

Women in Conservation: Peace, love and mushrooms!

- By Twinomugisha Edward Bills



Mushrooms, mushrooms, mushrooms (image by KIWOCEDU)

Small can be beautiful

This was again clearly shown by the recently completed small grant project under the [Women in Healthy Sustainable Societies](#) programme at the [Echuya Forest Reserve Important Bird Area](#), implemented by the Kigezi Initiative for Women and Children Empowerment and Development Uganda (KIWOCEDU). This project, funded by Conservation International, aimed to promote sustainable conservation through livelihood improvement of local women groups around this magnificent [Eastern Afromontane Key Biodiversity Area](#).

Most people around Echuya Forest Reserve eke out a living by farming a small piece of land. Against all odds: most of the area is highly overpopulated, the would-be arable land is too rugged, steep or hilly to support any meaningful agriculture, and the lowlands and valleys are susceptible to perpetual soil eroding floods. Obviously, people are not allowed to farm inside the famous Echuya Forest Reserve. The pressure on the remaining land is therefore extremely high, and many people who do not have the opportunity to leave, live below the poverty line. Including the women.

KIWOCEDU, a locally based organization working with women and youth at Echuya, took up the challenge and started a project to promote these women's economic empowerment. While the project lifespan was very short (9 months), and the available money very small (USD 10,000), this project has left many women smiling.

Economic power is domestic power

One of the key achievements of the project was the successful enterprise development, with and for women, in areas such as fruit and mushroom growing and handicraft making. More than 100 women were trained and/or supported in the above three enterprises, which are already producing very tangible results: the mushroom growing activity alone has already generated about 2,208,000 Uganda Shillings (approximately USD 748) for the project beneficiaries! Again, this may sound like little, but it is, in fact, a lot...

“With support from KIWOCEDU, I have been able to scale up my mushroom growing business. I have harvested 97 kilos of mushrooms, selling each at 7,000 Uganda Shillings, realizing a total of 679,000 shilling,” narrates Mrs. Mukamagoba.



“The WHSS project has not only improved our family income, but will also enhance our food production. This will also reduce the conflicts with our husbands for not providing for the home. Our husbands will see us as contributors to family income,” adds Mrs. Owomugisha, another project beneficiary.

Save our trees

In addition, 160 women took part in workshops about natural resource management and conservation of the Echuya Forest, and two women participated in a Training of Trainers in agroforestry management and energy saving technologies, supported by [Nature Uganda](#) (BirdLife in Uganda). They then sensitized women about the benefits of energy saving and taught them how to produce more efficient stoves. At the end of the project, 57 women had already adopted the new type of stove, which will reduce the need for firewood and will therefore reduce the pressure on the forest.

From the grassroots up

Over 350 people, including 100 men, participated in a range of awareness raising and collaboration meetings. KIWOCEDU also encouraged 17 women representatives to attend a meeting in natural resource management organized by the Bufundi Echuya Collaborative Livelihood Association (BECLA), where they discussed ways in which women can participate in forest conservation. They realized that most of the major decisions on conservation were made by men alone, and they resolved that gender mainstreaming should take place at all levels, right from the point of [selection of management committees](#).

Change that attitude

It is evident that the project has succeeded in changing people's attitudes. The attitude of women, who used to think that conservation is a "men's thing", but who now feel a desire to actively participate in the protection of the forest. And the attitude of men, who have learned to appreciate that having women in leadership positions doesn't necessarily mean they are superior, and who have pledged their readiness to engage women in their efforts to advance the cause of natural resource conservation.

Add that to the reduced stress in the beneficiaries' homes, and one can easily say that what's good for women, is good for families, and is good for the future of the Echuya Forest!

Please follow the series of articles about 'women and environment' on www.birdlife.org/africa/project/ci-women-healthy-sustainable-societies. The BirdLife International Africa Partnership Secretariat is managing a small grants portfolio of five innovative projects at selected Eastern Afrotropical Important Bird Areas / Key Biodiversity Areas in Uganda and Kenya, on behalf of Conservation International. The grant described in this article was made to the Kigezi Initiative for Women and Children Empowerment and Development Uganda (KIWOCEDU).