

***Flip-flops and Turtles - Women's Participation in  
the Kiunga National Marine Reserve ICDP, Kenya.***

**Working Paper No 5 for the Engendering Eden Project<sup>1</sup>**

**Fiona Flintan  
December, 2002**

**The International Famine Centre,  
University College Cork,  
8, Grenville Place,  
Cork, Ireland  
Tel: +353-21-4904-330  
Website: <http://www.ucc.ie/famine>  
Email: [flintan@eircom.net](mailto:flintan@eircom.net)**

---

<sup>1</sup> The Engendering Eden project is a DFID-ESCOR funded research programme assessing the links between gender and integrated conservation and development projects. More information on the project and the author can be found on the International Famine Centre website: <http://www.ucc.ie/famine/GCD>

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

*This case study is based upon a visit to the Kiunga National Marine Reserve in March, 2002. During this visit interviews were carried out with Project staff and women and men in the local communities. Many thanks are given to all those who helped me during my visit, particularly Julie, Haroun and Susie and the many women who gave up their time to talk to me and share their experiences.*

*The research was funded by the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom. However the Department for International Development can accept no responsibility for any information provided or views expressed.*

The Kiunga Marine National Reserve Conservation and Development Project started in 1996/7 and involves a partnership between the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and WWF. It focuses on the Kiunga Marine National Reserve (KMNR) which was designated in 1979 and covers 25,000 ha of which about 20,000 ha is mangrove forest. A population of 15,000 people live in the Reserve distributed on the larger of the 51 islands and another 100,000 live in the surrounding areas. The majority of the population are Muslim and have lived there for all of their lives. They earn a living mainly through fishing. In the past some have also heavily relied on the sale and collection of mangrove wood though in recent years this has been severely curtailed by the conservation policies and legislation of the Reserve. Children are often expected to help with the fishing and wood collection and will often miss school to do so. Fresh water is a key issue on the islands as it is restricted to a few scattered wells and *djiabias* within and adjacent to the Reserve. Few are properly managed and there are major problems in the dry season.

The KMNR ICDP focuses on 6 areas including habitat and fisheries management and conservation; education programmes; income-generating projects; and environmental health including waste management. One of its central aims is to adopt a gender sensitive approach to conservation.

The remoteness and insecurity of the Kiunga area is a constraining issue. Not least it limits the number of existing and potential economic opportunities. In addition the high illiteracy level can make it difficult to explain the need for conservation. Indeed, most of the women in the villages are illiterate and their lives revolve mainly around the house. Those who are more mobile tend to be those who are divorced and some of these can be very self-confident and even 'radical'. They, as well as the unmarried and more educated women tend to be those who are most active in community development and Project activities. Traditionally women are involved in shell (mainly cowrie) collection (sold to dealers), trap-fishing (for subsistence purposes) and the collection of mangrove firewood. In addition some women weave or dress-make and/or are involved in petty business. Traditionally women are not expected to 'work' though a small number are teachers. However today, many are keen to play a more 'productive' role in the household and to help their husbands in bringing in an income. In general, women have a large degree of control over finances, often being the main decision-maker as to how household income is spent. The sharing of other household decisions varies from household to household. There is a feeling amongst the women that their lives have improved in recent years and that their culture and society is becoming more liberal and accommodating of their views and needs.

The Project has found some resistance from the local communities. This was partly due to past experiences of a World Bank funded project which focussed on the formation of women's groups which were given 'hand-outs' for such as income-generation. The groups tended to be dominated by 3 or 4 influential/powerful women in each village who dominated decision-making processes and income distribution. It is suggested that they tended to use the money for their own benefit rather than for the benefit of the communities as a whole. As a result jealousy, division and friction surfaced between the women and between the groups. In addition there has been an expectation amongst some

that any NGO project is there to provide hand-outs only and the idea that development should be a joint effort or community-driven is somewhat alien. These attitudes and past experiences were not a good basis upon which to build further work and it has proved difficult to reform the groups. It is hoped that the 'new' groups will be more democratic and sustainable in nature, each group producing their own constitution and electing representatives such as Head and Treasurer.

Women are not able to swim and therefore can not help in Project fieldwork as the men do. However the women are asked to make reports of turtles and their nests. In return they are paid 500 Kenyan Shillings and are expected to care for the nest through a hatchling incentive - 20 Kenyan Shillings for each successful egg hatched and 10 for an unsuccessful one. However, one of the women declared, such conservation practices are highly dependent on the financial payments - if they did not get paid then they would not protect the nest. And in fact it is more than likely that they would eat the turtle! Though this may be a somewhat generalised and exaggerated statement and there is also some community pressure to protect the local resources, it does question the sustainability of any conservation ethic being promoted by WWF. The organisation does recognise this and is attempting to reduce the money paid and encourage the locals to carry out such work for conservation, rather than solely financial, reasons.

A gender and participatory planning workshop led to the organisation of an annual 'environment day'. In September 2000, 5 villages participated in the World Clean Up Day and over 4,000 kg of plastic waste was collected. It is now an annual event. Local villagers have also been involved in similar days held in Mombassa which has allowed them to meet other communities and share ideas and experiences.

The ICDP has established an 'eco-friendly' handicraft project. Selected women from local villages are trained in eco-friendly handicraft production. Keyrings, necklaces, bracelets, cushions, mosaic pictures and other innovative items are made from pieces of old flip-flops. The women, once trained, will act as key 'mobilisers' in the villages on their return and will be expected to carry out further trainings themselves. The women enjoy coming together for the trainings which can last up to 3-4 weeks. And it has been possible to promote a more cooperative and reciprocal culture between them. Women also make crafts, such as baskets and mats, from palms.

The women make the handicrafts from home and generally, to order. Once made, the crafts are checked for quality and 'finished off' by a core group at the Project base camp, made up of one woman from each of the participating villages. Such finishing touches are vital to maintain a high enough quality for sale. If the crafts are considered to be of too poor a quality then they are returned to the women who made them with an explanation of why. The women obtain approximately 30-40 Shillings a piece such as a flip-flop key-ring or toy. They can make up to 30 per day. Each woman is paid individually and the money is spent on school books, household items, the repair of houses, food, clothes, cosmetics, earrings etc. All the women were very happy to have this extra income and as a result feel more empowered to take a more active part within community life. The income from handicrafts is seen as a supplement not as an alternative or replacement.

However, no money is given to the community as a whole despite encouragement by the Project staff to do so. By giving money to their villages, the women may be better supported in their work.

When the women form a craft group (approximately 20 members) each member contributes to the initial set up costs and purchase of materials, other than those they collect from the beach including the washed-up flip-flops. Once the group is established the members continue to contribute a small amount each year. Some women who were not members of a group said that they would like to join however did not have the initial financial investment necessary. Any income from the crafts is collected by the group and when of sufficient amount, is invested in a savings account. One craft group stated that with the money they will raise they hope to set-up a guest-house for tourists. Each member of the group is expected to provide at least one basket or equivalent other crafts for sale each month.

In 2001 a small group of women attended a craft fair, held in Nairobi, where potential contacts and new outlets were identified and some crafts sold. In addition WWF-Switzerland bought 15,000 keyrings which were distributed to its members. The crafts are also sold from the Reserve Education Centre, in local hotels and in craft shops in Nairobi. In addition, the Kiunga Marine Ecofriendly Handicraft Team participated in the UNEP organised 'Plastic Fantastic' fashion show, June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2001 by making a flip-flop dress worn down the catwalk by a top model. After the show the dress was auctioned off. In the first last 6 months of 2001 'ecofriendly' sold over 3,000 USD worth of items.

However, marketing the products has proved problematic and is an area that the Project will be prioritising in the future. A number of women who have been actively involved in the handicraft production for a year or so, complained that they needed more work and higher sales. And they somewhat resented the fact that more women were being encouraged to join the handicraft production despite there not being enough work for everyone. They also suggested that they would feel capable of continuing the work should a time arise when WWF was no longer able to support them.

Despite the enthusiasm of some, it has, in general, been difficult to mobilise the women, who tend to do things because they are asked to (especially by the female project manager with whom they have a good relationship) rather than because they want to or feel motivated to do so themselves. In addition there has been some resistance from husbands unwilling that their wives should be away from home for the 3-4 week trainings. To overcome this it has been useful to have a trusted, local male as a key member of the Project team, who has been able to persuade the doubting husbands that the women's attendance at the trainings is likely to benefit everyone. Despite this there have been a number of cases where husbands have not allowed their wives to attend.

Health and sanitation training has also been provided by WWF and targeted at women. In addition, WWF has initiated a scholarship scheme for local girls to go to secondary school. Traditionally there is a 72% drop-out rate after primary school for girls. However, in some villages girls have failed to achieve the marks necessary for the scholarships and

therefore boys have taken their place. In general, because of a lack of employment opportunities and the likelihood of early marriage there is a low moral and a lack of self-esteem amongst girls. However, attitudes are changing and education, including that of girls, is increasingly being seen as an important investment for the future of the children and their parents. There are few jobs locally and education is seen as a doorway to employment in nearby towns and/or as far away as Nairobi. Women in particular find it difficult to get work locally – one or two work for the local tourist lodge and/or for WWF, cooking, housekeeping etc and others rely on handicraft production.

A holiday programme has also been developed for 'sponsored' students. Each student spends at least 1 week working on conservation issues within KMNR, and afterwards provides a report on his/her experiences.

However, though women are certainly involved in Project activities and are aware of the issues and WWF's concerns (such as turtle conservation) few if any really understand and/or realise the link between the support they are getting for local development and the conservation of local natural resources. Some do however realise that such conservation will benefit them in the long term. This is particularly the case for those who have been involved with the Project for some years. They understand the need for sustainable use of resources and that cleaner beaches and more wildlife is likely to mean more tourists. Making such links is fundamental for the future sustainability of the ICDP – and therefore without this link, its long-term future must be questioned.

Some of the women are also involved in a WWF-supported solar project. This works in conjunction with an international NGO - SHEP (Solar Health Education Project). The project supplies solar ovens and trains the women how to use them. Between 1 and 4 cookers are given to each village. The ovens are very easy to make from the material used for vedrapacks - coated in aluminium on the inside. Designs have been adapted to suit local needs. One of the village groups said that they use the cookers at least twice a week for group meals. Though it does save them the time that it would take to collect firewood, the cookers are very slow – it takes about 1 hour to boil water for tea and 3-4 hours to cook rice for a meal. The women suggested that they do however use the time saved productively, for example to make handicrafts. The women have also experimented in making a 'warming pot' – by filling a basket with insulation material such as shredded plastic bags.

Though the cookers do certainly save firewood and relieve the labour burden of women to some degree, they are not, in general, used on a regular basis. In fact the women need to be coaxed and encouraged to use them. Not only are they an alien way of cooking food and some suggested that the food did not taste as good, but also they can only be used during the dry months when there is plenty of sunshine. The cookers have to be guarded from animals – domestic and wild - and some women suggested that they actually enjoyed going with others to collect firewood - a time to get out of the village and have a gossip.

Overall, the Project has experienced a number of conflicts and problems. Many of these have centred on village and regional politics. Activities such as fund-raising have been politicised and WWF's role has been misunderstood. In addition the Project has experienced funding problems. For example the Project would have liked to have been able to hire a professional adviser/trainer on production, marketing, design and packaging and advice on new products for the 'ecofriendly' handicraft project. However there were not sufficient funds available to do so.

Ideally the Project would like the Reserve to become self-financing. However to do so a large amount of capacity building and investment (financial, time and other resources) needs to be achieved before that time can be reached. For the time being markets continue to be sourced for the handicrafts, the quality of them is continuously improved and new and innovative uses of beach waste are being explored. The use of the cookers continues to be promoted and the attendance of girls at secondary school supported. In addition new partnerships with local social development groups are sought to improve the sustainability of the Project.

## **REFERENCES**

Church, Julie (2001), *Kiunga Marine National Reserve. Technical Report June 2000-2001*. Unpublished report for WWF.

KMNR (2002), *The Conservation and Development of the Kiunga Marine National Reserve Area*. Six Monthly Report. July-December, 2001.

Weru, S., J. Church, I. Lubia, N. Nekesa, E. Verheij, A. Koyo, N. Muthiga, B. Kavuu, J. Kareko, and M. Litoro (2001), *Management Plan: Kiunga Marine National Reserve*. KWS and WWF.