

Assessing Ethical Compliance and the Needs of Workers in the Ethiopian Handicraft Cooperative sector: A Gap Analysis and Research for Eileen Fisher



Left to right: Member of a coop at work, member of a coop during an interview, member of a coop involved in weaving, member of the coop spreading out thread for weaving.

Traditional cooperatives or 'Iqub' have existed in Ethiopian society for centuries. The Iqub was an association of people with common objectives for mobilising resources. Since 1960 when the government set up a legal framework to govern cooperatives, there has been an increase in the number of cooperatives supported by government or NGOs. These can enable disadvantaged or remote workers to participate in global supply chains, bringing much needed income to communities and enabling traditional skills to flourish. But cooperatives can rarely afford to recruit highly skilled personnel or implement complex quality management systems. The resulting gaps can negatively impact the livelihoods of workers.

Eileen Fisher, the American designer fashion brand, sources handwoven scarves from an Ethiopian supplier that subcontracts to six cooperatives. Eileen Fisher therefore commissioned Partner Africa in 2014 to assess the living and working conditions of their supplier's (Sammy) 42 workers as well as the 46 members of the cooperatives Sammy used. The aim was to identify any gaps that negatively impact livelihoods, as well as opportunities to support workers in achieving better livelihoods through this work.

Partner Africa has pan-African reach and experience. So with our locally based Ethiopian team we were well placed to understand the context for such stakeholders with respect to the local laws, legislation, cultural factors and the variety of local languages, and we were able to gather essential and valuable information to make informed recommendations.

"Ethiopia is the first country in Africa that we are sourcing from. We wanted to understand the challenges faced by workers that are unique to this region, as well as understanding potential ways of influencing positive change. The studies conducted by Partner Africa made this possible." Luna Lee, Human Rights Leader at Eileen Fisher.

The initial step was to undertake a gap analysis at the supplier's site to highlight any gaps against the ETI base code which covers employment being freely chosen, freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, health and safety, child labour, living wages, working hours, discrimination, regular employment and harsh or inhumane treatment. This was done through facility tours, document reviews and worker interviews and from the gaps that were identified, we made recommendations to help the supplier implement action plans to drive ongoing and sustained improvement in these areas.

Following the initial gap analysis the six cooperatives that are part of Eileen Fisher's supply chain were consulted, to better understand the working relationships and welfare of the members. Structured interviews, focus groups and questionnaires were used to obtain information on economic issues, health and safety and social challenges affecting the cooperative members.

The results of the gap analysis and cooperative assessment were presented to Eileen Fisher, to help inform further projects to better address issues and improve the situation of workers.

Key Outputs:

- Eileen Fisher commissioned Partner Africa to deliver Ethical Trade Awareness training for the supplier. This interactive and participatory training programme engages and advises participants on the basics of ethical trade and helps the supplier to meet local laws and international standards.
- The training also addresses the needs raised from the gap analysis findings from 1 supplier, 6 cooperatives and 88 workers.