-workers/>
- 3 Mapping in this instance includes such things as understanding workers' geographical distribution and working conditions. It is used as a way to organise unprotected workers.
- 4 https://www.wiego.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Homebased%20workers_Uganda_open%20statement_15May2020.pdf
- 5 Luganda, a language widely used in Uganda.
- 6 HomeNet International (HNI) is a global network of membership-based workers' organisations representing millions of home-based workers (HBWs) around the world.
<https://www.homenetinternational.org/network/homenet-africa/>
- 7 The National Social Security Fund Uganda is mandated by the government through the NSSF Act, as amended, to provide social security services to all eligible employees in Uganda. The fund is a contributory scheme and is funded by contributions from employees and employers of 5% and 10% respectively of the employee's gross monthly wage.



Member-led constitution drafting process.