

Cultural Heritage Preservation Through Ushanga Initiative Cooperatives in Narok County Kenya

Charles Wambu & Purity Wanjiku

¹The Co-operative University of Kenya (ckamau@cuk.ac.ke)

²The Co-operative University of Kenya (puritynjau@yahoo.com)

*Corresponding author: ckamau@cuk.ac.ke

<https://doi.org/10.62049/jkncu.v5i1.407>

Abstract

Beadwork is still a potent way to preserve cultural identity while promoting and cultural heritage. Cooperatives have become essential avenues for group action and community empowerment. Ushanga cooperatives demonstrate an innate ability to recognize and capitalize on the inventive qualities of the cultural and creative industries. Despite all of this evidence, neither academics nor the cooperative movement itself have thoroughly examined the connection between CCS and cooperatives too far. Thus paper focuses on the contribution of cooperatives on cultural heritage preservation. The study adopted descriptive research design that combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The study was conducted in Narok county where Five Ushanga cooperatives operating both in Maasai Mara game reserve and Narok town with a membership of 1400 were purposively selected from the twenty (20) registered cooperatives due to their active participation and high membership. Simple random sampling procedure was used to select 300 active members from the five (5) Ushanga initiative cooperatives. Key informants were purposively selected and comprised of five leaders of Ushanga initiative cooperatives and one chief executive cooperative officer. Data was collected using structured questionnaires and key informants' interview schedules. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics for quantitative data and content analysis for qualitative data. From the study results females dominated in the Ushanga initiative cooperatives with a representation of (91.80%). This is an indication that beadwork enterprise is predominantly undertaken by females. Items such as leather bracelets (99.4%), beaded necklaces (99.2%), wristbands (99.2%), beaded rungus (98.1%) and woven garments (97.3%) were the most commonly produced items. Ushanga initiative cooperatives not only promote economic empowerment but also cultural resilience. The study comes to the conclusion that bolstering cooperative frameworks can be a successful cultural preservation tactic and suggest policy assistance to increase their influence among indigenous groups.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Preservation, Ushanga Initiative & Cooperatives

Introduction

African communities have been engaging in the interesting and age-old beadwork technique for generations. Intricate designs that are exquisite and have cultural and symbolic meanings are made using beads (Collins et al., 2020). Various groups in East Africa created beads using a variety of resources at their disposal. These materials include everything from the utilization of animal bones to black coral that was harvested from the Indian Ocean (Babalola & Ajayi, 2022). The evolution of commercial beading over several decades demonstrates how early financial benefits have resulted in more significant social change, with prosperous craftspeople gradually acquiring more decision-making power within their families and communities (Rodland, 2023). This development shows that when their economic potential is fully realized and fairly managed, cultural practices can operate as the cornerstones of progressive social and economic change.

Heritage has been primarily portrayed in African nations as a legacy, symbol, and representation that has been passed down from previous generations to the current generation in the hopes of being passed on to future generations (Nilson & Thorell, 2018; Shilabukha and Muyembe, 2024). It possesses both tangible and intangible qualities Hamilakis and Jones (2017) and is a prime example of achievements and a priceless asset of historical events that are recorded and preserved for the benefit of current and future generations (Insoll, 2021). A community's cultural history is viewed as a channel of communication between its past and present generations (Nilson & Thorell, 2018).

Cultural heritage is a crucial part of communities, groups, and individuals and is the foundation of development (Magnavita, 2019; Shilabukha and Muyembe, 2024). It is also very difficult to separate from their identity (Shilabukha and Muyembe, 2024). According to Moffett, et al., (2022) as well as Shilabukha and Muyembe (2024), if people are more aware of the value of cultural heritage resources, community-level protection can be accomplished. As stated by Hamilakis and Jones (2017), this has brought about the concept of social benefits or the significance of heritage treasures. Participation by the community in heritage management and conservation fosters social cohesion, inclusion, bonds, trust, and connections between the government (at the top) and other groups of people at the grassroots level (at the bottom), as well as strengthening the communities' intellectual capacity and intricate link to communal heritage physiognomies. The community's active involvement in heritage contributes to its preservation and continuity (Moffett & Walz, 2023).

Over the past twenty years, community involvement in heritage management has become a global phenomenon. It is a bottom-up strategy that has permeated historic conservation methods (Ronchi, 2020; Yung & Chan, 2011). This idea is essentially the result of paradigm shifts in heritage conservation from place-based conservation to more people-centered conservation (i.e., from conserving solely tangible heritage to conserving intangible cultural heritage that represents the people). In contrast to top-down interventions by governments or the specialized heritage business, the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organization (UNESCO) has consistently been at the forefront of promoting the bottom-top approach in heritage practice (UNESCO, 2015). One prevalent aspect of 21st-century democratized cultural heritage practice is locally-led active engagement that is ingrained in social connotation (Chitty, 2017).

The claim that cultural and social sustainability in heritage management may be accomplished by implementing a bottom-top approach rather than the other way around has been validated by experience from numerous nations (Giliberto & Labadi, 2022; Shilabukha and Muyembe, 2024). The composition of locally-led active participation in heritage protection is the sole reason for this. It is a model framework that ensures local communities can voice their ideas and make decisions on matters that are most important to their survival and well-being (Chan, 2016). In addition to fostering social cohesion, inclusion, bonds, trust, and connections between the government (at the top) and other groups of people at the grassroots level (at the bottom), community involvement in heritage management and conservation helps communities develop their intellectual capacity through intricate links to communal heritage physiognomies (Labadi, 2016). The progression to more commercialization of heritage can be enhanced through community cooperatives.

Globally, cooperatives are playing an increasingly important role in the CCS for the Culture and Creative Sectors (ILO, 2021b). Today, the cooperative model is being applied to new fields of activity, such as information and communication technologies, tourism, and the cultural and creative industries (ILO, 2021). Traditional worker cooperatives operate in industry and services, including social services, while the majority of cooperatives operate in agriculture, finance, wholesale and retail, health care, housing, and insurance. Combining the two fields can significantly improve each (OECD, 2020). On the one hand, the cooperative movement wants to be more visible in the prevailing economy, while culture and the arts have been shown to foster cooperation, understanding, and communication (Magnavita, 2019).

According to the US Federation of Worker Cooperatives (2019), worker cooperatives are frequently created to help vulnerable individuals develop their skills and generate revenue in communities that are most directly targeted and impacted by inequality. Globally, there appears to be a lot of potential and promise in the creative and cultural sectors. It is crucial to address the issues and challenges in these areas, such as the high rates of precarious employment and the structural fragility of many businesses, to fully realize the enormous potential for culture to influence economic, social, and even environmental outcomes. By preserving cultural legacy, cooperatives demonstrate an innate ability to recognize and capitalize on the inventive qualities of the cultural and creative industries (International Cooperatives Alliance, 2021). Despite all of this evidence, neither academics nor the cooperative movement itself have thoroughly examined the connection between CCS and cooperatives too far. The creative and cultural industries greatly benefit from the economic, social, and cultural advantages that cooperative models provide to their employees and customers. The transfer of income among creative and cultural workers is supported by the mutualistic framework of cooperatives. This paper focuses on the contribution of cooperatives to cultural heritage preservation.

The Maasai are one of the most recognized communities with as long history of beading, whose centuries-long tradition ties the social and spiritual fabric of their community along with the physical craft (Robertshaw, 2020). Before growing through trade networks that brought glass beads from far-off places, the craft started with simple materials like clay, seeds, and bones that could be found locally. The adaptability and tenacity of Maasai culture is reflected in this progression (Moffett & Walz, 2023). In the past, Maasai beadwork mostly used locally accessible materials like clay, shells, bone, and natural fibers that had little effect on the ecosystem. Beginning in the 19th century, the shift to commercially produced glass beads brought with it new concerns about the procurement of materials and the effects on the lifetime (Robertshaw, 2020). Through creative strategies that strike a balance between aesthetic traditions and

ecological responsibility, modern craftspeople are navigating these issues. This is the essence of heritage management through beautification with a commercial touch.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Two theories were relevant to anchoring this study

Cultural Capital Theory

Cultural capital theory by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) provides a strong foundation for understanding how traditional knowledge, artistic skills and cultural expressions hold significant value within communities. In the context of pastoralist groups such as the Maasai and Turkana, beadwork is not only an economic activity but also a key expression of identity, status and heritage. Bourdieu argues that cultural skills and knowledge function as important forms of capital that can be transferred across generations and converted into economic or social benefits. Within the Ushanga initiative cooperatives, women artisans draw upon their inherited beadwork skills that embody their history, beliefs and community aesthetics to produce cultural artefacts for both local and global markets.

Through the cooperative model, this cultural capital is collectively organized, refined and commercialized, ensuring that artisans benefit from increased bargaining power, quality control, and structured market access. At the same time, cooperative plays a central role in protecting these cultural expressions from erosion, commodification without consent, or misappropriation by external actors. Cultural capital theory therefore helps explain how the Ushanga initiative transforms intangible cultural heritage into a sustainable livelihood asset while maintaining its custodians of cultural knowledge and agents of intergenerational transmission.

Community Based Development Theory

Community-based development theory by Elinor Ostrom (1933) emphasizes bottom –up approaches in which communities are the primary decision –makers and drivers of their own development processes. This theory is particularly relevant to the Ushanga initiative cooperatives because they are grassroots, community-owned entities designed to empower local women to preserve, market, and innovate within their cultural traditions. By situating control within the community members.

CBD theory highlights how participation, collective action, and local ownership contribute to sustainability. In the context of the Ushanga initiative, women artisans form cooperatives that oversee training, resource mobilization, product standardization, branding, and market linkages. These processes enable communities to protect their cultural designs against external exploitation and to determine how their cultural products are represented and valued in broader markets. The theory further explains why preservation efforts succeed when cultural custodians particularly women hold leadership roles and make decisions about how heritage is used, showcased, and transmitted. Ultimately, community-based development theory shows that the strength of the Ushanga initiative lies not only in economic empowerment but also in its reinforcement of collective identity and cultural pride. By anchoring development interventions within community structures, the initiative supports a sustainable model where cultural heritage preservation and socio-economic uplift are mutually reinforcing.

Methodology

The study adopted descriptive research design which incorporated both qualitative and quantitative approaches in data collection and analysis. The study was conducted in Narok county where twenty (20). Ushanga initiative cooperatives have been registered with a total membership of 25,000 individuals. The county was selected due to the rich cultural heritage of Maasai beadwork and organized initiatives to market the piecework both locally and internationally through cooperatives. Five Ushanga cooperatives (Siana Shanga Women Co-operative Society Limited, Mara Beads Co-operative Society Limited, Nalepo Ildamat Beadwork Women Co-operative Society Limited, Mosiro Nalepo Beadwork Women Co-operative Society Ltd and Osiligi Lomareta Beadwork Women Co-operative Society Limited) operating both at Maasai Mara game reserve and in Narok town with a membership of 1400 were purposively selected from the twenty (20) registered cooperatives due to their active participation and high membership. The study adopted a simple random sampling procedure to select about 300 individuals from the five (5) Ushanga initiative cooperatives. Key informants were purposively selected and comprised of five leaders of Ushanga initiative cooperatives and chief executive cooperative officers. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire and key informants' interview schedules and analyzed using descriptive statistics for quantitative data and content analysis for qualitative data. All ethical considerations were put in place during the data collection process.

Presentation and Discussion of the Findings

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Gender of Respondents

From the study results females dominated in the Ushanga initiative cooperatives with a representation of (91.80%) while males were (8.2%). This indicates that beadwork business is predominantly undertaken by females. This is shown in figure 1 below.

One participant explained:

Traditionally Beadwork is seen as women work but not just an economic activity but a cultural expression who engage in craft, passing the skills down from mother to daughter (IP1).

As one of the respondents stated:

Beadwork represents a significant source of income and economic empowerment for women. It also serves a key tool for reducing poverty and improving livelihoods among Maasai women (IP2).

According to (OECD (2020) beadwork is culturally assigned to female craft and especially in traditional African communities like the Maasai.

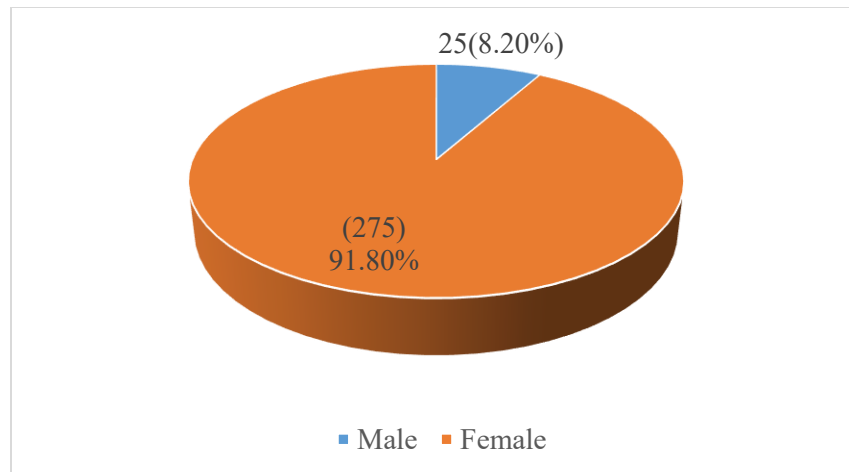


Figure 1: Gender of the respondents

Age of the Respondents

From the study findings majority of the respondents (50%) are of age bracket 54-71 years, followed closely by those in the age bracket 36-53 years (43.2%) while those of the age bracket 18-35 years (6.4%) and those of the age bracket 72 years and above (0.4%). This indicates that older women are the primary participants in the beadwork cooperatives. This could be attributed to traditional nature of the craft, which is often practiced by mature women with deep cultural knowledge and skills passed through generations. The low youth participation may threaten the sustainability of beadwork cooperatives if they are not engaged or interested. This is shown in figure 2 below. One of the interviewees stated that:

The low participation of the youth is attributed to potential disconnect between the youth aspiration and traditional crafts, preference of formal jobs, perceived lack of economic value in beadwork among the youth (IP4).

According to ILO (2021) most cultures, women have historically worked in beadwork because it serves as a symbolic language, an adornment, and a means of transmitting cultural knowledge and customs.

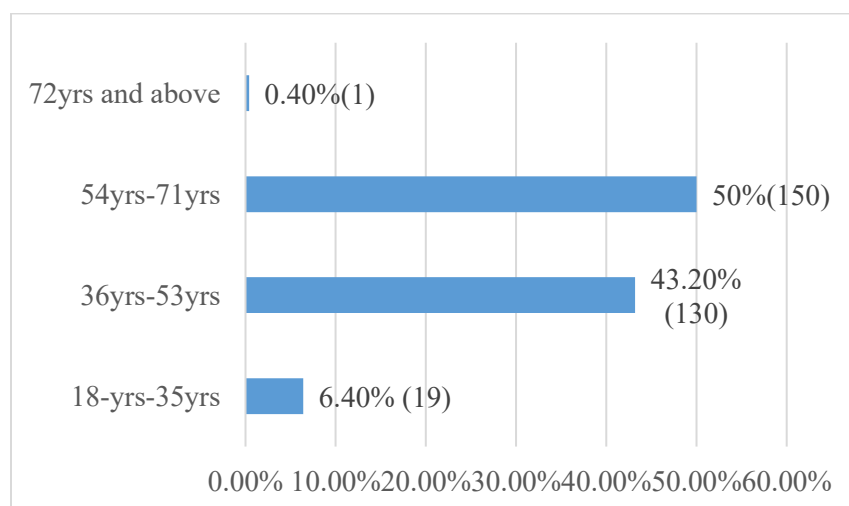


Figure 2: Age of the Respondents

Type of Household

The study findings indicate that members of beadwork cooperatives are drawn from diverse types of households which include polygamous 108 (36%) and monogamous 96 (32%) households account for 68%. This is an indication of widespread activity across different traditional family structures. Female headed household is represented by 57 (19%) while the youth or morani households have the lowest representation 2 (0.8%). This is show in figure 3. One respondent stated:

The female headed households face various challenges such as time burden, limited mobility and access to capital, which may restrict their full engagement in cooperatives. The extremely low participation of youth in Ushanga cooperative is an indication that beadwork is culturally and economically not seen as a youth-oriented activity (PI 3).

According to Linares and Woolard (2021), household type has a major impact on participation in economic activities like beading due to its effects on time availability, resource control and opportunity access. Beadwork may be a more significant source of income for female-headed households, which frequently face additional limitations, particularly if women are also handling childcare and home duties. Reducing a family's susceptibility to poverty, boosting financial independence, and enhancing people's capacity to support their children are the goals of household economic strengthening.

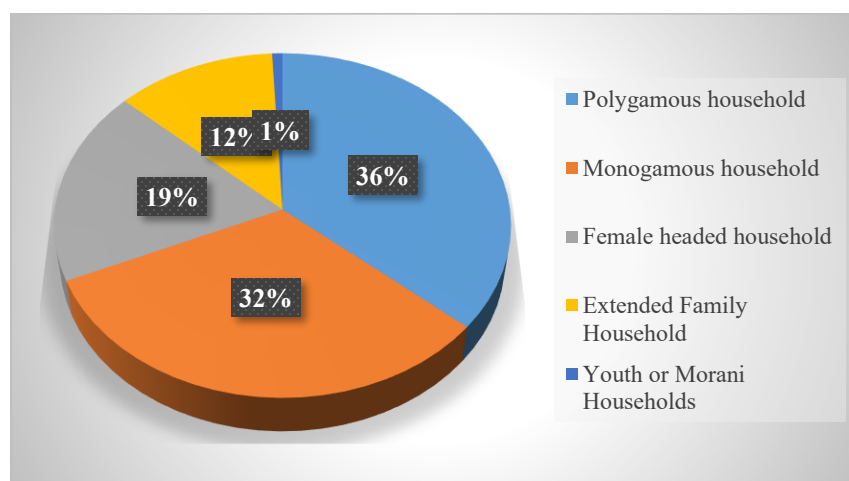


Figure 3: Type of Household

Types of Beadworks Done

From the study results items such as leather bracelets (99.4%), beaded necklaces (99.2%), wristbands (99.2%), beaded runcus (98.1%) and woven garments (97.3%) were the most commonly produced items among the cooperative members largely focusing on traditional, culturally significant beadwork. Items like wallets (17.4%) earrings (12.8%) and handbags (7.4%) show a very low production which could be attributed to lack of access to materials, tools or market for modern products. The findings are presented in Figure 4.

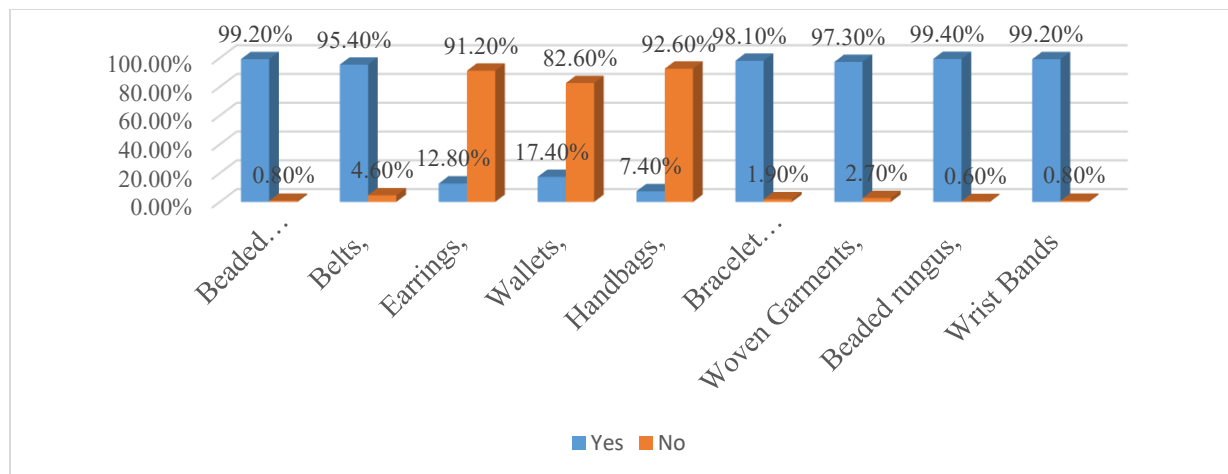


Figure 4: Types of beadworks

This was corroborated by the key informant interviews as one of the participants indicated that

Beadwork items produced by members of the cooperative are well established, easy to produce with available skills, and are on high demand locally as well as by tourists who seek authentic crafts. This also indicates strong cultural preservation and skill mastery among members. (IP3)

Some items such as wallets and earrings are not enormously produced due to lack of design or fashion diversification as well as more focus on time tested traditional items which feel safer economically (IP6)

The respondents displayed samples of the beadwork which are presented in Figure 5.

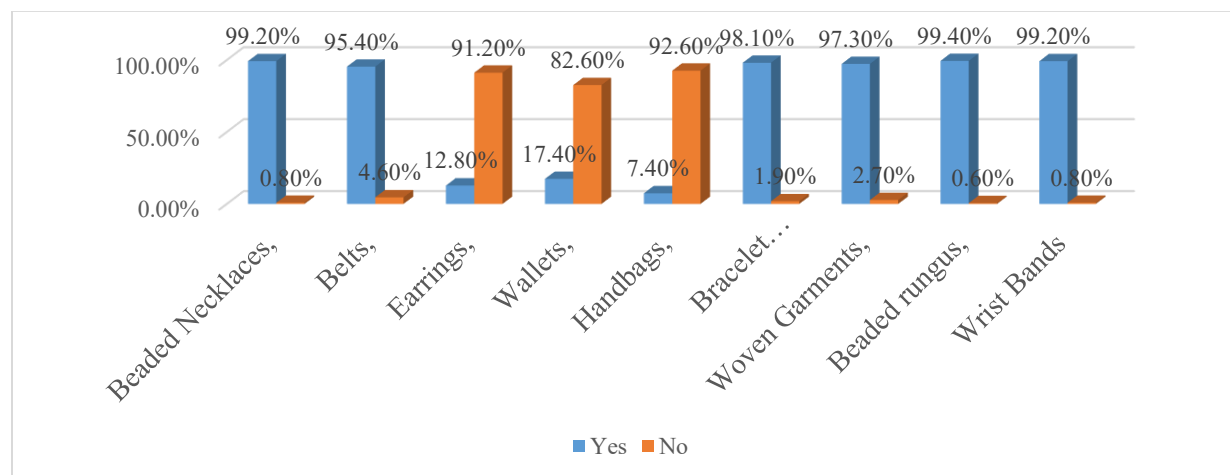


Figure 5: Samples of beadworks



Figure 6: Images of sampled beadwork

The findings of the study concur with other authors such as Robertshaw, (2020) who indicated that Maasai culture is embodied in the beadwork, which stands for power, beauty, heritage, and occasionally even social standing. One of the most revered elements of Maasai tradition is the passing down of beading expertise from one generation to the next. Young girls watch their mothers and aunts work with beads from an early age, learning not just the techniques but also the cultural meanings, stories, and songs that are weaved into each item. Both technical skills and cultural knowledge are guaranteed to survive thanks to this apprenticeship system (Rodland, 2023). Many craftspeople continue to produce both modified designs for foreign markets and fully traditional pieces for ceremonial use inside their communities (Moffett, et al., 2022). Maasai beading has been able to maintain its economic viability in evolving times without compromising its deep cultural roots.

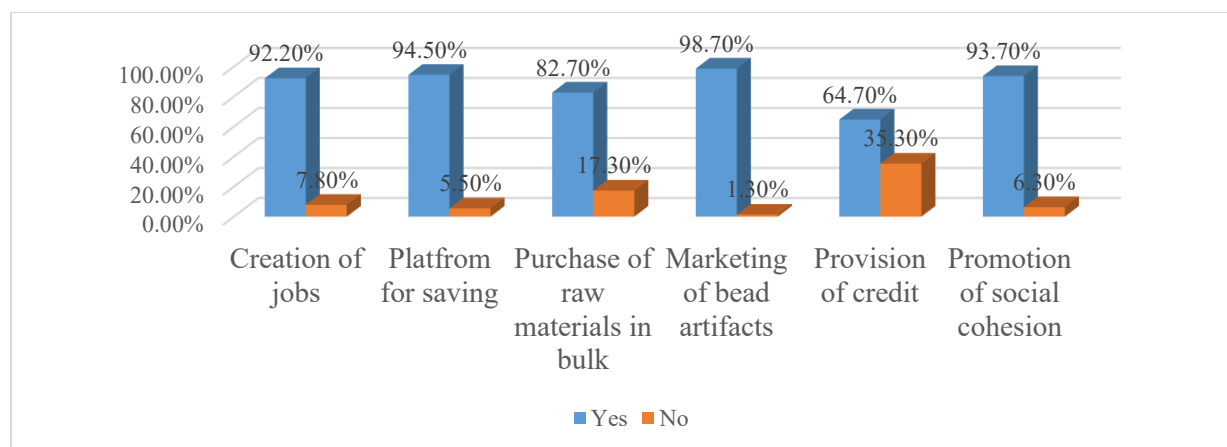
Role of Ushanga cooperatives

Ushanga initiative cooperatives are key facilitators in accessing markets for members representing (98.7%) which is the highly rated role. About (94.5%) of the respondents report it offers a platform for saving income from beadwork building financial inclusion for women. About 93.7% indicated that the cooperative serves as a social unit where members share ideas, support one another and maintain cultural values strengthening community bonds. About 92.2% of the respondents indicate that are a major source of livelihood among Maasai women enhancing self-reliance, reducing poverty in a predominantly patriarchal setting. One of the participants observed that:

Beadwork cooperatives connect members to local and external buyers, enhancing visibility and collective branding reducing reliance on middlemen thus improving profit margins. Beyond economic empowerment, beadwork cooperatives contribute significantly to cultural continuity and social stability (IP6)

Another participant indicated that:

Pricing for genuine Maasai beadwork through cooperative has created economic incentives that encourage younger generations to learn and maintain traditional techniques that might otherwise be abandoned as economically unviable (IP1).



According to ILO (2021) cooperatives have become the organizational backbone of this economic revolution. These collectives typically operate as democratic organizations where artisans pool resources, share knowledge, and collectively negotiate with buyers and suppliers. The cooperative structure provides critical advantages: bulk purchasing power for materials, quality control standards that maintain premium pricing, collective bargaining leverage, and risk distribution across the membership. These groups also frequently establish communal savings mechanisms that function as informal banking systems, allowing members to finance education for children, healthcare expenses, and home improvements. Women who master beadwork can now earn income that rivals or exceeds traditional male-dominated economic activities, fundamentally altering family dynamics and community power structures while reinforcing the cultural value of this traditional craft.

The cooperative organization has created a sustainable economic foundation that preserves cultural heritage while generating tangible material benefits. These arrangements establish minimum price thresholds, transparent supply chains, and direct relationships between artisans and end retailers that eliminate exploitative middlemen. Many partnerships also include capacity-building components such as business skills training, digital literacy education, and market research collaboration (International Cooperatives Alliance, 2021). This is in coherence with the study findings.

Challenges Faced by Beadwork Cooperatives

The highest-rated challenges (Mean ≥ 40) are stiff competition, limited business skills, lack of brand identity, limited technology access, inflation and input costs. Moderate issues include market access and financial illiteracy. Undervaluing craft work is the lowest rated issue, possibly due to cultural pride in beadwork.

Table 1: Challenges Face by Beadwork Cooperatives

Statement	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Stiff competition	300	1.00	5.00	4.7164	.61622
Limited access to international market	300	1.00	5.00	3.6725	1.11944
Limited business skills among members	300	1.00	5.00	4.6053	.76144
Continued use of traditional designs	300	1.00	5.00	4.3626	.92702
Difficulty in accessing stable markets	300	1.00	5.00	3.7164	1.27632
Lack of brand identity	300	1.00	5.00	4.6520	.68839
Inflation and input costs	300	1.00	5.00	4.2749	.95984
Limited access to technology	300	1.00	5.00	4.0234	1.20338
Undervaluing craft work	300	1.00	5.00	3.0263	1.45586
Financial illiteracy	300	1.00	5.00	3.4386	1.26330
Valid N (listwise)	300				

According to ICA (2021) despite their advantages, beadwork cooperatives are confronted by various difficulties such as restricted market access, budgetary limitations, and the requirement for better administration and governance. Furthermore, members' lack of skills and cultural opposition may impede advancement.

Conclusion

Women comprise the highest percentage of members in beadwork enterprise cooperatives an indication that beadwork is a traditional role assigned to women. The low percentage of male participation highlights a potential opportunity of engaging men in roles such as marketing, logistics, or innovation within the beadwork value chain which can led to balanced representation in beadwork cooperatives.

The middle age constitutes the majority (50%) of beadwork cooperative members. Programs to support beadwork should target the middle-aged members.

The high involvement of members from polygamous households shows that each wife may manage their own beadwork leading to higher individual participation while monogamous households may support beadwork as a supplementary or primary income source.

Bead work cooperatives are heavily reliant on traditional beadwork which is culturally rich but may limit income growth. Earrings, handbags and wallets are common fashion accessories items that attract market both locally and globally, yet they are underrepresented. This could be attributed to potential gap in innovation and market adaptation particularly towards appealing export markets.

Beadwork cooperatives play a critical role in commercializing traditional beadwork which directly impact on the economic livelihoods of their members.

Beadwork cooperatives play a critical role in socio-economic empowerment of Maasai community especially in marketing, savings, supporting job creation as well as social cohesion.

The findings reveal that beadwork cooperatives face significant operational and strategic challenges that hinder their growth and sustainability. Key among these is stiff competition, inadequate business skills and weak brand identity, all of which reduce their competitiveness in both local and international markets.

Recommendations

There is need to develop gender responsive policies and support programmes. Trainings, access to credit, marketing support, and business development services should be tailored with a focus on women, who form the bulk of the membership of beadwork cooperatives.

There is critical need to attract and train younger people, maybe through modernization of design techniques, digital marketing and integration of beadwork with fashion.

There is need for beadwork cooperatives to expand product variety and incorporate modern design skills to access new customer segments.

There is need to recognize and integrate beadwork cooperatives into local development planning, especially in cultural tourism, women empowerment and poverty alleviation programs.

Beadwork cooperatives should encourage blending of traditional and modern designs to appeal to wider markets while maintaining cultural heritage.

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