

Learning Communities And Participation In Appropriate Education: The Women In Fishing Industry Project

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ABSTRACT

WIFIP is a non-formal education project in Kenya, which uses open learning to educate and empower women in fishing communities. This paper shows that WIFIP is enabling a surprising variety of voices to be heard – not just those of the women participating.

INTRODUCTION

This is a story of genuine participation, where the art of empowering women has led to significant change in their lives; where the role of radio and audio, coupled with simple print and group activity, has been crucial in giving a voice to some of the most marginalised communities in Kenya. For the past two years IEC has been working with the WIFIP Trust, a newly and specially established local NGO in Kisumu on the shores of Lake Victoria, to deliver a non-formal distance education programme to disseminate educational messages relating to health and business. This is the Women in Fishing Industry project. A recent independent evaluation (Fentiman et al, 2003) concludes that 'The WIFIP project has succeeded in achieving its aims and objectives as set out in the original proposal.' It is the way in which it has been able to make these achievements that is so important. Though the programme has many strengths, it is still striving to improve as it moves into the expansion phase. This is not my story, but one shared by many and I will tell it using the voices of those others wherever possible.

Context

Despite its enormous economic potential, the fisheries sector in Kenya is currently contributing only about 4-5% of the GDP. Most of the fisheries production has remained at subsistence level with very few local people engaging in commercial fisheries business. This has been attributed to a wide range of factors including lack of marketing infrastructure.

The majority of those handling fish at its source (the beaches) are relatively poor. The women fisher folk in particular not only buy and sell small quantities of fish, they all have low investment capacity with the more established operating a capital base of about US dollars 15 and sometimes as low as US dollars 5. Given their low capital base, women are more vulnerable to sexual demands from their male suppliers, who often give them fish on credit.

Some cultural practices impede effective participation of women in the fishing industry as women's venture into the lake as well as boat ownership is restricted by culture. High impact of HIV and AIDS is one of the greatest challenges affecting the vibrancy of the fishing sector.

With small-scale enterprises the fisher folk lack access to savings and credit opportunities. This is exacerbated by the general lack of savings and borrowing culture among the majority of people and the lack of micro-credit finance and investment opportunities in the fishing industry.

WIFIP Trust (2004)

Project description

WIFIP is a non-formal, distance education programme delivered in Dholuo language through a variety of media to disseminate its educational messages including print, radio, audio and face to face.

WIFIP started with a process of sensitization and mobilization of targeted communities, particularly women, Beach Management Units and other local government representatives in order to gain entrée to four of the fish landing beaches, namely, Nambo Beach in Bondo District, Kaloka Beach in Kisumu Rural District, Dunga Beach in Kisumu Municipality and Sango Rota Beach in Nyando District.

This process was to ensure that the ideas and methodology of WIFIP were understood and accepted and that positive working relationships were formed.

Relationships with existing women's groups were strengthened and eight Pilot Learning Groups of 20 women each, two on each beach, were established.

A base line survey was carried out and data concerning the women's knowledge of, and attitudes towards the use of fundamental business practices, savings habits, hygiene and sanitation and common diseases on the beaches, including STIs, HIV and AIDS, was accumulated. The prevailing educational needs identified related to Health Issues and Small Business and Savings Skills.

Using Consultant Advisors in these two areas, WIFIP designed curriculum for five blocks of learning programmes; two on Business Skills and Savings, two on Health Issues and one on Women's Rights.

To create a learning programme, the curriculum is developed into a story line, which is presented as a radio drama with tutorial back up. The dramas are broadcast twice a week by Kenya Broadcasting Corporation's Dholuo programme to an estimated audience of three million covering cross-borders into part of Northern Tanzania and part of South Western Sudan.

Cassette tapes of the programmes are delivered to the women's groups, who meet twice a week at a time convenient to them, for study based on the programme. The audio programme is supported by flip chart material comprising illustrations as many of the learners are illiterate. Group learning is facilitated by group leaders who have been given considerable training by WIFIP, in leadership and facilitation skills.

The groups fill in Feedback Forms after each learning session and feedback programmes are produced and broadcast. WIFIP Beach Coordinators visit the groups on a regular basis to provide support.

Included in WIFIP's methodology is the holding of 'events' on the beaches such as Beach Days for fun and education and Health Days which concentrate on Health Education in the form of live drama, videos, songs and talks, and the provision of 'on site' health services. These events have been attended by large numbers of community members who have responded very favourably to them, and have been supported by local medical personnel and Kenya based pharmaceutical companies.

WIFIP Trust (2004)

Project aims

The overall aim of the project is:

- To educate and empower women by giving direction towards economic development and social rehabilitation through a non-formal education programme.

The three overarching objectives are:

- To enable women to have a voice in the process of development
- To promote positive behaviour change in order to reduce and control infection and spread of HIV/AIDS and other STIs
- To build women's capacity in running small business enterprises in the fishing industry

VOICES

The emphasis of the project at the beginning was clearly focussed on the women. Their participation has led to programme content being appropriate to their needs. For example the business programmes are not trying to turn them into accountants, but address the functional needs of their businesses – in many cases introducing for the first time the idea that what they do, buying and selling fish, can be considered a business.

Now I know that fishing is work, not just something I do.

Woman, Kaloka beach, 2003

What we have found is that the project reaches far beyond these women and that as the women's confidence grows they want to encourage this expansion, to include training for their men folk, children and neighbours.

- Our neighbours listen to the radio and then enquire, so we fill them in.
- Sometimes it is difficult to talk to the men about health issues – men should be trained.
- Husbands and other men need (business skills) training.
- We discuss our learning with everyone

- Everybody is enquiring about the programmes.

Women, Kaloka and Nambo beaches, 2003

Whose voices can we hear?

There are very many voices audible now: Jennipher Kere, whose ideas spawned this project; the WIFIP Trust set up to run the project; the radio drama; the women on the beaches; and now the men and youth from those beaches.

The original idea for this project came from Jennipher Kere, who was studying on the University of London External MA in Distance Education, taught at a distance by IEC. Jennipher, who comes from Kisumu, used her research project to investigate the needs of the women on the beaches and developed an initial proposal from this work. Working closely with Jennipher, IEC developed the proposal and raised the funds to undertake the project. Jennipher is now the Project Manager and continues to champion the cause of the fisher women. Her voice is now heard through the WIFIP microphone.

WIFIP Trust exists to build a community in which everyone and women in particular, is empowered and equipped with the necessary capacities to lead socially and economically prosperous lives.

Kere (2004)

The WIFIP Trust makes itself heard in a number of ways:

- Running seminars to initiate debate on the issues faced by fishing communities
- Publishing a magazine, 'Samaki News', for the fishing communities
- Coordinating community health and beach days
- The occasional TV appearance

But most importantly through the

- Production of the radio programmes and the frequent visits to the beaches

Seminar took place from the 17th-20th November at the Ukwelli Pastoral Centre. Evaluators observed the dynamic dialogue between speakers and participants. Excellent programme and good opportunity for various NGOs to learn and share in the discussions. Excellent networking.

The Newsletter was well received by the WIFIP members. However, the Newsletter is 'for and by the women from the fishing community' and yet few articles were written by these communities. If the Newsletter is to capture the 'voice' of the WIFIP women more articles should come from these women. The Newsletter needs to be distributed to a wide range of stakeholders as soon as possible.

Fentiman et al (2003)

Taking the criticism to heart – listening and responding – is the philosophy in WIFIP; the second issue of the newsletter reflects more from the women and community themselves.

For many of the readers from the Beaches who returned the feedback forms, we say thank you. Your very useful suggestions have helped us change the face of Samaki News.

John Oywa, Editor, Samaki News, 2004

Central to the WIFIP project are the radio programmes themselves. The broadcast drama serial carries now familiar voices to the heart of people's homes. Using the local Dholuo language and local actors the characters are becoming household names, the actors stars and role models.

My children know the theme tune to the radio programmes.
Since the programmes are broadcast in our language even children and old women can understand and listen to the programmes.

Men, Kaloka beach, 2003

The local actors are treated like stars when they visit the beaches. Some [actors] are requesting advice from WIFIP on how to respond to the many questions they are asked by individuals on issues raised in the programmes.

Fentiman et al (2003)

The women's voices are central to the project and they are heard in two distinct ways. Firstly what they express as their needs and concerns inform the whole programme development and improvement. From the beginning they have been consulted and involved, which means that the programmes and the supplementary materials developed for the women's group activities have been directly responsive to their needs. Feedback and questions from the women on the programmes themselves are used to develop responsive editions at the end of each block of programmes. Health and Beach Days are also set up to respond to needs articulated by the women, for example, by bringing the HIV/AIDS testing to the beach.

An excellent example of the impact of the health initiative is that women in Kaloka beach invited CDC/KEMRI for a community VCT exercise where hundreds of community members were counselled and tested for HIV. This action was prompted by the programme they heard on the radio/audio-cassette on the importance of VCT.

Beach community member, 2003

Beach and Health days were not part of the original project design; they have come about as the project team's response to the women's and community's demands.

Secondly, the women in their communities are being listened to. As their confidence improves, and they are seen by the community to be in possession of valued knowledge and skills, they are taking on teaching and leadership roles. Their increased assertiveness is enabling them to take responsibility for changing their lives.

They have improved confidence and are now able to address the community in the chief's barazas.

To the wider community the women are now able to teach community members on issues of health in the Chief's and Assistant chief's barazas and the administrative leaders confess that these women have made their work easier.

They work as a group and share ideas that boost their businesses and improve their health and that of their household members.

The women in the WIFIP programme are doing their fish business better than before, and this is evidenced by their ability to negotiate for prices, keep records and have some savings.

The women practice better sanitation practices at home such as treating their latrines with ash to repel flies and reduce bad odours.

Beach community members, Fentiman et al (2003)

This growing confidence is also reflected in the way women are taking to solving their own problems and starting to look beyond themselves to the needs of others in the community.

Women on the Nambo beach are very concerned about the increasing number of orphans and widows in the area. Members of the group suggested that they might take turns in providing food and clothing for the children, or contribute a portion of the group's saving scheme funds to assist them, while at the same time looking to WIFIP to assist in other ways.

Another group of women from Kaloka beach went together to discuss face to face with the Jaboya – the young fisherman who sell fish to the women for sexual favours – the risks and unacceptability of their behaviour.

The behaviour of the Jaboya is being condemned. The Jaboya are embarrassed by this and their type of behaviour is diminishing.

The Jaboya have stopped pursuing women for sexual favours and there is general awareness by men of the risks of multiple partners.

Women, Kaloka beach, 2003

The men's voices are being heard increasingly and quite early in implementation it was recognised that there may be a need to provide men with the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of the supportive group work, as do the selected women's groups. Men appear to be benefiting from the radio broadcasts and also appreciative of what they can learn from the women. The women are empowered by this gate keeping of knowledge, but it may not be appropriate for it to remain exclusive.

- The men recognise the value of the training and want it for themselves.
- Men catch and sell fish, but not use the money wisely.
- I have listened [to the radio broadcasts] and realised I can be a good fisherman.
- I learned the difference between capital and savings.
- Due to the programmes I am even ready to part with money from my own pocket to ensure my wife can continue learning.
- Giving us money is useless if we do not know how to use it – we need education.
- If both men and women were trained by WIFIP the community would have a better chance of making changes.
- If you don't train the men, it is pointless training the women, because if we cannot make good business there is nothing for the women to buy.

Men, Kaloka beach, 2003

What are these voices telling us?

All these voices speak of change. In addition to those noted earlier, there are many other examples.

- I used to think AIDS was just the same as gonorrhoea.
- Children feel that they now have hope that they will get an education because their mother is earning.
- Men have realised that it is not good to 'walk here and there with different women'. They used to be friendly with women who had lots of money, but because of the HIV programme they have realised it is not good to do so.
- Men are working harder so that they may be able to construct a health centre as they have realised the importance of health.
- The women are better coordinated in their work as a group.
- There is now greater hygiene when handling fish.
- In the past his wife did not boil the water, now she is doing it perfectly.
- If they cannot sell their fish they take them home and fry them to sell the next day.

Men and women, Kaloka, Nambo and Sango Rota beaches, 2003

IN CONCLUSION

The essence of what is happening around Lake Victoria is very simple. Women's voices are being heard and in response new learning communities are being created.

Radio dramas, based on storylines suggested by the women themselves, may be reaching several million listeners around the lake and beyond (as evidenced by questions reaching WIFIP from as far away as Sudan and Tanzania). Particular groups of women on selected beaches get supplementary materials in the form of flip charts and audio cassettes and are thereby able to listen again to and expand upon what they hear on the radio.

These women take the lessons they have learned, put them into practice and show by example the value of what they have learned. Husbands, fisher folk, friends and neighbours, informed by the radio programmes and seeing the difference in the women who attend the group sessions, are raising their voices demanding more information. Women respond to this by passing on what they can and by working in groups to make changes, such as addressing the issues of the Jaboya. Evidence is mounting that the beach community is recognising collective responsibility for issues of health, as they are seeing the changes made possible by a better understanding of health and business matters and witnessing the strength of working as a group. Those in the fishing communities are often at the mercy of the 'middlemen' who bypass the locals and take the profits elsewhere. Local people are recognising that by working together they may be able to wrest some control of the fishing back.

In recognition of this WIFIP is now offering training for men's groups. This is still based on the simple drama storylines and supplementary flip chart materials, geared this time towards the male perspective.

The lesson about technology is not new. Using the most appropriate technology is paramount for success. The combination of radio, audio and flip chart materials, simple, old fashioned technology to deliver a non formal education programme (Warr, 1992; Dodds, 1996) has succeeded remarkably well in Kenya. A wide audience has been primed, while a smaller group has been given the basic training that enables them to become valued members of their local community and the focus of change.

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