

LWF Uganda: Community Participation in Rakai *August 2006*

In all LWF projects in Uganda, community participation and involvement is an integral part of program strategy. The LWF has implemented a number of mechanisms for ensuring this close working relationship: from hiring qualified locals as field staff, to supporting local volunteer counselors to work in their own communities, to holding open meetings with members of the communities—the LWF is always looking for ways to stay connected.

Development Fora in Rakai and Lyantonde

One example of this close community partnership is the Development Fora that has been established in Rakai and Lyantonde districts. On an approximately annual basis, LWF Rakai/Lyantonde staff set aside three full weeks from their regular responsibilities to collect and process community input. Through the Fora, project staff speak directly with the people the project is meant to be serving, thus gaining valuable insight about how the project could better meet their needs.

Each day of the fora is a full one: from morning until evening, staff members are in the field visiting families and community groups and holding community meetings at the parish level. Speaking with individuals and groups who have received assistance from LWF is a chance for LWF staff to follow up with interventions and measure the impact. It's also an opportunity for beneficiaries to relate their progress and any other issues they may have.

Additionally, every afternoon is taken up by a gathering to which all members of the particular parish are invited. Meetings often constitute several hundred people. During the meeting, LWF staff and community members enter into an open dialogue in which the LWF explains its strategies and plans, and communities offer feedback regarding the direction of the organization's work. People are encouraged to ask questions and offer constructive criticism which the LWF can absorb and use to shape its future activities.

LWF staff invite university students, Ministry of Health officials, sub-country representatives, and other local leaders to join them in their visits. Encouraging public officials to join the Fora helps officials understand the LWF's work and also helps bridge the gap of understanding between officials and their constituents.

Staying in Touch with Those in Need

Through the Development Fora, the LWF aims to stay in closer touch with the people on the ground—to reach out to communities in a more personal manner. Over the course of the three weeks, LWF staff collectively visit over 200 individuals and groups that have received LWF support, including orphans, child-headed households, people living with HIV/AIDS, women's groups, and neighborhood groups.

As part of the 2006 Fora, for example, LWF staff visited a child-headed household consisting of three brothers orphaned by AIDS. The LWF had built the boys a house in 2002 after their old one collapsed, and assisted them with food and household items. The program had also given them a goat in 2004 as part of the "Give Me a Goat, Give Me a Chance" project, with the

intention of providing a future source of income which can be used to buy food, scholastic materials, and other necessities in times of hardship.



From just one female goat and the training that went along with it, the three brothers were able to breed and purchase more goats, and they now have a total of eight goats including several females (good for breeding and milk production). However, in order to earn enough daily income to sustain the family, the eldest boy was working as a cleaner in a lodge in a nearby city, which caused the other two to drop out of school in order to dig in the fields, fetch water, and cook food. From the Fora visit, it was clear that continued support is needed if the boys' hope to return to school and finish their education is to be fulfilled.

Another meeting in the 2006 Fora showcased the challenges and successes of a women's group in Kagamba parish. Focusing on the objectives of caring for orphans, helping create awareness of HIV/AIDS, and increasing income for the group, these women are fighting for the basic rights of their community to better living conditions and opportunities. With material support from LWF such as seeds and farm tools, the women have grown 15 bags of beans (1500 kilograms worth approximately \$400) and used the income from selling them to buy 12 bulls for fattening.

The women related to LWF staff how difficult it was to maintain group membership during the long drought, since many women felt discouraged by the poor crop yields. The group thus hopes to receive training from the LWF on how to better manage their agricultural endeavors and thus retain full participation from women in the community. Their goal is to start a cassava field and buy a cow for each member—generating income that can be used to help marginalized people in their community.



The Kagamba parish community meeting, with an attendance of over 300 people, was also highly enlightening with regard to the plights and possibilities of community members. Though shy at first, people soon started asking important questions, mainly relating to food security and HIV/AIDS issues. Some people offered suggestions to LWF for improving the way the organization distributes seeds, since sometimes the timing is poor in relation to the planting season. People were also concerned about the lack of water during the long drought and requested help in building water tanks that could support up to 120 people. The community thus demonstrated its drive to build capacity in being able to care for themselves.

Results

LWF staff follow each day with a debriefing meeting, to review the events of the day and figure out how to adjust the program's strategy to best respond to the community. For example, this year's Development Fora highlighted the need for LWF Rakai to offer a more flexible package—community members would benefit greatly if LWF staff were able to provide tailored assistance to each group's particular needs. While this may be more complicated in terms of implementation, such a strategy would ultimately provide more efficient and effective support to the people that need it most. Other issues that have arisen from Development Fora are issues of transportation for volunteer counselors, transportation for HIV/AIDS patients to medical centers, and the need for further assistance in the areas of food security and access to water during the long dry seasons. In this way, the LWF in Rakai and Lyantonde—much like all LWF projects in Uganda—is constantly reevaluating its projects using direct input from the communities themselves.