

# “Today, I Can Do What I Couldn't Before”

Breaking Down Barriers in  
Kigali, Rwanda



**T**wo hours before sunrise, Kigali, Rwanda is still quiet—no street sweepers clearing the pavement with straw brooms yet, no high morning whistle of the common red-billed finch, no hum of morning traffic.

Yet, just as she has done for almost four decades, **MARTHA NYIRABAM-BOGO**, a 67-year-old street vendor, begins the long day in this silent darkness. Martha must get to the Bweramvura Cell produce warehouse early to purchase deep red tomatoes, large grapefruits, sweet figs, and ripe mangos. Walking on foot, she'll transport this heavy load on her head to the Nyabugogo Market, a trading hub outside of a busy bus station where she'll organize and display it in time for the market's opening at six. Here, amid the chorus of voices negotiating prices and the smell of fruit and vegetable skins mixed with that of tall lilies, she'll stay until eight at night. In 14 hours, she'll hope to earn the equivalent of five US dollars.

This five dollars, while still not enough to lift Martha and her family completely out of poverty, is five times the amount she earned just four years ago. Before that, she says, "I had been vending for forty years without success. I was suffering alone."



Since joining SYTRIECI, vendor Martha Nyirabamogo has been able to acquire a market stall, which increases her security and income. Photo: H. Jean de Dieu

Martha began street vending in 1973 when she became a 33-year-old widow with children—five in all—to support. "Life was very bad," she says. "I started street vending to be able to raise my children ... I had to carry all of them with me all along the day. We were chased from the house we slept in front of. We didn't have enough food to eat." This hardship and isolation was made infinitely worse by the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsis, when all of her close relatives—brothers, sisters, aunts, and uncles—were murdered.

Like so many other survivors, Martha not only continued to live with the

trauma of what she'd experienced, but she was further entrenched in poverty that the country had no ability to help her overcome. More and more people became jobless and turned to informal work like street vending, so even if Martha could have afforded a stall's taxes and rent, competition made it difficult to get a market space. At the same time, government law prohibited (and still prohibits) vending on sidewalks or streets.

As Martha says, "There is insecurity vending on the street—you can have car accidents, and your children can be out

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in bad weather. And we were chased on the road." Like other street vendors, if Martha and her children were apprehended by police or security guards for vending illegally, they could be confined in "rehabilitation centres" for up to three days before release.

Insecurity in vending sites and the constant threat of police harassment and confiscation of goods leads to insecure income, which means parents like Martha often cannot provide adequate food or housing for their children or pay their school fees. Illiteracy and a lack of knowledge of the laws and rights affecting street vendors exacerbate the difficulties. Both can lead to a feeling of powerlessness and a lack of hope in ever being able to change the situation.

But in 2014, Martha's life and livelihood did begin to change when she decided to join a newly-founded trade union for domestic and independent workers in the informal economy: the *Syndicat des Travailleurs Indépendants de l'Économie Informelle* (SYTRIECI). SYTRIECI is committed to protecting and promoting the rights of workers in the informal economy by improving their living and working conditions through education, collective action, and the increased representation of informal workers in decision-making bodies.

Even as a fledgling organization, SYTRIECI has put these values in action. It



SYTRIECI members sell a variety of goods, including clothes, material, and jewelry.  
Photo: H. Jean de Dieu

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has demonstrated its own persistence, creativity, and success in helping members to break down barriers around poverty and to access different forums for economic activity. For example, it advocates on behalf of its members with city officials and banks. It has successfully negotiated with the Mayor's office and other officials to have the number of Kigali market stalls increased, which resulted in the city building more markets. SYTRIECI also advocated with a major bank in order to help members access accounts and loans even without guarantees, and so far, over 2,500 SYTRIECI members have accessed these

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loans. Thanks to SYTRIECI's negotiation skills, many of these loans come with reduced interest rates.

Alongside its work with banks, SYTRIECI has helped its members form their own loans groups, usually led by women. Here, around 30 members contribute a small amount of money at the end of every day into their own Social Solidarity Fund (SSF), which members can then access for interest-free loans when needed. In 2018, SSF groups managed a total of 10 million Rwandan Francs (\$11,000 USD).

SYTRIECI is an affiliate of the global street vendor organization StreetNet International. StreetNet believes street vendors, as a part of the social solidarity economy, are a creative point of entry for addressing issues around poverty reduction, access to human rights, civil society organizing, and the development of alternative forms of economic activity and service provision. Among other efforts, it's committed to helping build the capacity of its members by facilitating training and learning exchanges.

SYTRIECI and StreetNet have worked together to bring in StreetNet trainers to help members learn negotiation skills and improve their understanding of labour laws and rights.

These efforts and results lead to tremendous change in the lives of members like Martha. After joining SYTRIECI, Martha



A market stall helps vendors keep produce from spoiling and diversify their products.  
Photo: H. Jean de Dieu

began attending its monthly meetings. She learned about saving and joined an SSF group, which allowed her to increase the quality of her products and take out interest-free loans. With this help, she was able to afford the market stall SYTRIECI helped her advocate for. Working in the market has increased her daily income and her income security. Now, she is able to save, manage microcredit, and make rental payments on her house each month.

Through participation in StreetNet's negotiation skills workshops, she's also

learned how to negotiate with customers and market officials every day. More, she feels like she has a community with whom she can share her concerns, and that, "together, we can find a solution." As an elder street vendor, she says, "I can also advise others who are street vendors, asking them to leave the streets because I experience the benefits of belonging in a trade union and working with others in an organized framework."

Even with these gains, though, Martha worries about the future. At 67, she

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would like to be able to retire soon, but this isn't possible without a house of her own. Until then, she says, "I am forced to work to live."

Still, her work with SYTRIECI has taught her how to hope and how to work towards solutions. "I want to see more advocacy for social security," she says. "I want to see if there are some other strategies to help me have my own home, to keep me safe with my kids."



It's now midmorning in the Market. Gone is the stillness and darkness of the pre-dawn hours. Outside, noisy buses and beeping taxis disgorge people and products in equal measure while under the vegetable market's covered roof, stacks of carrots vie for buyers' attention against piles of bananas and mounds of precariously positioned watermelons.

Even amidst all this vibrancy, vegetable and fruit vendor **ANATHALIE IAMU-BONYE** is hard to miss. In a deep blue and yellow dress with matching headscarf, she stands confidently behind a stall heaped with high-quality onions, garlic, bananas, long green beans, thick carrots, and ripe tomatoes. Though she is now 50 years old, this confidence is newly found.

Anathalie began vending as a young mother of five children when her husband, a gardener, couldn't make enough money to support the family. Anathalie herself couldn't find work because she hadn't gone to school and because, as she says, "I was raised to be a housewife." Every day was a struggle with hunger and housing. Though Anathalie eventually found work as a domestic worker, her income was not enough to pay for rental housing, let alone for school fees. Soon, her children were forced to drop out.



Since joining SYTRIECI, Anathalie Iamubonye has created a handcrafts business, so she can take care of her family when vending is slow. Photo: H. Jean de Dieu

Street vending became Anathalie's only option. "It was really hard with all the dangers that it implies," she says. "I had to do vending on the road, walking with my two last babies all along the day—one on my back and one walking beside me. Sometimes we got imprisoned because, in my country, vending on the street is prohibited. Another big problem was that I had to carry the fruit on my head under an overwhelming sun, which decreased their quality. This affected the price, and at the end of the day the income problems were still there."

She recalls "Our lives were vulnerable and permanently in danger."

Anathalie believes her family would still be facing this level of vulnerability and hardship had she not joined SYTRIECI three years ago. "I joined," she says, "because I understood it would help me find a solution to my problems."

She began attending monthly meetings, which helped her learn about saving. After joining an SSF, she was able to take out and manage interest-free microcred-

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it. Because she was able to increase her capital in these ways, she could afford the market stall SYTRIECI helped her secure. This success has had a cascade effect—now not only can she feed her children and pay their school fees, but she has also bought a house.

Anathalie has also learned about diversifying her income sources. Because it's part of StreetNet International and its global network of street vendor organizations, SYTRIECI was able to host a learning exchange visit with trade unions from Kenya and Uganda. The visit introduced Anathalie and 70 other women to handcraft making as income generation. Now, as Anathalie says, "I have two options to earn income. When the market is not going well, I can sell handcrafts and continue to take care of my family."

Anathalie says trainings like this have opened her mind to new possibilities, and she hopes to receive more advanced training on how to manage a business and even develop a small enterprise. "This way," she says, "I can ensure the future."

**T**hirty-five-year old **FATOUMA MUKAMUGENZI** is another Kigali vendor who is casting her gaze to the future. Even in the heat of mid-day, she shows no sign of wilting as she sits behind her stall, laden as it is with limes, mangos, bananas, and oranges. Instead, she's thinking through the skills and trainings she needs to become an international trader.

"I need education on business management and planning," she says. "Training on negotiation skills, leadership, and loans." She also wants to benefit from the experience of others through exchange visits, so she can improve her business.

It's hard to imagine that just four years ago, this savvy business woman was struggling to feed her family. "My family was poor," she says. "I was married when I was 16 years old only. As a too-young lady, it was really difficult to take care of my family since my husband was jobless. We couldn't get enough food, shelter, medical insurance, or school fees for our children."

Street vending proved the only occupation open to Fatouma. "I used to sell fruits, but the vending conditions on the street were hopeless. I had to carry products on my head the whole day, whether the weather was bad or good.



Besides being a busy businesswoman, Fatouma Mukamugenzi now sits on a national street vending negotiation committee. Photo: H. Jean de Dieu

Sometimes, we might encounter car accidents or robbers."

Like so many other street vendors, Fatouma felt alone. But when she joined SYTRIECI, she began to meet others in the same situation. They started to share experiences, she says, and then began working together. Fatouma joined others to form an SSF and to take trainings on rights and negotiation skills, both of which have helped her acquire a market stall and navigate around the challenges of working with market management. Now, Fatouma says, "I know how to negotiate to

get favourable solutions around big challenges in my working conditions." She also uses her negotiation skills for the benefit of others after being elected to the national negotiation committee SYTRIECI has created.

Her income is further stabilized through working collaboratively with other market vendors. "For now," Fatouma says, "I can be sure to vend even when I am not at my vending place because my colleagues can sell my products for me, which was not the same when I had to carry products on my head everywhere I went."

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Not only do Fatouma's new skills in negotiation and collaboration have a ripple effect, benefitting others in the community, but they have also had a dramatic impact in her own family's life. "There are things that I can do that I couldn't do before joining SYTRIECI," she says, "I can now pay school fees for my children, feed them, and pay their medical insurance. I have a house, where before I had to pay monthly rent. I can manage a big amount of money and invest it correctly."

With this security, grounded in learning, skills, and community, Fatouma can now afford to dream.



**T**wo hours have passed since the sun sunk behind the hills to Kigali's west, but the Nyabugogo Market is just closing for the day. Twenty-four-year-old **RAFIKI NTAKIRUTIMANA**, tall, athletic, and distinguishable among other market vendors for his youth, is packing away the grocery bags and envelopes he sells from his stall at the vegetable market's edge. Soon, he will head home to his improvised family of three children—former street children he now provides for.

Not long ago, Rafiki himself was a child living hardscrabble on the street. As he recounts, "my mother chased me from home, and thereafter I was forced to leave the school. During several nights, I had nothing to eat. Many times, I got sick and had no possibility to get medical services. I used to carry bags for people coming for shopping. I was often beaten because there is no security on the road, especially when you are young, walking and struggling day and night."

In order to try to support himself, Rafiki decided to invest the one dollar he had to his name in envelopes and shopping bags he could sell on the street. He believes he would still be selling on the street, sleeping outside, eating nothing, and continuing to carry shoppers' bags



Rafiki Ntakirutimana dreams to make enough income to support more former street children.  
Photo: H. Jean de Dieu

had he not encountered SYTRIECI two years ago. After learning about the benefits membership could bring, he decided to join, attending monthly meetings and participating in trainings around savings, negotiations, and job creation for youth.

In fact, SYTRIECI has a specific Youth Program that concentrates on organizing youth vendors into small groups and youth social solidarity funds so that they can contribute to their own development. This focus reflects StreetNet International's focus on improving the lives and livelihoods of future generations of street vendors. By sharing experiences,

developing common strategies, and strengthening organizational structures within unions like SYTRIECI, youth can generate a culture of empowerment and solidarity.

Rafiki feels both this sense of solidarity and a sense of responsibility keenly. As he says, he's now the leader of other children selling envelopes. He's part of an SSF, so he's been able to take out microcredit to raise his capital. As a result, he says, "I no longer live on the street. I can pay rental money for my house, and I can buy food for me and the other children I live with."

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Rafiki says this is not yet enough. He would like training on more advanced business management, so he can continue to improve his income. "I need a permanent house," he says, "so that I can offer a home to more street children who were suffering like I was."

But for now, as day settles into night, Rafiki heads towards the home where three children already count on his continuing triumph over hardship.

*by Brenda Leifso  
with Jeannette Nyiramasengesho*



Rafiki Ntakirutimana. Photo: H. Jean de Dieu

**STREETNET:** StreetNet International, an alliance spanning five continents, was launched in November 2002 in Durban, South Africa to unite organizations whose membership comprises street vendors, market vendors, and/or hawkers (mobile vendors). StreetNet promotes the exchange of information and ideas on critical issues that affect street/market vendors and hawkers, as well as practical organization and advocacy strategy.



**SYTRIECI**, or *Syndicat des Travailleurs Indépendants de l'Économie Informelle*, is a Rwandan trade union for domestic and independent workers in the informal economy. It is committed to protecting and promoting the rights of these workers by improving their living and working conditions through education, collective action, and the increased representation of informal workers in decision-making bodies.

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