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Education, Gender & Natural Resources in the Kiunga region

Lamu District boasts an exceptional human and biological heritage. In 2001 Lamu town achieved UNESCO World Heritage Site status in recognition of its unique Islamic character and architecture, and Kiunga Marine National Reserve in the Lamu Archipelago has been identified as a priority site in the WWF Eastern African Marine Ecoregion.

The vast majority of people living along the coast of Lamu and Kiunga are Bajuni, who have Swahili, Arab and Bantu ancestry. Their livelihoods place much reliance upon natural resources - fishing, mangrove harvesting and farming. There are few alternatives to these strategies - salaried jobs are rare in the area, mainly limited to tourism and government.

Literacy levels among men and women are low. The main work available locally – fishing and farming – requires no academic training, entrenching an attitude among local resource users (also the principal agents of resource depletion in the Reserve) that education is not a priority.

Men are largely illiterate but they are the principal resource users who potentially can be educated and motivated to adopt sustainable methods. They are also decision-makers who at present are sceptical of the values of education and conservation. They perpetuate under-education through their reluctance to support children (especially girls) in secondary school (for which fees must be paid).

In some cases it is female parents who keep children from school. Single woman families are common in some villages (e.g. Kiunga). Women generally have extremely low educational attainment and very little access to economic opportunity. Again, these factors conspire to perpetuate under-education of the next generation – poor illiterate women may be doubtful of the value of schooling, and even those who are keen to send their children to school may find the financial burden too great.

Girls are particularly affected, and drop out early to attend to household duties, get married, have children and stay at home. For some girls it may only be by defying the wishes of their parents and sneaking to school that they can obtain formal education.

Support to boys is seen as more justifiable, since there is a slim possibility that an educated boy might get a salaried job. Nevertheless, commitment wavers because, in Kiunga's society, there is little evidence of a significant disbenefit associated with a boy's dropping out.

On average, about 45% of pupils complete Primary School and sit the final KCPE exam in Standard Eight (age 13-14), but by this point 70% of the girls have already dropped out (the drop-out rate of primary school girls between ages 9-10 and 13-14 is very high). Of those that reach this final year of primary school, the girls generally achieve much lower KCPE grades than boys (about 60% of students pass, but only about 30% of girls pass).

WWF-US support in 2001 delivered through WWF's Kiunga Project education programme recorded the following successes:

- Over 500 girls in six primary schools received support, including text books, mock exams and opportunities to participate in WWF calendar art competitions, inter-school quizzes and debates and turtle hatchling releases. The activities contributed to improved performance by primary school girls in the Kenya Certificate

of Primary Education (KCPE) examinations.

- A girl from Kizingitini village achieved the highest pass in all Lamu District and continues to score excellent grades in annual exams. Other primary schools have since come forward for WWF support.
- Six girls (one from each participating primary school) received secondary school scholarships, awarded according to academic ability, commitment and financial need. Each of the sponsored girls participated in KMNR activities by spending a week at the KMNR HQ.
- Primary and secondary school girls from all schools participated in turtle hatchling releases (40 girls), and in the Environment Day (100 girls) and Earth Day (60 girls) celebrations. More than 60 girls took part in the International Beach Clean Up Day.

With a low premium placed on formal education and a financial contribution from parents demanded should their children reach secondary school, it is not surprising that many parents do not encourage their children's academic efforts.

Fishing is still a productive way of life, but the ecosystem is increasingly threatened by destructive and unsustainable fishing practices, unregulated commercial offtake by outsiders, coastal erosion, land grabbing, speculative development, habitat conversion and pollution. Left unchecked these escalating forces will undermine the biological productivity of the Reserve, eroding its conservation capital and impoverishing the local economy.

Attitudes to education must be influenced by perceptions of its cost, and in a society where incomes derive from natural resources uses there is a risk that education will become increasingly unaffordable in real terms as natural-resourced based incomes decline because use cannot be placed on a sustainable footing. At the same time the need for education to facilitate alternative livelihoods may become more keenly felt as the capacity declines of the natural resource base to sustain further traditional exploitation.

Potentially enhanced protection and controlled-access management of the Kiunga fishery for higher value products could generate improved returns that could be used in part to fund enhanced access to education (while at the same time protecting the base of biological capital), but if this does not happen then perhaps the only ways by which local people can expect to receive better education will be if this is delivered by improved State provision, and/or they benefit from further donations from the international development community¹.

If not, community members increasingly will be obliged to seek work elsewhere as natural-resource based opportunities diminish, but they will find themselves poorly-equipped for the transition because of low educational attainment.

¹ Other sources of education might be enhanced provision from the traditional Islamic madrasa schools