

Addressing Local Needs

with practical information



Deaconess Phillip is known widely in King'ong'o village as a church social worker with a heart for everyone. She is also a community educator and most new ideas that reach women in this small village in the heart of Mitaboni Division, Eastern Province have a lot to do with her efforts.

In February 2005 when *AfriAfya* began working with a group of Community based organisations (CBOs) in Mitaboni, Philip and several other women were trained as info-mediaries. Their work was to identify and respond to information needs of their community members particularly women.

Four years of working with community champions like Philip has yielded positive results by providing practical information that meets local needs.

Providing Knowledge for better livelihoods

An hour of travel, part of it on a bumpy dusty earth road brings you to Mitaboni village, about 70 kms east of Nairobi. The region is semi-arid with scanty vegetation and harsh weather with limited livelihood opportunities especially for the women and youth. It is in this community that *AfriAfya*, working with a group of CBO's affiliated to the Mitaboni African Brotherhood Church (ABC), launched a community resource center in February 2005.

Getting the information out

Engaging with the Mitaboni community offered *AfriAfya* the unique opportunity of moving information 'beyond the computer'; that is of relevance and use to local communities. *AfriAfya* quickly realised that computers, though important, are not enough by themselves. In most rural settings, face to face contact over time works better in passing on knowledge and learning.

In the case of Mitaboni, CBO meetings were utilised to get out information sourced from *AfriAfya*. The use of community champions within the CBOs as info-mediaries further enhanced the delivery process and allowed *AfriAfya* to reach many more people.

The treeless and dry landscape of Mitaboni





Putting Solar Cooking Knowledge into the hands of rural women

AfriAfya first conducted a demonstration in September 2007 where a group of 45 women were exposed to solar cooking using a solar cookit. This is a simple cooking device that directs sun energy to a black-coated pot to cook a meal.

The next phase involved training local representatives drawn from the 15 CBO's on the production of the solar cookits. The purpose of this training is to equip these women with skills to enable them promote solar cooking among community members as well as basic entrepreneurial skills to enable them to start income generating activities. This training was conducted in August 2008 and 16 men and women were trained.

Through this initiative, *AfriAfya* has built a strong partnership with Solar Cookers International. This has yielded an opportunity for both organizations to educate rural women on the benefits of solar cooking. For the women in Mitaboni, the benefits of having an alternative cooking fuel cannot be understated as has been clearly demonstrated by this initiative.

"Our women spend a lot of time and energy in search of firewood and yet our area is very dry. Solar energy cookers are helping reduce the burden of household fuel on women and to earn some cash."

- Mrs. Martha Nthenge, CBO's Coordinator

Another success point for *AfriAfya* is that this model of partnering with organisations to spread knowledge is now being replicated in the other communities where *AfriAfya* is establishing community learning centers.

Mitaboni community expressed need for a variety of information and not just about health. As a result, other types of information that were more geared towards boosting livelihoods began reaching and spreading throughout this community. One of this was the use of solar or sun energy for cooking and purifying drinking water.

Charcoal, firewood and kerosene, the main sources of household fuel for Mitaboni residents are neither affordable nor readily available to many households. In the expansive Mitaboni plains, it is rare to sight a tree and the search for firewood is a burden that falls entirely on women.

An alternative energy source is a recurring need in this community. During an information needs assessment, it was found that majority of CBO members had heard about use of the sun energy but didn't know where to get the information. It helped to work with Mrs. Martha Nthenge, the CBO's coordinator, who is passionate about the welfare of her community and is keen to seek for help from any quarter.

AfriAfya responded to this request, fulfilling its mandate of linking information poor communities to information-rich sources. This led to a partnership with Solar Cookers International, an organisation that helps communities learn how to utilise sun energy in their everyday lives.

Funding a local initiative with global resources: *AfriAfya* taps into the Internet

AfriAfya successfully applied ICTs, in this case the use of the Internet, to carry out online fundraising for this solar knowledge initiative. Money, which *AfriAfya* didn't have was needed to roll out the skills needed for adoption of solar cooking in the Mitaboni community.

AfriAfya therefore in its role as an infomediary, linked these community based organizations that needed support, with virtual donors located on an online fundraising forum known as Global Giving.

AfriAfya facilitated preparation of a brief on the idea and this was sent to Global Giving and provided with website space on the main website of Global Giving.

Constant updates of progress and photographs are posted on the site to educate donors about how their money has been put into use and what it has achieved.

Through Global giving, this initiative has received \$3,403 from about 70 donations towards realizing the dream of cooking with sunshine and more is still being fundraised.

Spreading the Knowledge to more rural communities

Before you branch off to Mitaboni, the highway leads you further down to the Kenyan coast, a perfect getaway for many holiday-seekers. Sandy beaches, boat-rides and fine dining are just a peek into the fun-filled experience one is bound to enjoy.

But 140 km from this haven of pleasure and 600km from Nairobi, lays a forgotten region where a glass of clean water is a privilege. The blazing sun mercilessly beating on the red baked earth reaches soaring temperatures.

An hour's drive on a narrow dusty road flanked by leafless trees and shrubs takes you to a small community surviving in these extreme climatic conditions. This is Kilibasi village and home to a primary school that bears a similar name.

Kilibasi is one of the sub-locations of Samburu Division in the Kenya's coastal district of Kinango. It is among the driest regions of the country, receiving less than 500mm of rainfall each year. Famine and drought plague the region, and when crops dry up and farmers have no source of income, they cut down the few remaining trees and sell the wood.

AfriAfya is in this region in partnership with World Vision Kenya. Kilibasi primary school is within the locality of one of the three Community Learning Centers (CLCs) that have been set up through this collaboration. The other two are in Kajiado and Nyando districts respectively. The aim of the centers is to make health and development information available to rural communities who continue to suffer from information poverty.

Kilibasi Primary school has a population of about 500 children, a figure that is only constant when there is food at the school. This is the harsh reality that children are solely motivated to attend school on the assurance of a meal at

mid-day and it is the only one that the majority will have for the day.

"Attendance drops to as low as 150 pupils when food shortages hit the school. The School Feeding Programme (SFP), is what has saved the day and boosted the school's ability to provide at least a meal a day for the children," says Mr. Omar, the school head-teacher.

But this is not without some challenges. The school cannot afford staff to do the cooking and often pulls children, especially the older girls from class to cook for the rest of the school. Occasionally, the school will hire cooks when some money becomes available.

Even when the food is present, its preparation is a tedious affair. The cooks will use the three-stone fire, fed with scarce firewood to boil two huge containers of a mixture of dry maize and legumes. This process takes at least 6 hours and involves constantly adding firewood with whoever attending to the fire inhaling copious amounts of poisonous smoke.

But thanks to *AfriAfya's* eagerness to provide information and knowledge that is relevant to local needs, this school community is already learning about the potential of solar cooking. This is an extension of a similar experience in Mitaboni Division in Machakos District that has benefited local women. They have not only learnt how to use the cookers but also how to make them. The two regions bear similar geographical features – dry weather, scarcity of cooking fuel and degradation of the environment due to cutting down of the few trees available.

A demonstration of this technology at the school was conducted in collaboration with Solar Cookers International and with funds collected through Global Giving. Already, this first step of bringing knowledge of a simple yet efficient and cost-effective source of energy has inspired hope for pupils, teachers and parents alike.

For *AfriAfya*, this is yet again a confirmation of how providing simple information can make profound and long-lasting difference in a community.



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AfriAfya's idea of popularizing knowledge on solar energy has offered practical information to empower rural communities with new skills to better their lives. Providing this knowledge has helped rural women prepare meals for their families as well as free up time spent looking for firewood for other life-improving activities. It is helping safeguard the environment by eliminating the use of charcoal as a house hold fuel. Most of all, households are beginning to generate some income through the sale of sell solar-powered wares.



Kilibasi School community attend a knowledge event on solar energy organised by *AfriAfya*

About *AfriAfya*

AfriAfya, African Network for Health Knowledge and Management and Communication, is a consortium of health NGOs set up in April 2000 to explore ways of harnessing modern Information and Communication Technologies for improving health and development in rural and marginalized areas.

Information and Communication Technologies have been making a sweep across the globe but with no real benefits for marginalized and poor communities. *AfriAfya* is tapping the potential of ICTs to increase access to relevant health and development information for such communities in Kenya and beyond.

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