



A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON SMALL FIRMS IN KENYA

Summary of Key Findings from the Small Firm Diaries

The *Small Firm Diaries* followed the financial lives of 155 small businesses in Kenya between October 2021 and November 2022. This study is part of a global research initiative active in 7 countries—Colombia, Nigeria, Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, Indonesia, Fiji—which seeks to understand the role of low-income small firms in poverty reduction, and the barriers that limit their contribution to local economies. Small firms in this study are being defined as those with 1–20 non-family employees.

Better serving this population represents a significant opportunity to advance financial inclusion (including digital), and pro-poor economic growth.

small firm
DIARIES

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8,060
HOURS OF INTERVIEWS

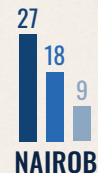
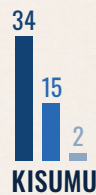
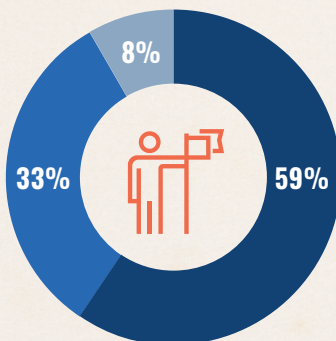


AGRI-PROCESSING



FIRM OWNERSHIP:

MALE FEMALE BOTH



EMERGING TRENDS

1

THE SMALL FIRMS ARE UNIQUE IN WAYS THAT ARE IMPORTANT FOR POLICY AND FINANCIAL SERVICES

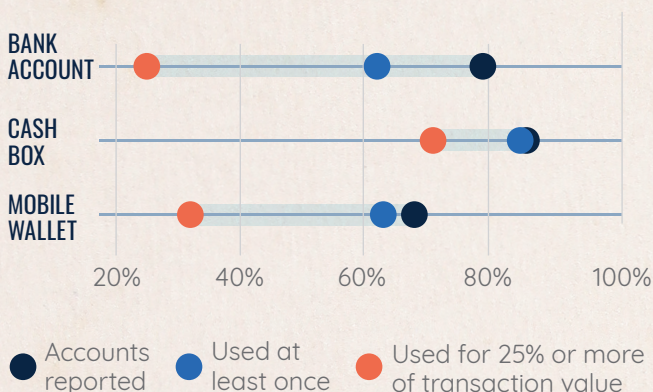
Small firms represent an “invisible middle,” different from microenterprises and larger, more professionalized firms. They straddle the line between formal and informal.

- These firms experience significant volatility in revenue through the course of a year, they are neither on a strong upwards or downwards growth trajectory.
- Small firms are a key source of employment, but the jobs they provide are precarious.
- They are “banked” and users of formal financial services, including digital financial services. But cash still dominates other modes of transactions in this segment.

The financial tools they have access to are not sufficient to help them manage the volatility they face. Small firms constantly struggle with liquidity and access to working capital.

ACCOUNTS REPORTED AND USED FOR BUSINESS PURPOSES, PERCENTAGE OF FIRMS

In Kenya, 68% of firms report having a mobile wallet, 63% use it at least once during the study, and just 32% use it for 25% of transactions measured by value.



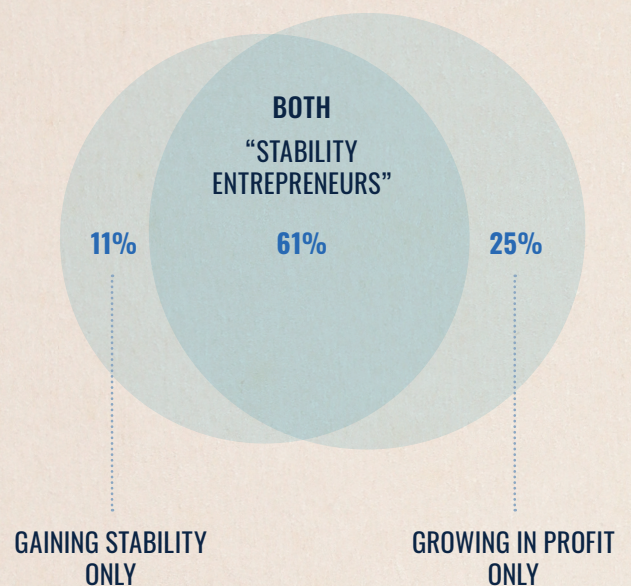
2

THESE FIRMS SEEK GROWTH, BUT WITH STABILITY

Many academic discussions of small firms and their role in local and national economic growth focus on a binary distinction between, for instance, “gung-ho” and “reluctant” or “growth-focused” and “survivor,” types of entrepreneurs.

The Small Firm Diaries reveal that these profiles miss the largest group of these firms: firms with aspirations to grow but also in need of stability. We call these “Stability Entrepreneurs.” This population aspires to grow, but cannot take on the additional risk (they already face a great deal of risk) that is necessary for rapid growth. They want step-by-step growth that helps reduce volatility and risk.

WHAT IS YOUR VISION FOR YOUR BUSINESS OVER THE NEXT YEAR?



3

SMALL FIRMS NEED BETTER TOOLS TO MANAGE WORKING CAPITAL AND LIQUIDITY



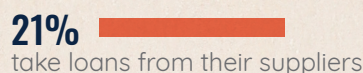
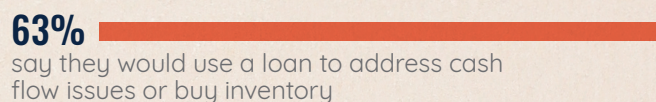
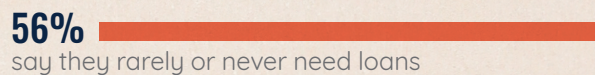
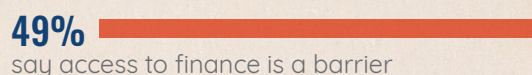
Most efforts to help small firms have focused on providing loans for equipment or other capital investments. The firms tell us that working capital and liquidity are more important for their survival and growth.

Firms closely match revenues and expenses on a month-to-month basis. This helps confirm that they lack working capital/liquidity. Firms rarely take any operating risk that could result in negative monthly cash flow.

Small firm use of supplier finance is another indication of their need for working capital: they use credit from suppliers as much as they use bank loans.



OF THE KENYAN SMALL FIRMS STUDIED:



4

SUPPORT FOR SMALL FIRMS AND THEIR EMPLOYEES COULD LEAD TO MORE STABLE EMPLOYMENT



We collected data about employment, including from employees themselves, shedding light on a population that is less studied, and more precarious than the firm owners themselves.

- The employment picture is different and more volatile than it appears from simple counts of employees. Most workers' pay varies considerably from month-to-month.
- From the perspective of the firms, the number of jobs they offer fluctuates a great deal. In addition, the individuals who fill those positions can change several times during the year.
- The firms are not able to provide consistent income to workers, but those workers also find it difficult to earn income elsewhere.
- Two-thirds of the workers we talked to said that they lacked money to meet their basic or food needs at some point during the study.

RESEARCH PARTNERS

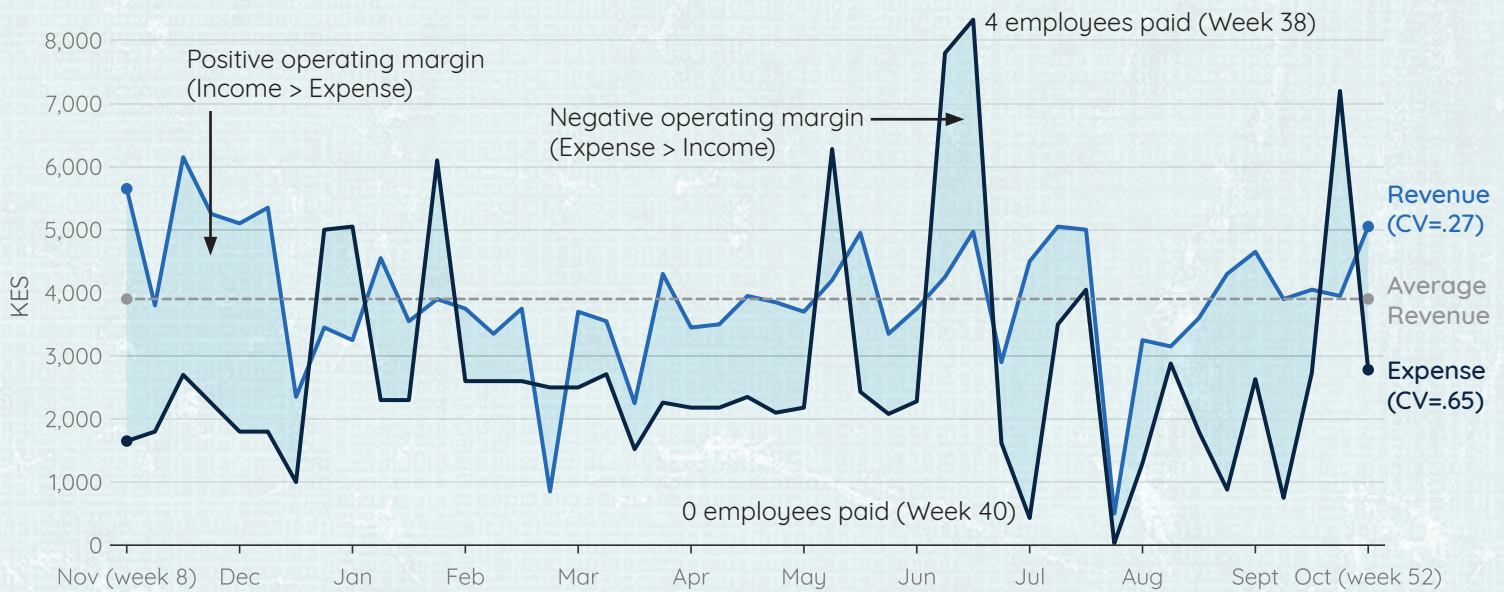


FUNDING PARTNERS



CASH FLOW FROM A MALE-OWNED REPAIR SERVICES FIRM, WEEKS 8 TO 52

The financial diaries capture cash flow over time. Here, weekly cash flow data is used to show volatility of revenue, expenses, and operating margin. Qualitative and survey data is layered on top to understand the interplay between firm owner decisions and cash flow.



The coefficient of variation (CV) is a statistical measure of variability in a dataset. We use it to measure volatility of a firm's revenue, expenses, and operating margin. A firm with the same revenue each month would have a CV of 0, as illustrated by the gray dotted line. This firm's revenue CV is .27, meaning that monthly revenues are typically 27% greater or lesser than the average. This firm's expense CV is .65, meaning that monthly expenses are typically 65% greater or lesser than the average. This firm exhibits less volatility than most firms in the study, which have an average revenue CV of .44.

STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS	
FOCUSED ATTENTION ON SMALL FIRMS	Small firms, not just micro or larger firms, deserve specific attention. They are distinct from other types of firms, yet are a critical source of jobs and incomes for low-income groups, and make an important contribution to value chains and economic development
DESIGN POLICIES AND PROGRAMS AROUND ACHIEVING STABILITY	The focus of policies and programs should shift toward reducing volatility and achieving stability. Public and private partnerships to reduce exposure to demand- and supply-side risks as well as training programs focusing on risk and liquidity management would help firms achieve greater stability.
EXPLORE LIQUIDITY AND WORKING CAPITAL LENDING	New products focused on increasing liquidity are desperately needed. Explore models to increase access to trade credit and leverage information and assets (e.g. stock) to unlock working capital.
DEVELOP SUPPORT PROGRAMS FOR EMPLOYEES (NOT JUST FIRMS)	While volatility is passed on to employees, there is no guarantee that greater stability for firms will be passed on to employees. Develop programs and policies that directly support the workers in small firms.



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