



# AFRICAN VOICES

A NEWSLETTER ON DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA

USAID Bureau for Africa, Office of Sustainable Development Summer 2001

## From the DG Team...

*By Melissa Rosser*

In this special issue of *African Voices*, the Africa Bureau and the Global Bureau's Office of Women In Development (WID) recognize the good work that some USAID missions in Africa are doing with gender integration and cross-sectoral approaches to strengthening the role of women in policy-making at all levels of government. This single-theme issue highlights examples that illustrate how USAID programs are enhanced by including women and addressing gender-based barriers and opportunities during program design and implementation.

USAID has long recognized the development gains achieved by strengthening the capacity of women. Our programs in Africa have embraced the importance of women in development, supporting girls' education, women's co-operatives, microcredit programs, and grassroots organizations with demonstrable benefits to women, their families, their communities, and sustainable development goals. In addition to targeted programs to help empower and benefit women, it is becoming increasingly clear that by paying attention to gender, USAID staff and partners can improve the results of all development programs in such areas as health, environment and natural resource management, economic growth, democracy, and conflict resolution.

Thinking about how gender dynamics affect and may contribute to project success, as well as how failure to involve women in project design may have harmful impacts on communities and project results, is critical to maximizing the results of development assistance investments. Additionally, gender integrated activities in all sectors may strengthen democracy and good governance by giving women the skills and knowledge to participate effectively in community decision-making and by sensitizing men to women's contributions.

This issue of *African Voices* illustrates that women have much to contribute to economic growth, natural resource management, health, and community participation across the continent.

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Editors' Note: We would like to extend special thanks to Melissa Rosser and Marcia Greenberg for their efforts to ensure that this special issue became a reality.

## Decentralization Creates Openings for Women in Decision-Making

*By Marcia Greenberg*

When the Government of Mali launched its decentralization process in the late 1990s, for the first time communities were able to set priorities and allocate resources through the discussion and development of local plans of action. USAID's mission in Mali has long viewed decentralization as the heart of the democratization process and has made supporting and strengthening community organizations a major goal. The Democracy and Governance (DG) team in Mali also recognized that such a new system both offered women a historic opportunity and depended upon their participation in civic and political activity for success.

The DG team has implemented several activities to capitalize on this opportunity, as well as foster the growth of women's organizations. In 1999, they developed radio vote campaigns geared toward enhancing the involvement of women in the electoral process, which contributed to the highest election participation rate of women in Mali's political history. In 2000, they implemented a women's leadership program that supports female interns in the judiciary, national assembly, local government, and civil society organizations.

To help the mission find the most effective ways to support stronger, more visible, and more effective women's civic and political participation at the local level, the DG team commissioned an in-depth study. Based on this study, which was done by WIDTECH last October, the team suggested that there are two predicates for supporting women's participation in decision-making in Mali's rural areas: sensitization, both for men and women, and time. Before women can take on more visible and effective roles, the men in their communities must accept it, and in fact see it as something beneficial.

At the same time, women must be able to recognize and take credit for the roles they already play and then take some

*continued on page 2*

### INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Mission Approaches to Gender Integration .....	3
Cross-Border Trade in West Africa .....	4
DG Program Focuses on Nigerian Women .....	5
Namibian Women and Natural Resources .....	7

## Mali

*continued from page 1*

interest in playing these roles more regularly or publicly. For instance, when men gather to discuss a village issue, they often decide they should postpone the final decision to the following day in order to “sleep on it.” This usually means that the men go home and consult with their wives. Formal recognition of women’s roles in this process would increase their ability to participate. However, Malian women will not be able to participate unless the burden of household work and agricultural duties is relieved, giving them the time to do so.

Beyond those predicates, interventions to increase women’s participation must address five issues: information, a sense of possibility, group collaboration,



*Members of a rug-making cooperative.*

capability, and motivation. Because standard processes of information dissemination do not reach the average rural woman, channels of information must be extended or diversified. Traditional channels of information for Malian women—such as celebratory events, word-of-mouth, the chief’s wife, town criers, and theater for sensitization—are ready, familiar, and effective mechanisms for purposeful dissemination of relevant information. In addition, women need substantive information related to their social and economic well-being and as well as successes they can emulate. They need to hear about women in elected offices

and women participating in decentralization consultations. As women receive information about what they can do, they gain a sense of the possibilities.

Yet even with sufficient space, time, information, and expectations, women in Mali are not likely to affect decision-making unless they can work in effective collaborative ways. There must be a group sense of solidarity, capability, and hope. This is why women’s groups are critical assets. In Mali, women’s groups are not as visible when compared with the village associations for men, but they are numerous and fundamental to the socioeconomic structures and social capital of rural communities. Through these groups, women are already accustomed to sharing and discussing information and to working together to solve problems and overcome adversity. Although these groups of women may already influence decision-making in private spheres or indirect ways, political processes like decentralization consultations require familiarity with political processes. Thus, women need training in skills with which to influence such decision-making. By working together, they have the opportunity to become confident and empowered.

The last issue is a critical catalyst without which the others may not suffice. There must be some basis for motivation, mobilization, and action. For this reason, purposeful links with other sectoral programs—girls’ education, literacy programs, access to credit, potable water, natural resource issues, transportation needs, and fighting HIV/AIDS—offer invaluable opportunities. Economic interests may also motivate women to engage in decision-making as they realize government’s responsibility for such issues as roads, communications, credit, courts, and taxation.

A participatory working group sponsored by the Ministry for Decentralization and implemented by the Ministry

for the Promotion of Women developed a Charter of Partnership for the Promotion of Rural Women to define the actions of an integrated local plan. The charter states that every plan should include women’s input in all phases, from

### *Eight Elements for Women’s Influence over Decision-Making*

- ◆ Sensitization
- ◆ Hope, sense of possibility, and empowerment
- ◆ Time
- ◆ Groups and solidarity
- ◆ Information channels
- ◆ Skills and training
- ◆ Substantive information relevant to women
- ◆ Motivation, mobilization, and action

activity identification to budgets to actual expenditures. A pilot implementation project began in May 2000 to test training and participatory processes for setting priorities for communal plans. Some NGO projects are also focusing on training local people to participate in community consultations. For example, one women’s organization is working in 18 localities to support women’s participation in the communal system by training them to develop and manage their own microprojects.

Experience also may be gained from initiatives that focus on the substantive issues of importance to women, rather than with the process of community plans. One example is the *Association Sikassoise pour l’Encadrement de l’Enfant et de la Mere* (ASEEM, or Sikassoise Association for Mother and Child Care) in the city of Sikasso, which focuses on healthcare, particularly for women and children, and on HIV/AIDS. The responses of three different target populations demonstrate the success of the project. There have been astonishing reactions by women as they begin to realize how much they did not know about health care. Men have also become supporters of the initiative and have started bringing their wives to the ASEEM center. Finally, because

*continued on page 6*

# Missions Take Innovative Approaches to Gender Integration

By Mary Knox

**M**any innovative activities are underway in USAID missions and regional centers in Africa to assist women in overcoming cultural, political, and economic barriers so they can participate more meaningfully in all sectors of society and benefit fully from development gains. Last year, the Global Bureau's Office of Women in Development (G/WID) and the Africa Bureau joined forces to examine progress made by Africa missions region-wide in integrating gender issues in their programs.

## Gender Successes

Of the sectors examined, democracy and governance programs provided the most examples of successfully addressing gender-related barriers to development. Support to women's civil society organizations is an important part of the approaches taken by missions to overcome these barriers. Missions are working to ensure that women's participation in broader civil society organizations, such as trade unions, also increases. For example, support by USAID's Regional Center for Southern Africa to the Southern Africa Trades Union Coordinating Council has helped the council to increase women's participation in the union movement.

In Kenya, a women's civil society organization provided vital testimony during deliberations leading to the amendment of the constitution, and secured the adoption of gender-specific provisions as well as gender-sensitive mechanism in the review process.

In Eritrea, USAID is working to increase the economic strength of women through its Women's Economic and Social Development Program. The program is supporting a wide range of activities that foster greater participation of women as well as promote their economic well being, including technical assistance, capacity building, the promotion of education, and land reform.

Increasing girls' access to education is a key area of accomplishment for the Africa Bureau. Successful approaches include supporting rural communities' own solutions to eliminate barriers to girls' education, combined with a national strategy to promote girls' education (USAID/Guinea), and training teachers to better meet girls' education needs (USAID/Ethiopia). Realizing that schooling young children can benefit the entire community, parents are taking a more active role in their children's education, and a greater percentage of girls are now attending and staying in school longer.

Within the population, health, and nutrition sector, there has been pioneering work on the need to address the health behavior of men, particularly in connection with the HIV/AIDS pandemic. USAID Tanzania, for example, started a pilot effort that takes into account the differences between men's and women's attitudes toward HIV/AIDS prevention methods.

In any discussion of gender issues in Africa, the problems faced by Africa's many female farmers loom large. Increasing the incomes of female farmers and helping them access the benefits of the globalized economy are among USAID's agricultural objectives. USAID/Malawi's support for farmers' associations helped increase the number of rural women selling export crops to the international market

by nearly 30 percent during 1999. In The Gambia, a Food for Peace program promoted sesame growers' associations, which increased production, processing, and marketing of sesame. This both helped The Gambia develop a viable alternative to reliance on groundnuts and benefited Gambian women, who are the majority of sesame growers and processors.

Progress in addressing gender issues was also reported in the environment/natural resources sector. For example, USAID/Namibia reported that it had made progress in involving women in decision-making in natural resources management, with women now making up 40 percent of the membership of conservancy management committees under the Living in a Finite Environment (LIFE) program. (See article on page 7.)

In conflict and post-conflict societies, USAID's missions in Africa have helped survivors put their lives back together and have supported the strong local women's associations that are already working on social reconstruction. USAID/Uganda's efforts to assist returned abducted children and their families have been valuable for girls who were abducted to serve as sex slaves. The Office of Transition Initiative's Women in Transition (WIT) program has become known for working with women's associations to support grassroots community improvement activities in Rwanda. Now managed by USAID/Rwanda, the WIT program has expanded into improving the access of women to banking services by joining forces with women's communal funds, the equivalent of community banks.

## Recommendations

In spite of this strong performance in gender integration by USAID missions and regional centers, gender-related programming could be further enhanced and applied more broadly in several ways:

- ◆ Gender issues need to be more fully integrated in mission strategies. The



J. Owen-Rea/USAID

*continued on page 6*

## Cross-Border Trade for Women in West Africa: A Long, Hard Journey

By Jean Harman

**W**est Africa is a region known for, among other things, women's cross-border trade. Women who engage in trade, generally tend to begin on a very small scale, helping other women who no longer have young children. A younger woman may also start in business by selling goods in local markets. One of the primary motivations for engaging in trade, either local or cross-border, is to use the income to help clothe and educate their children. As they gain experience, they may travel with other traders to inter-regional markets, taking on new and expanded roles, including the role of distributors. Over time, both the value and volume of the goods they purchase increases, and their prominence grows, giving them increased decision-making power in their families and in their communities. However, there are many obstacles that they must overcome first.

As part of its activities to help integrate and expand the economies of the 15 countries of the Economic Community of West Africa, USAID's West African Regional Program (WARP) worked with the Office of Women in Development in USAID's Global Bureau and the WIDTECH Project to design a regional assessment of women's activities in cross-border trade. More than 100 women were interviewed in Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria, and Senegal. To identify obstacles and opportunities, information was also obtained from *transitaires* (fully integrated freight forwarders), truck drivers, and customs and local officials to gain fundamental insight into the movement of goods throughout the region.

The assessment identified four of the most substantive of problems for female traders: 1) the lack of access to intermediate or long term capital, and the central banking system's lack of support to small or intermediate enterprise development, especially for women outside of the system, 2) inadequate transportation, 3) institutionalized bribery, and 4) the lack of

democratic governance or substantive civil society to help sustain change and development in the region. The problems of trade and commerce for women in West Africa differ little from that of men, but the smaller scale of women's trade makes the problems more acute. Problems are consistent throughout the region, and information about the trade patterns appears to flow easily from one side of the region to the other.



*Women in Benin preparing palm oil for sale in Nigeria.*

J. Harman

Banking and finance in the region is significantly influenced by the presence of the central bank of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU). WAEMU controls the currency in 8 of 16 countries in the region. The currency is pegged to the French Franc, and hence to the Euro. While there is a low rate of inflation in these countries, the lack of a common currency throughout the rest of the region inhibits business transactions and impedes integration. Loans are difficult and in many cases impossible to obtain for a small- or medium-sized enterprise. Most of the microfinance institutions only award short-term loans that are not structured to help develop or expand a sus-

tainable business structure. The larger private banks have little interest in lending and do not substantively contribute to the investment in economic development in the region. The largest border-point regional markets have currency exchange pavilions where many thousands of dollars in currency sales occur: niara, CFA, dollars, cedes and likely every other currency in the region.

In addition to the financing of economic activities, a constant complaint among traders is the inadequate numbers of trucks available for rent throughout the region. Sometimes travel is delayed up to two weeks because of the scarcity of trucks in the region. This is more acute for women who trade in smaller quantities and must work together to engage a truck. While the road system throughout the region is not as extensive as it could or perhaps should be, the quality of the roads is improving and a number of roads and routes are slated for completion within the next several years. Meanwhile, the critical rail link between Bamako and Dakar, which transports over 500 women on each trip, is undergoing the process of privatization in Senegal, with privatization discussions underway in Mali.

Institutionalized bribery in the region is quite widespread. One trip from Abidjan to Bamako included approximately 29 stops with payments of CFA 1,000-3,000 (US\$1.35 to \$4) at each stop, depending on the contents of the load. In many cases receipts are written and the stop attributed to a minor infraction of the law. In two separate interviews, customs officials explained that the gendarmes and police need these unregistered "taxes" to augment their typical monthly salary of about \$55. A woman in Benin stated that there were no problems with the officials along the road. "We just pay them then continue on," she said. While the absolute cost of the stops may not be large, the time spent in

*continued on page 6*

## USAID/Nigeria's Democracy Program Focuses on Women

By Susan Jay

**D**uring the 1990s, USAID searched for a way to promote democracy and good governance within Nigeria, particularly by encouraging women's political involvement. Despite their essential economic and social roles, by and large, Nigerian women had historically been marginalized and had participated in the political process as advocates and candidates only in small numbers. Most women were unaware of their rights, ways to assert those rights, and ways to make their political views heard. Women themselves cited lack of information, political skills, resources, and networks as major barriers to their participation.

To address these challenges, USAID engaged its longtime partners, the Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA) and Johns Hopkins University (JHU), to work on democracy issues. Since 1996, the Democracy and Governance (DG) Initiative in Nigeria has sought to strengthen civil society by increasing women's participation in the political process. The initiative has focused on expanding women's participation in politics and the democratic process, empowering women, and strengthening fundamental human rights.

To achieve these objectives, USAID has, through its implementing partners CEDPA/JHU, provided small grants, training, and technical assistance to community-based organizations representing more than 21 million women throughout the country. Such breadth was accomplished by tapping into existing networks, many of which had partnered with USAID under previous health activities.

Activities in the current phase of USAID/Nigeria's DG Initiative (February 2001 to January 2002) are designed to promote more effective participation in the democratization process, engendering of the political process, active participation in constitutional and other reviews, and closer interface with gover-

nance at the grassroots level. Specific programs will promote active participation of civil society in governance, utilize skills of professional women to address needs and issues of concern to women, and explore ways in which political parties can create opportunities for more women in their top hierarchies.

Training activities focus on building organizational and individual skills so that indigenous women's organizations develop skills to design, manage, and evaluate projects and increase participation. Assistance has also been targeted to build skills for democratic participation including advocacy, public speaking, media relations, coalition building, fund-raising, campaign organizing, and running for office. To increase impact and sustainability, CEDPA/JHU trained a core of female leaders at the national level so that they could in turn share the lessons learned with a larger group.

Nigerian women have used their enhanced skills and grant assistance to raise awareness about the importance of women's political participation. Economic cooperatives, professional and religious associations, women's advancement groups, and traditionally health-oriented NGOs have conducted a wide variety of information, education, and communication activities about the need for women's participation. At the community level, these include school visits, community meetings, workshops, and special events. To motivate and inform a wider audience, activists have turned to rallies, theater, songs, and the media. JHU employed principles of behavior change often used in social marketing in the health sector to develop effective strategies for influencing attitudes. They conducted sophisticated baseline assessments and follow-on surveys, drawing on evaluation models developed for health projects.

Moving beyond awareness raising, the DG Initiative further sought to enable women to influence policy. There-

fore, USAID supported women's advocacy coalitions to develop strategies for influencing government leaders, policymakers, and traditional rulers—both male and female—to increase resources and support for women's participation and human rights. Nigerian partners have formed grassroots, state, and national coalitions of women's organizations. These coalitions are providing a mechanism for women to make their voices heard, develop their leadership skills, and become involved in the political process. Results of the activities include the appointment of women onto traditional ruling councils, passage of traditional council edicts outlawing harmful practices against women, and even the passage of legislative bills on women's rights by some state assemblies. In particular, the groups are identifying and promoting an agenda on women's issues including marital, property, and legal rights and protection against domestic violence and harmful widowhood practices. Moreover, they are creating constituencies for female candidates for public office.

As a result of this project, more grassroots organizations are helping women learn about their rights, identify issues of special concern to them, develop skills for participation, and generate support for their issues. Women are gaining greater decision-making abilities in the household, community, and political arenas. By increasing women's role in the political process, not only are democratic institutions bolstered, but Nigerian women also gain more control over their destinies, which ultimately increases their contribution to their country's development.

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## Gender

*continued from page 3*

USAID missions already using a more integrated approach seemed to be better able to take advantage of linkages between and among sectors to produce a more coherent approach.

- ◆ More sex-disaggregated data should be collected wherever possible. Excellent mission work on gender issues may be going unreported and unrecognized due to the small number of indicators that are currently reported on a sex-disaggregated basis.
- ◆ Increased attention to gender issues in economic growth, environment and natural resources management, and in conflict/post-conflict societies would be helpful. In economics, the work on gender issues in areas other than micro and small enterprise seems to be under-reported. For countries in conflict or post-conflict situations, reporting on gender issues tends to be low despite the fact that women are often the ones left behind to hold together and rebuild communities.
- ◆ As new issues emerge, additional work will be needed to ensure that

gender-specific differences in challenges and opportunities are effectively taken into account in USAID programming. Current emerging issues include trafficking, information technology, and the implications of the HIV/AIDS epidemic for women and girls.

As these examples show, gender integration is not simply integrating women into development activities but it is about understanding the roles of women and men and how these roles are essential for long-term impact on development programming. Integrating gender into development and humanitarian assistance goals and the synergies that result are a crucial part of achieving development goals and fostering long-term change.

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## Trade

*continued from page 4*

dealing with the stops highlights the problems in developing the economies and attracting investment to the region.

The centralized nature of the governments and regional organizations in West Africa also works against the building of the economies in the region. Under the WAEMU treaty, a common external tariff (CET) came into effect at the beginning of this year that in theory should facilitate the free movement of people throughout the region. Yet the reality is much different. Often, people are held at border crossings for hours and required to "purchase" additional identification before crossing. This common tariff could facilitate the movement of goods brought in from outside the region, but because many countries have enacted import restrictions, value-added

taxes, or other forms of protection, the economic potential of the CET is diminished within the region and sub-region.

In spite of all of the problems in trade and commerce in the West African region, there are changes occurring that contribute to the well being of the small or midsized trader. As the results of decentralization take hold in the region, greater democratic governance and stronger civil society will help to create a more vibrant economy throughout the region. The private sector generally distrusts the motives of government officials because the government often keeps information close-in or does not help facilitate business activities or requires excessive tax payments. The development of civil society in the region can help government better define its

## Mali

*continued from page 1*

ASEEM's work has been so successful that local government, particularly the mayor, is interested in using new local resources to partner with the organization. This illustrates how information can lead to communication, followed by the capacity to identify common issues and push for resources.

If all these elements fall into place, women in Mali stand a good chance of taking advantage of the leadership opportunities the new climate of decentralization offers them—and of contributing to successful decentralization in Mali.

*Marcia Greenberg was the democracy and governance specialist for G/WID's WIDTECH project. The complete report, available in both English and French, is online at [www.widtech.org/Publications/Publications.htm](http://www.widtech.org/Publications/Publications.htm). For more information, contact Ed Lijewski in USAID's Office of Women in Development at [elijewski@usaid.gov](mailto:elijewski@usaid.gov), (202) 712-1088.*

role in helping the private sector thrive, rather than trying to compete with or become the private sector.

There is a direct link in West Africa between cross-border trade, trade openness, and regional economic growth. Working to enhance the cross-border trade activities of women increases this potential for economic growth. Furthermore, the economic participation of women increases their financial independence and their access to, and control over, resources. And with increased independence comes a greater say in governance.

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## Namibian Women Protect Communities and Natural Resources

By Monica Koep

**M**ore than 11 years after independence from South Africa, Namibia is still struggling to overcome the legacy of apartheid era land distribution. The majority of black Namibians makes only a subsistence living in the rural, communally-owned areas in the north. Since 1993, USAID's Living in a Finite Environment (LIFE) initiative has specifically targeted this problem and sought to address these vast imbalances. This joint partnership between USAID, the Namibian Ministry of Environment and Tourism, the World Wildlife Fund, and Namibian conservation and rural development NGOs is a means to provide economic activity and growth to rural populations, particularly marginalized groups like women, and enable these groups to have a greater voice in communal activities.

At the heart of the initiative lies the establishment of "conservancies" in targeted communal areas. These are legally constituted entities that consolidate tracts of land under management bodies formed from within the participating communities. Responsibility for the sustainable use of wildlife and other natural resources thus devolves directly to the ultimate beneficiaries, historically disadvantaged Namibians located in these under-developed areas.

Results have exceeded expectations for a number of years. By the beginning of 2001, 14 conservancies have been officially listed by the Government of the Republic of Namibia and 3.85 million hectares of communal land had been placed under direct management of conservancy management committees, benefiting approximately 27,000 persons. In 2000 alone, nearly US\$560,000 in revenues was generated from conservancy-managed enterprises such as campsites, craft sales, thatching grass, and employment at tourist lodges. Over the past six years, the total income has amounted to more than US\$1.2 million.

The LIFE initiative incorporates activities that benefit rural, poor, and marginalized women in remote areas of

the country. Against many odds, including limited access to financial resources, low literacy and high fertility rates, and the increasing burden of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, rural women have seized the chances opening up to them through changing circumstances. To date, 25 percent of conservancy management committee members are women, and with management committees changing annually, the program has set an ambitious target of 40 percent by 2004. Where women are not elected members, mechanisms are set up to ensure their voices are heard.

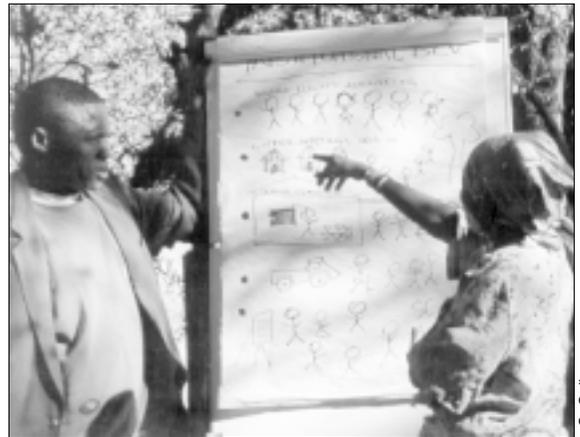
The increase in self-confidence and social standing that results from increased participation is of equal importance to economic rewards. Affected women derive concrete benefits in the form of cash, training, and job opportunities (through employment in lodges), as well as less visible gains such as recognition and utilization of talents and abilities, including traditional craft skills. The resulting sense of empowerment is an important component in the process of softening rigid, traditional inter-gender relationships and shifting the locus of power in rural communities.

An example of an effective LIFE program is the Women's Desk of Grootberg Area (in the far northwest of Namibia), an organization founded jointly by women from the Khoadi Hoas Conservancy and the Grootberg Farmer's Union in July 2000. The aim of the organization is to uplift the status and the living standards of women in the Grootberg area by achieving the following objectives:

- ◆ To serve, support, and encourage disadvantaged women;
- ◆ To organize women into self-help groups;
- ◆ To promote training for income-generating activities;

- ◆ To participate in women's affairs in Namibia;
- ◆ To identify and address social problems in the local area such as drug abuse, alcoholism, aids awareness and prevention, teenage pregnancies, and education and health related issues; and
- ◆ To identify strong female leaders in decision-making positions in the local area.

Members of the group have accomplished many goals. They obtained a grant from the Namibian Nature Foundation's Local Environment Fund



*Conservancy management committee members discussing activities.*

to buy sewing machines in order to sew school uniforms as an income-generating activity. They successfully negotiated with the local tribal authorities for use of facilities for both the sewing project and a bakery. They have held meetings with women in the area, elected sub-committees, and planned visits to other parts of the country to support the development of groups elsewhere who are interested in being involved in similar activities.

The members of the Women's Desk recognize the link between the empowerment and democratization processes put in motion through the conservancy structures, and their newly found strength and ability to recognize opportunities

*continued on page 8*

## Namibia

*continued from page 7*

and practice creative problem-solving methods. They acknowledge the role of the management committee as an agent of change, a source of support, and an example for women. As Helga Howoses, a member of the Conservancy Management Committee and secretary of the Women's Desk Management Committee, stated, "We are proud that our conservancy has long recognized the role of women in resource management. We believe we are the first conservancy to appoint a female environmental shepherd [game guard] who does the same work as our male shepherds...and is a role model for women in our area and in Namibia."

The impact of this initiative can be measured in part by the words of this

LIFE participant. "Success does not come from luck but through sheer hard work. The world believes that the alleviation of poverty is in the hands of us women. I hope that women will feel encouraged to become active members of our community, getting involved in the decision-making process, and promoting their interests on an equal basis."

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