

# PIECING *together* resilience



**B**eekeeper and entrepreneur Kathy Mbondo knows she can't take anything for granted: not even the trees. At her father's funeral in Makueni County, Kenya, almost two decades ago, hundreds of mourners from the Akamba community gathered under the shade of acacia trees. Last year, at her mother's funeral, Mbondo's family had to install canopies for their guests because of how the climate and local community had changed the landscape. "It's one motivation I have to bring back the community to its lost glory," she says.

REGIONAL ISSUES SUCH AS deforestation and overgrazing and global issues such as climate change are threatening Mbondo's community's environment and traditional ways of life. Mbondo witnessed these problems growing up on her family's farm, where her parents ran cattle, grew

vegetables, and kept a few traditional beehives.

As she grew more involved in the family business, she also experienced the whipsaws of the crop export business and has been working on how to make the farm and surrounding community more resilient to the changes they are experiencing.

## THE NEED FOR CHANGE

**A**fter university in Nairobi and several years working in insurance, Mbondo began building links between her family farm and the global market by exporting flowers to The Netherlands. But a season of extended rains and a huge price dip drowned that business. She turned her focus to the national market, instead, selling vegetables from the farm to supermarkets in and around Nairobi. But soon, some of Kenya's leading grocery chains fell behind on payments as they underwent

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nationwide collapses. It brought down Mbondo's vegetable business. "In the middle of all this, I'm contemplating on what to do next. One of my friends asked me, 'Kathy why aren't you selling this honey?'"

THE HONEY CAME FROM ten traditional acacia-log hives her mother had hung in a tree on the farm as a hobby. "I asked my mom, 'Why do you suspend [the hives]?" Mbondo recalls. Her mother answered that the Akamba community traditionally suspended beehives in the acacia trees because of its immense canopy and size. A single acacia tree could host 30 hives.

But acacias were endangered. Charcoal buyers had been picking over the region for acacias, and many landowners were willing to sell their trees for a little money upfront despite their higher long-term value of the trees for beekeeping. Other charcoal producers were even less scrupulous and stole remote acacias from sprawling, hard-to-patrol properties.

At the time, Mbondo shared the honey with friends in the city, but she decided to develop a brand for it, [Asali Natural](#), and sell it online and via a pickup point in Nairobi. Soon she was in closer contact than ever with her customers, and she figured that made her more resilient to business shocks of the kind that had scuttled her previous endeavors: "I avoid retail stores as much as I can," she says. "Sixty percent of my sales, I push them directly online."

To meet demand, she had to recruit other farmers. She enticed them by pointing out how hives hung on a single acacia tree could produce honey in one year worth five times the price charcoal buyers were paying. It was frustrating for Mbondo to see farmers pay

such a high long-term price for their short-term gain. But recruiting partners was still difficult and she found that hives didn't reach historical honey yields.



## PUTTING CHANGE INTO PRACTICE

In 2018, Mbondo was thinking about how to diversify the business, she says, in line with conventional business thinking about how to reduce risks. She was talking to other farmers to learn what other produce they had in surplus, beyond honey, and try to add some value to it as she delivered it to consumers.

BUT STARTING IN 2019, she began participating in the Transforming Changes program. Now she is rethinking her next steps. "Before the program, I was a cause-effect kind of person," Mbondo says. "This program has opened up my mind to complexities and to embrace the fact that the systems and things are never as simple as they seem at the surface."

Mbondo says she now sees her business as more than just making payroll each month: she wants her business to help her community meet some of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. That means that she must confront global issues such as

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climate change with local resources. So, if she and her fellow farmers only think about selling today's surplus crops, they will miss out as the climate changes their environment.

“THAT IS SHORT-TERM. What is available today will not be available ten years down the line, because of climate change. My mindset has to change,” she says, “from just being a transactional kind of mindset...to a regenerative kind of mindset.”

Instead, Mbondo and other farmers in her community must be more proactive, she says, such as by improving bee habitat to increase production rather than accepting low or declining productivity. If they succeed, they could solve two problems: produce more profit in the short term and lower the long-term risks. To do that, Mbondo consulted community elders about traditional beekeeping practices, such as using ash as a pesticide, and brought in new outside ideas, such as including sunflower cultivation alongside traditional crops. The sunflowers could give her bees something else to pollinate, the plants produce oil she could sell, and may even work as feed for cattle. That could make her farm more resilient to droughts.

## LOCAL FIXES

**M**bondo has also been exploring another lesson learned from Transforming Change. In one module, moderators challenged participants to play a so-called bricolage game, in which they had to invent a game that used craft items they had to hand, such as pencils and stencils. [Playing your way to innovation](#), and meeting challenges with the nearest available tools, are part of the Transforming Change approach. “That opened my mind to:

‘what resources can I tap into locally?’” Mbondo says.

**BACK ON THE FAMILY FARM**, she began experimenting with plastic drums instead of acacia wood—one of many experiments she's been doing—because it would allow farmers to cut down fewer acacia trees. But the plastic trapped too much heat for the bees. After stepping back and testing other materials, she settled on sisal, another low-cost, local material. Weaving sisal into her farm's business could have multiple advantages: local artisans use it to make bags, so she could sell it to them, and her bees could pollinate the living plants. With each iteration of her business, Mbondo has tried to introduce solutions that address multiple problems, sometimes on multiple scales. “We have to explore the resources that are available without over-exploiting them,” she says.

*Kathy Mbondo is an entrepreneur and a sales and marketing director, who is passionate about bees, acacia trees, and nurturing her country's ailing environment. Her company, Asali Natural, works with beekeepers, health companies, and retail outlets to create a sustainable producer-consumer chain.*

*[Transforming Change](#) is an Africa-based programme that strengthens participants' capacities in social-ecological resilience, systems and complexity thinking, and systems entrepreneurship—seeking to transform the very way we approach change. The programme is funded by the Swedish Institute and delivered through a partnership with the [Stockholm Resilience Centre](#), the [Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship](#), and the [Centre for Complex Systems in Transition](#).*