

Transcript of audio report:

Small business owner Henry Thuo's COVID-19 story

[Introductory male voice] Hi, and thanks for tuning in. You are listening to an Inclusive Futures audio report, brought to you direct from our citizen reporter in Kenya.

[Alan] On a chilly Saturday morning, I got to speak to Henry Thuo, of Hemuth Fabrications. With a big smile, he welcomes me into his home. Henry is dressed in a tall blue dust coat branded with his business identification logos.

Hi. I am Alan Herbert. The citizen reporter for the Inclusive Futures initiative in Nairobi, Kenya. Many small businesses in Kenya have been adversely impacted or even been forced to shut down due to the effects of COVID-19.

In this report, I speak to Henry about building a business as a person with a disability, how COVID-19 nearly took out his business from him, and how with support, his business is now booming. Henry speaks to me predominantly in the Swahili dialect. His words have been interpreted and voiced by an actor in English.

Henry starts off by telling me how his mother found out about his disability.

[Henry] It has been a long day which began when I was born, it was my mother who observed me closely, and after some time realised that I had a disability. One day she called my father and told him, "Henry's leg is not moving, it is not moving at all." It was bent. When she realised this, she took me to the Karen Clinic where I was given injections as a treatment. A doctor told her that I needed surgery immediately.

[Alan] The surgery could not save Henry's leg so he had to learn to walk with just his right leg and crutches. His mother was determined for Henry to get an education and that's where his passion for the trade was born.

[Henry] I started my schooling in 1987, at Katepe Primary School. After that, I attended Waithaka Polytechnic. It was a struggle for my mother who could not afford the fees and had no money even for bus fare to take me there. By that time my father had already died but God showed us the way.

[Henry] When I was in primary school, I wanted to pursue arts and crafts. I loved seeing how the hacksaw worked. I was interested to do that. So, I chose to study carpentry, which was offered in my school. I studied metalwork, that's why I became an artisan. After graduating a man called Karanja offered me a job making windows because I had studied welding and fabrication. I first bought a gas welder in 2002.

[Alan] Henry started his own business and had to work hard to build trust among customers who questioned his ability because of his disability. He explains.

[Henry] Since I started this business, I haven't felt disadvantaged because it has been of immense help to my family, to my mother and to those I have employed. When I speak to

customers, they usually question whether I can meet their standards, but they're usually willing to trust me because they have been referred to me by a person who has seen my work in the past.

[Alan] But this past was jeopardised by the pandemic. Henry tells me how.

[Henry] I've kept my business in Dagoretti going until March 2020, because of COVID-19. When businesses were closed, I had no clients. COVID has affected everyone, it has really affected me. I'm used to making metal windows, chairs and tables for schools, but it's no longer happening. When I'm not making money, my kids don't get their daily meals. I have used my savings from March and April. It is what I have been using because I haven't been getting contacted by any clients.

[Alan] After being forced to shut down his workshop due to the pandemic, a flicker of hope showed itself. Henry was introduced to the InBusiness Initiative by Light for the World, which is funded by Inclusive Futures. They gave him support, including a business mentor called David, to keep his business running.

[Alan] Pravallika Valiveti of Light for the World, known as Val, explains to me what the InBusiness Initiative is all about.

[Val] I love this programme. There are four main responsibilities or focus areas of [the] InBusiness programme. So, number one is we provide business support to micro-entrepreneurs with disabilities, like the likes of Henry. So, these micro-entrepreneurs with disabilities, they get business training, they get technical training, they get business mentors like David to help them take very crucial decisions. Like, "Do you have to buy your tools or do you have to hire your tools?" Probably Henry would not have thought of the whole analysis that David did, but David being there for him probably made that decision easier for him. So, that's focus area number one.

Focus area number two is the linkage part of Henry getting potential customers or potential suppliers. This is where the tendering comes in. So, okay, Henry's empowered, he's trained, he has all the knowledge. Now does he have customers to get the actual money? Where is the cash hitting the table, right? That's part number two, we are empowering organisations to source [products and services] from persons with disabilities. We are trying to make sure Henry is supplying to other organisations and they're willing to take Henry's services. That's focus area number two.

We're trying to work with DPOs or OPDs (organisations of persons with disabilities) to provide this environment where they're advocating for themselves. And they know their rights and they are empowered enough to ask for their rights wherever they see that they don't have this particular right. That's part number three.

Now the final part, number four is because we are a pilot programme and also because it's always good to learn, we collect learnings. So, every time we implement an activity, we try to learn from it. "Is this going well? Is this not going well?" And provide evidence. "Why is it not going well? And how can we do it better?" So, these four parts together form [the]

InBusiness programme. And ultimately if I should summarise it in one line, it's made for [the] economic empowerment of persons with disabilities, through inclusive collaborations.

[Alan] As well as the training, Henry has found the support from his business mentor has been vital to turn his business around.

[Henry] The help has been an immense blessing. The director asked David to come and check on me and see how my business was coming along and he would come.

[Alan] David is a business development supplier for Light for the World. Here's what he has got to say.

[David] I got a message that, "Hey, we need to support someone here. Their business is going under because of COVID."

He also encountered some other challenges whereby he could not service orders. He has clients, they want him to make gates, windows and so on, but he had no cash. At that point, he could not even lease some machines to do the job. He could not acquire raw materials and so on. So, I came in and analysed all that, and then I came up with a report and some kind of motivation letter, to Light for the World to support him in various ways. One of them being maybe to support through a grant so that he can be in a position to buy the raw materials to service his orders.

Then from there, we realised that he had an issue with tools, whereby we compared the cost of hiring tools versus the cost of buying his own. And we found out that it was easier and cheaper if he could have his own tools, but then even with that, he didn't have the money to buy his own. So again, we had to come up with another request letter to Light for that World to support that, which Light for the World gladly did. And then since then, he has now been servicing his orders quite well.

And actually, right now he has so many orders. He has even been moving around because you see now, he has his own tools.

Yeah, he has that freedom. He's able to plan his work accordingly.

[Alan] The support did not stop there. David also helped Henry to build a brand with a visual logo which people would recognise, to build his reputation. And thanks to training recommended by David, Henry now understands tendering processes, which opens him up to wider work opportunities.

[Henry] I registered my business Hemuth Metal Works and Construction. I have a logo. I registered with the government and got my certificate. My mentor wanted to help me grow my business and we came up with a plan. From August to September, we made sure my business was branded so that it became visible so that people know where I am located. So that when people pass by the roadside, they see that it's a smooth operation going on. I was proud of what Light for the World did, they gave me branding, which I appreciate.

[Alan] Just like any other entrepreneur, Henry is a visionary. This is what he has to say for the future of Hemuth Fabrications.

[Henry]: What I can say about my life is that it is good to work and to build a customer base so that my family, kids and wife can work with me in the future. I can rename the business and call it Hemuth and Sons.

[Alan] Many small businesses in Kenya have been adversely impacted or even been forced to shut down due to the effects of COVID-19, among which are businesses of persons with disabilities. Inclusive Futures and its partners have taken the lead to implement solutions such as the InBusiness Initiative. What's your response?

[Introductory male voice] If you'd like to hear more from our citizen reporters, why not visit www.inclusivefutures.org