

Empowerment of a HIV/AIDS Women's Group through Mangulukeni Fish Farm: A Case Study from Namibia

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Introduction

In 2001, the Government of the Republic of Namibia (GRN), through the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources (MFMR) introduced Namibia's Aquaculture policy, *Towards Responsible Development of Aquaculture*. The policy called for the "promotion and development of responsible and sustainable aquaculture". The purpose was to provide a legal/institutional framework for the aquaculture industry to contribute to food security and poverty reduction through employment and to attract foreign investment. In order to stimulate interest in fish farming, the GRN spearheaded aquaculture pilot projects in different regions of the country. In the inland areas, the interest was on fresh water aquaculture where eight fish farms were established in the north and north-eastern regions, farming three spot tilapia (*Oreochromis andersonii*) and the African sharp tooth catfish (*Clarias gariepinus*). The farms were to be under the technical supervision of the MFMR together with the community members who benefit from farm profits. An integrated aquaculture fish farming approach was adopted. For the coastal towns, the interest was mostly in commercial ventures for export, such as oysters to South Africa, Europe and Asia, abalone to Asia and seaweed to Asia.

In its mid-term and long-term planning, the GRN regarded food shortage and poverty reduction as the priorities for aquaculture. Aquaculture campaigns were targeted at the north and north-eastern regions where the majority of the population is concentrated. Aquaculture in Namibia is still in its infancy. The industry is hampered by the lack of capital, training and expertise. However the response to the GRN initiatives was encouraging and communities have started benefiting through fish as food and monetary income, even though on a small scale. Commercial farmers are also practicing aquaculture by stocking ponds and dams on their farms, also on a small scale. Feasibility study and site assessment requests are increasing as communities start their own aquaculture projects. The following case study highlights the result of the Government's initiative involving women living with HIV/AIDS in fish farming.

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Description of Project

Oshikuku Support Group (OSG) was established in January 2007 in conjunction with St. Martin's Hospital in Oshikuku. The group's purposes are to provide a supportive environment for HIV positive and affected individuals to share their experiences, and to provide counseling to people while they were participating in a group project. After the group was formed, the members decided to begin an income generating project. They chose an aquaculture project. This aquaculture project served as a means to generate income while addressing both economic and psycho-social challenges through group dynamics. They named the project "Mangulukeni Fish Farming Project", from the Oshiwambo word meaning to "be free". This project urges members of the group and the larger community to *be free* to share their experiences with each other, to *be free* of stigma associated with HIV/AIDS and to *be free* to live a healthy life.

Implementation of the aquaculture project began in 2007, with the guidance of MFMR. The members decided to start farming with three spot tilapia (*Oreochromis andersonii*), which is a delicacy among the local people. Mangulukeni Fish Farm had its first harvest in the summer of 2008. The second harvest followed in September 2009. Since inception, this project helped to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS in the Omusati region while allowing the members of the Oshikuku Support Group to benefit from the psycho-social, physical and emotional health benefits of participating in a group-based project.

Mangulukeni Fish Farming Project aims to continue as a sustainable and beneficial aquaculture project in the Omusati Region, setting an example for other aquaculture projects, other support groups, and for women in the community in general. This project has been created and run by women, with 10 out of 11 group members being female. This initiative creates a powerful example for the community at large of the strength and success of women and their ability to access the opportunities available to them. Additional direct beneficiaries from this project include the family members and households of all of the group members, totalling 92 people, 46 of whom are children.

History, Structure and Leadership

The idea for Mangulukeni Fish Farm came directly from the members of the Oshikuku Support Group. The group was working with a former Peace Corps volunteer, Julie Garon, at the time. However, the ideas for the fish farm and its motivation came directly from the group members. When the group was initially formed they discussed the need for income generation and brainstormed possible ideas and projects. In the end, they decided on a fish farm based on discussions with the MFMR. The decision was based on the prospect of a lucrative market for selling fish in the Oshikuku area and the general benefits that could be garnered through this project. They then visited an existing pond to learn from people experienced in fish farming. The Chair and Treasurer were elected from among the support group members on a rotating basis. Additionally, a

schedule is maintained each month to detail responsibility for checking the pond, feeding the fish and other tasks throughout the month. One person is deployed each month in case someone else cannot make their shift or needs assistance. These rotating structures of the support group, the leadership and fish pond maintainers, allow all group members to gain leadership and management experience. Leadership training is also planned for all group members.

Challenges

Although Mangulukeni fish farmers have successfully harvested tilapia twice, and remain highly committed, the first two years brought challenges:

- During the first year the group had to determine the best method for selling the fish (by weight in kilograms or by a standard bundle size)
- The harvest yielded small sized fish, compounding the issue as to how best to sell the fish.
- During the second year the group had to deal with a very small harvest due to catfish entering the tilapia pond during the floods of 2009. Unfortunately, the timing of the floods was such that the catfish entered when the tilapia fingerlings were quite small and the catfish ate many of those fingerlings.

The money generated from the harvest was not enough for reinvestment in the project for the coming year and could not provide substantial income to members. This was a learning process. The group remains committed to the project and has been working closely with the MFMR to ensure that the lessons learned from these experiences serve to improve planning and management of the fish pond in future years.

Impact and Successes

Participation in the Mangulukeni Fish Farming Project potentially provides group members with a wide range of opportunities and benefits. The opportunities and benefits include: opportunity for income generation; important source of protein from the fish; fostering of business, management and leadership skills; and development of a sense of belonging, ownership and accomplishment. Each project member is part of a family which also directly benefits from this project and will experience improvements in their quality of life through these benefits. These benefits include the provision of nutritious foods (fish brought home from the harvest), the benefits of additional income brought to the family and the positive experience and skills development of the group members. The project also serves as an overall source of support for group members and their families. The group meets regularly to plan and care for the pond and this allows group members additional time to talk with each other, discuss what is happening in their lives and offer support and friendship to each other. The fact that all of these economic benefits are being brought home by women cannot be

over-emphasized. This provides group members and their families with a sense of accomplishment, independence, self-worth and also encouragement for the younger generation.

In addition, Mangulukeni was awarded with an American Ambassador's Self-Help Project grant in the beginning of 2010 to assist the project with basic and operating costs. Although fish yields were low in the first two years, this project clearly demonstrates the wide array of positive impacts that income-generating group projects can have for the entire community. In addition to business management skills and psycho-social support from their peers and community, members of OSG now hope to be able to gain additional monetary income from the project in future years. The community members of Oshikuku also gain nutritious food and an awareness of HIV/ AIDS, along with a decrease in the stigma associated with the disease. This project has great potential to improve the quality of life of all the group members, their families and the wider community.

The new stage of the project is projected to produce 3-4 tonnes of product in its first year. Production is expected to increase each year, making the project self-reliant, sustainable and profitable in the long run.