

# **A livelihood enhancement community based distance learning programme**

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to explore the impact of a non-formal distance education programme on the learning and livelihood of the women in the fishing industry on the beaches of Lake Victoria and markets in slum dwellings.

The programme widely broadcasts through radio to a general audience. However, the primary target audience uses audio and print materials in organized learning groups facilitated by women selected from the groups, and trained to facilitate learning sessions when and where they choose. They use relatively cheap and easy to handle appropriate technology- solar powered audio-cassette players.

Through user designed series of radio/audio programmes covering a wide range of subjects that include Business Management, Health, HIV/AIDS, Reproductive Health, Mother&Child Health and Women's Rights, the women have improved their income and make savings, diversified their income generation activities and improved their health practices. Thus decreasing their vulnerability to common diseases and HIV/AIDS through poverty prompted casual sexual relations, a contributing factor to high prevalence rates.

The fishermen, who do not normally volunteer to participate in learning activities, are now seeking to participate because they have been inspired by the positive progress the women are making in their businesses and general development.

## **1.0 Historical Background of Lake Victoria Fisheries and Communities**

Fishing is an economic activity in Kenya that is undertaken in both inland and coastal waters. The fishing referred to in this paper takes place in Lake Victoria. Lake Victoria that measures 68,000 square kilometers is not only shared among three East African countries, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, but is also the second largest fresh water lake in the world. While Kenya owns only 6% of the lake, Uganda enjoys 45% and Tanzania 49%. Lake Victoria is a direct source of livelihood for approximately 10 million people and upto 30 million people who live in the lake's catchment area which measures 193,000 square kilometers.

A wide range of human activities on the Lake and in the Lake Basin have far reaching adverse effects on the lake and community. These activities include; industrial and sewage discharges, poor agricultural practices and deforestation have led to land degradation, use of agro-chemicals, soil erosion, sedimentation, urban run off and solid waste and uses of wetlands have all led to pollution of the lake. Over exploitation of fisheries have led to depletion of fish stocks and caused instability of the ecosystem. Over the last fifty years, the lake had over 500 different fish species, today there are barely forty with only three available for commercial exploitation. (Bwathondi, P.O.J, etal, 2001)

An East African Regional Fisheries Stakeholders' Conference was held in February 2005 to discuss the status of the lake, the fisheries resource, the situation of the people and strategies for addressing the problems and challenges. The Ugandan Minister of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries, Hon. Janet Mukwaya said, "Despite the wealth accruing from fish, poverty is still high among fishing communities, literacy is low and there are high incidences of diseases especially HIV and AIDS. There is urgent need to work together and change the life style of fishers to reduce their vulnerability. A sick fisheries labour force is unproductive and destructive to the fisheries resources." (LVFO, 2005). She requested the conference to come up with a road map to fight poverty among the riparian communities, reduce vulnerability as well as incidences of HIV and

AIDS among fishers and device options for sustainable funding of fisheries management and information requirements. She went on to say that while those who are already sick should be supported to get healthcare, messages must be put across and interventions in place to prevent new infections for a future healthy labour force that has a stake in lake fisheries and care to conserve.

Hon. Mukwya is not a lone voice in this call. More voices have raised concern over the situation of the fisheries and the fishing communities. President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni of Uganda during the same conference for example, echoed the same concern over high incidence of disease, besides increasing fish pressure and effort on the lake, poor and destructive fishing methods, deterioration of water quality among others, and the need to curb them. Surveys carried out in this sector reveal fishing communities as comparatively having the highest HIV and AIDS prevalence rates. Some riparian districts in Kenya record as high as 44% prevalence rates while some beaches' prevalence rates are as high as 50%. This is a disturbing trend considering that the National prevalence rate has gone down from 13% to 6% in the last six to seven years. This picture is common in all the three countries. We are talking of a population of approximately 176,000 men and women who are directly involved in fish trade, about 9.5 million dependants.

### **3.0 Women In the Fishing Industry**

Women occupy a central place in the fishing sector. They dominate the post harvest sub-sector of the Lake Victoria fisheries accounting for between 70% to 80% of all fish traders involved in artisanal fish trade. (Bathwondi, P. O. J. et al 2001). Despite being the majority and of great importance by their contribution to the fishing industry, they have received little attention from both governments and non-governmental organizations. In Kenya, WIFIP was one of the first whistle blower on the plight of these women. Their participation in the fishing industry is grossly undermined by social, cultural, economic and political factors. There is a prevailing high rate of illiteracy reported amongst women in fishing communities. The majority of the women have either never been to school or left after finishing primary school (Aloo et al 2000).

As women are the main actors in the post harvest sub sector, their contribution to fish handling quality, processing and preservation cannot be over emphasized (Amia 2000). In Lake Victoria, women traders are almost excluded from the trade in Nile perch except for under size and/or rejected fish and processing of swim-bladders. Jenkins (1995) observes that women are the largest excluded group according to United Nations Development Programme. She says that by every measure of development, women get a poorer deal and that even as life improves all over the world, the gap between men and women refuses to close.

The women operate the main marketing channels for fishing units that use mosquito seines, catch tilapia and use beach seines. Unfortunately much of the fish catch made by these methods are immature and by law must not be caught. Due to this, the women get into conflict with the law enforcement arm of the government's fisheries department both at fish landing sites and in the market. They eventually either end up in the courts of law where they are heavily fined or bribe their way out at any of the levels. This not only points to corrupt practices but also to loss of income. The women are also subjects of illicit sexual relationships with their male counterparts in the fishing industry. The transactional sexual relationships involve multiple partner affairs and unprotected sex. There is a big influx of widows and single mothers/women who end up in fish trade not only because it is a free for all entry and easy to start business but most importantly to etch a living and support their households. It has been reported that some women run their trade without having money of their own but through credit from the men which is only secured with submission into these relationships. This is one factor attributed to the high prevalence rates of STDs and HIV and AIDS.

A recent baseline survey carried out in beach communities in two districts - Suba and Bondo in Kenya established that 53.5% of households had children under the age of five

but had no access to reliable post natal care services, while of the women who had given birth, 76% of them also had children below the age of five years. Ironically, while 87.2%, only 45% made more than three to four visits, only 22% delivered their babies in government health facilities and a low 13% were using family planning methods. All these negative findings are attributed mainly to long distances from government facilities and ignorance to the possible adverse consequences they are likely to face. By the same survey, only 30% knew their HIV status and more men than women knew their HIV status at 35.3% and 26% respectively. (Llewellyn, E, 2005).

Women affect the lake and its' resources and consequently their own livelihoods through activities in other sectors. In their multiple roles, they collect firewood which is used to smoke fish and cook food on the beach and at household level. Some women plunder reserves such as forests, wetlands and other marginal lands for agricultural purposes and other related activities including cutting papyrus for mat making leading to deforestation, cleared wetlands and therefore loss of rainfall and fish breeding grounds.

Due to their evident overall subordinate status, viz a viz their important role in sustainable development, women need recognition and particular support by the relevant government authorities and development players. They need holistic empowerment to be able to play their dual roles and to be accepted in the sector and in the household as equal partners in decision-making and management processes. This is only possible if they are able to access adequate information, and increase their knowledge, skill and resource base so as to counter the socio- economic and cultural discrimination.

#### **4.0 WIFIP Intervention Model**

WIFIP model is designed to create an environment and opportunities for the women in fishing to learn how to do things differently, to make them informed, knowledgeable and skillful so as to be able to face and cope with the disadvantaged situation in which they operate. They are part of the world's most excluded group in all ways of life. The WIFIP intervention model is based on the blended principles of non-formal (NFE) and distance education (DE). This provides considerable flexibility and allows the women to choose appropriate place and time for learning which fit in their tight schedules resulting from their multiple roles.

WIFIP designs and develops educative programmes based on the simple definitions of NFE as a system of education "comprising all educational activities organized outside the formal system and designed to serve identifiable clientele and education objectives" (Carron, G and Carr Hill, R.A., 1991), and DE as learning that takes place in an environment where teacher and learner are geographically separated and supported by different media technology and learner support systems. NFE covers all teaching and learning activities that develop outside the sphere of influence of central planning mechanisms and created either by enterprises, by individual or spontaneous initiatives, or by market mechanisms. (Carron, G and Carr Hill, R. A, 1991)

WIFIP materials' design and development starts with educational needs assessment which informs the second stage of curriculum development. A curriculum outline and a detailed one are developed for each subject by a course team comprising subject advisor, audio/radio production manager, graphic artist, field coordinator, audio/radio tutor, programmes' officer who heads the team and Editor. The graphic artist develops print materials in form of flipcharts and manuals for low literacy level use. The audio/radio production manager on the other hand develops scripts which are eventually used to perform drama series by a team of actors who play characters symbolizing real life situations that learners easily identify with.

Each subject would normally have 12 to 15 lessons which develop around identified characters from the first lesson and reach climax by the end of the last lesson. Each lesson is complete with the audio tutor raising issues for discussion and pulling out important learning points in between scenes, questions for group discussion and

group/individual activities. The complementary print materials come in handy during and after lessons to reinforce learning. The most important things we are concerned about are quality and appropriateness of all the processes, systems and products. As a result, we endeavour to design learning and support systems that are appropriate to the needs, styles, circumstances and preferences of the women learners. (Sponks, B. 2000). To this end, the course team continuously consult over and vet the materials at all stages of development.

### **Group Learning, Organization and Learner Support**

Women have generally tended to be invisible in education systems, particularly women who either dropped out of school early or never went to school. The learning process and involvement that the women go through in the learning groups prepare them for "their socio-economic and civic roles that go far beyond the limits of rudimentary literacy defined by ability to read and write." (Young, M. et al, 1991). He further observes that the learning is designed to encompass acquisition of knowledge and information that the learners can immediately use to improve their standard of living standards at household and the community in general. The learning provides opportunity to train for work, increased productivity, greater participation in civil life and a better understanding of the surrounding world. Towards achieving this status, WIFIP learning is organized in small community groups of 20 to 30 members who are 97% women. The size of the group enhances closer group discussion, planning, implementation, support and follow-up.

Each group is provided with learning materials and equipment which include a simple to use solar-powered audio-cassette player, recorded and labeled C60 tape containing four fifteen minutes long lessons, printed flipcharts, news print for writing, flipchart stand, and felt pens. In addition to this, learning group facilitators are given Facilitator's Handbook, a file containing evaluation and feedback forms, lessons' objectives and register.

We recognize that gaining access to distance delivered programmes alone does not guarantee success and therefore, we seriously study possible barriers to effective learning and put in place measures that enhance learning. Groups select 2 members from their respective groups who we train on facilitation and leadership skills and group dynamics. Training lasts 10 days divided in two parts, with recall back sessions for further practice and experience sharing. This is one of our learner support strategies based on principles of peer support. Others include Field Co-ordinator's group visits for monitoring and mentoring, retired professional people found in the community, home visits and written and oral feedback systems.

The programmes we design, develop, produce and distribute primarily through audio and radio cover Health, HIV/AIDS, Agriculture, Entrepreneurship, Women's and Children's Rights, Maternal Child Health, Nutrition, and Environment.

### **5.0 Learning Outcomes**

"The driving force for education and training for women is economic." (Jenkins, J. 1995). Learning is only completed when it leads to behaviour change. For the women it is about bringing quality food on the table, taking children to school, getting higher income, having a stake in fish trade and management of the lake. There is a wide range of positive behaviour change that is witnessed among the learners. These have been confirmed through various ways including evaluations. There are such small things like:

- Confidence building that may be taken for granted yet it is the beginning of effective practice of acquired knowledge and skills.
- The women are operating in cleaner environment on the beaches, markets and home including sanitation.
- They have variously come up with Kitchen gardens which serve their food needs and also earn them some income.

Other examples include:

- Practice of savings, a culture that has been unknown among the fishing communities and seeking loans to initiate alternative income generation activities in the wake of diminishing fish stock and enhanced enforcement on illegal activities on the lake.
- They have organized themselves into stronger and more united groups taking care of orphans.
- There is increased desire to know HIV status while some have declared their positive status Taken up leadership positions in an ongoing regional re-organization of management of beaches on Lake Victoria.

## **Challenges**

The greatest challenge we face is having a sustainable, effective and efficient Learner Support System. Most of the documented support systems are more for advanced and formal systems that refer to advanced modern technology which are out of reach for such non-formal learning groups like the ones we have in terms of infrastructure, affordability, skills and language to use them. Sponks (2000 p16-17) on the topic Women, technology and education focuses on the issues which face women in developing countries in relation to learning technologies and notes the women belong to groups which are already doubly first by location and secondly their relative poverty, including access and use of learning technologies. Millions more women than men are unable to use reading and writing technologies.

Distance Learning is not a familiar approach in learning organizations and groups in this region, leave alone grassroot communities. It takes a bit of time for their group facilitators to adopt to their facilitation roles and for the women to build trust in their facilitators who they think should be the "experts and professionals" not any of them and even to build confidence in themselves as learners. The women learners believe very much in face to face education and training which is extremely expensive taking into account the expansive geographical areas and the big numbers of learners which by radio run into several millions and several thousands by audio.

Lack of qualified DE personnel is another challenge. At WIFIP for example, only one staff out of the 12 has DE qualifications. The rest have to be inducted on the job from time to time. There are no local courses even at Certificate level that can prepare those interested or those who find themselves in this field and need to cope.

For materials' production we are not able to access appropriate and quality equipment we need due to high cost and in most cases we end up hiring equipment. These include recording studio, recording and radio transmission equipment .

The DE approach and the programmes in particular have gained popularity in this region hence an increased demand for organizing learning groups. The support system may still pose great challenges as it is one of the main components of DE that keeps learners from dropping out .

Poverty remains an indelible challenge that stares the world in the eyes. The programme region has a poverty prevalence rate of 65%. Effecting change through education has no quick fixes but that the poor wrongly think can bring them out of poverty. People commonly ask for instant support like food and medicine. Though this is a challenge, we have been able to change thousands of people for the better , we have inspired people not only to seek knowledge and demand for their rights but also to take responsibility of their personal and communal development. Something not impossible to accomplish but also not so easy where people cannot afford the very basic of needs.

## **Conclusion**

The potential of open and flexible learning is unquestionable. As the world gravitates towards modern and advanced technology, let us all remember that there is an invisible lot who need education not for academic purposes but for livelihood improvement, improvement that will enable them make informed choices, and lead better lives. They have a great potential to contribute towards world economic growth in whatever small way. Give them the opportunity to do so.

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