

WORKING WITH COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS TO ENHANCE THE DECISION-MAKING POWERS OF WOMEN



The experiences of FIDA and Plan in Kamuli and Kampala

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Empowering Communities”



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1. Introduction

Plan has implemented, from 2005 to 2010, a programme to reduce the vulnerability of Ugandan communities to the impact of HIV and AIDS, an initiative carried out in partnership with FIDA-Uganda until 2009. The programme has in particular sought to protect the legal rights of HIV-affected people in two areas: Kawempe, a low-income neighbourhood in the capital city of Kampala, and Kamuli, a poor rural district in the East of the country.

The denial of women's rights to participate in the decisions that affect them and their families was a key rationale for this intervention. As one way to reduce the violation of these rights, Plan and FIDA established a cadre of community volunteers to provide information and legal services to local residents and thus increase their access to justice. This strategy was seen to provide a number of advantages, including harnessing volunteers' knowledge of the local situation and the prospects of sustaining their work beyond the programme period.

This case study documents the work of these volunteers and the change they have contributed to, especially in relation to enhancing the decision-making powers of women. This, Plan recognised, was essential to reduce the impact of HIV and AIDS on the primary 'target group' of the programme, women and children affected by the pandemic.

This document first provides some background information on the programme areas and the main challenges faced at the outset. Section 2 also outlines the PLAN/FIDA initiative, its objectives

and strategies. Section 3 includes information on the community volunteers, the rationale for using them, their intended functions, how they were selected and their daily work, drawing contrasts between urban and rural contexts and between male and female volunteers.

Section 4 brings out their impact on women's decision-making, illustrated with examples and short stories, and highlights successes and challenges met. Section 5 proposes lessons learnt from this programme, including the efficacy of using volunteers as an approach and the prospects for sustainability. The final section offers conclusions.

The study has been written to share the programme experience with the wider development community and to inform future initiatives by Plan and other partners. It has involved a review of programme reports and other documents, as well as 55 individual and group interviews with more than 80 respondents who saw the programme in action and could observe the changes it brought about. This included the community volunteers themselves; programme staff; opinion, religious and cultural leaders; the police and magistrates; and members of Local Councils who interacted with the programme at village and district levels. Women and men who directly benefited from the volunteers' work were also met. The interviews were conducted in Kawempe and Kamuli by two women lawyers who were part of the implementation team and formerly worked with FIDA. Research was supervised and the text edited by the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda.

2. Background

The need for gender equity and women's empowerment

In 2005, one of the first programme activities was an analysis of gender relations, women's empowerment and the general human rights situation. This indicated that women in both Kawempe and Kamuli were not party to most decisions taken in the family, including those affecting their personal and sexual lives, let alone those taken in the community (Box 1). In so far as family property was concerned, for example, they had no say on how this was acquired, controlled or disposed of.

In both programme areas, girls were counselled before marriage to obey their spouses, to protect their husband's reputation and to keep domestic problems within the home at all times, unless the severity of any beating or other form of violence forced the wife to complain to her parents or in-laws. In some cases of wife abuse, a religious leader might be called upon, or clan heads (much respected in Kamuli) would meet, talk to the man and counsel him. Sometimes, the culprit would be instructed to make amends, such as buying new clothes for his wife. There were therefore no formal legal institutions that the women could turn to for redress. It was unheard of for a woman to take her husband to court, whatever the severity of any abuse. A final option for women was to run away from home: in such cases, the bride price would often have to be refunded by the woman's parents.

If the male head of the household died, disinheritance of orphans and widows was a common occurrence. 'Widow inheritance', where a widow is 'passed on' to a male relative of the deceased husband, with or without her consent, was a widespread practice in Kamuli. Even with regard to children's upbringing, women had little influence and, in the event of divorce or separation, the woman would have to leave without her children. On matters concerning their health, women could not take independent decisions, despite being responsible for taking care of the sick. The same applied to issues of reproductive health.

Women were living a sheltered life, and in some households were not even allowed to listen to the radio, as this was considered a male prerogative. Women would in rare cases speak in meetings but, as one of the community volunteers remarked, *"Such women were considered to be very disrespectful and everyone pitied their husbands if they were married. Society would laugh at a man who would consult his wife on how to develop his family."*

Even in the urban areas, where some women had access to an income (such as by selling foodstuffs along the road), this was insufficient to take most decisions independently from men. Zamini Nsibambi, another community volunteer, and an elected local leader in charge of women's affairs in Kawempe says: *"Here, a man decided which house to rent and how much money to leave home for shopping. The only decision a woman could take was to fit everything into that little money. So she could buy the basic necessities, but the decisions on how to invest was not hers. The man also decided which child would go to school and where."*

In addition, many women espoused the cultural norm that it was the duty and responsibility of a man to earn money and take care of the children and family. Where some women did go out and earn money, they would hide this from their husbands, and even send the proceeds to their parents to make it appear as a donation from the in-laws to the family, for instance to pay school fees.

Women's inability to take decisions in all domains - whether economic, social, cultural, legal or reproductive - hindered family and community development, and perpetuated poverty. It also increased women's vulnerability to HIV, already with a high prevalence in both programme areas, and the widespread stigma associated with HIV and AIDS. This was combined with limited awareness of the law, with its provisions for gender equality and respect of human rights. Women in particular were often not aware of their rights, and even where they were informed, were not helped to assert them.

In Uganda, legal institutions include a hierarchy of decentralised Local Council Courts, which are established at the administrative levels known as villages, parishes and sub-counties, all with elected Local Councils. The village and parish Courts play an important role in the dispensation of justice in the community, but poor people's access to legal services in the programme areas was nevertheless limited: lawyers are expensive, other legal institutions such as magistrates' courts are distant and Local Council Courts often fail to provide justice because of limited legal knowledge, nepotism, bribery or the patriarchal values associated with the cultural context. Thus, the 2005 situation analysis showed that *"Local Council Court members take it personally if a person is dissatisfied with their ruling and seeks an appeal. [A group of widows in Kawempe] revealed what they go through: 'If you want to appeal a decision made in favour of your step-son to take over the property left behind by a husband, just leave the village.'*" Poor women affected by HIV and AIDS were doubly disadvantaged and vulnerable. Unsurprisingly therefore, the programme analysis indicated that women felt that their needs and aspirations seemed unattainable, resulting in resignation to their situation.

Another challenge stemmed from the legal framework. This included antiquated laws that neither reflected Uganda's obligations under various international agreements, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, nor the 1995 Constitutional provisions regarding non-discrimination, affirmative action for marginalised groups, equal opportunity regardless of sex or disability, and ownership of land and inheritance matters. For example, the Domestic Relations Bill was not enacted to redress imbalances in relations between the sexes and in marriage, and there was no specific law addressing gender-based violence, yet this was a major issue affecting women and their decision-making ability. Specific laws and policies concerning people affected by HIV and AIDS were also absent, forcing reliance on general human rights provisions.

Moreover, enforcement of the laws that were in place to ensure the protection and equal treatment of women and the marginalised, especially those affected by HIV and AIDS, was deficient, partly because of the culturally determined beliefs and attitudes of state officials and legal providers. The police, for instance,



Box 1: Coming from far and gaining step-by-step

- **Aida Nabirye** (above left) from Kamuli tells her story: *"I had always had problems with my husband. He was a drunkard and womaniser, which hurt me a lot. People used to say a woman's place is in the kitchen. Boys were taught to be tough, not to cry like women. A girl had to learn how to do house work: then, when she gets married, she would not find problems. We women used to spend most of the time in the fields. My husband would be in the trading centre and be drunk all the time. I could not even complain if he constantly beat me or brought another woman in the house. I would go to my parents and they would tell me to go back to my marriage and that "a woman must be patient". Justice to a woman meant reporting to elders and they would tell the husband to do the right thing - not mistreating a wife - and if he did so, that would be justice.*

"FIDA came; they elected community volunteers to teach us the law in the villages and this brought change. They sensitised people. Though there was women emancipation brought by government, it was in town. Here in our village it was FIDA. My husband at first had prevented me from attending information sessions because, he said, I would be taught to misbehave. My fellow women used to tell me what was taught by the volunteers. One day, I went and I was surprised to see my husband there. When we went home there was a fight but neighbours intervened. The next morning, John-Bosco and Agnes, two volunteers, came to our home. A friend had tipped them off. They told him about the law and my rights. The good thing is that he was sober that day so he understood everything they told him, he admitted his mistake and promised to reform. Of course he could only adjust little by little. His behaviour changed, he now pays school fees willingly and we farm together. When he sells produce, he shows me the money. He controls it but seeks my opinion on how to spend it."

usually determined that cases of domestic violence and inheritance were private family and civil matters and therefore not of their concern. Even in defilement cases, the victim's parents would be encouraged to settle out of court.

The Plan/FIDA programme

The goal of the programme has been to reduce the vulnerability of children, their families, and communities to the impact of HIV and AIDS. This is part of a larger initiative, called the *Reducing Community Vulnerability to HIV and AIDS programme* supported by the Australian Government. In Uganda, the intended primary beneficiaries have been young people affected by the epidemic, women living with HIV and AIDS and poor affected families.

Plan and FIDA chose to largely focus their efforts on the protection and enforcement of the legal rights of people affected by HIV and AIDS, an aspect that had not received much attention in the fight against the epidemic and its effects in Uganda. The programme in Kawempe and Kamuli, entitled *Legal rights for people affected by HIV and AIDS*, was intended to improve the well-being of people affected by HIV by securing the assets they possessed, reinforcing their entitlement to social and legal services, and enhancing their capacity to claim these entitlements. Improved protection of inheritance

and other property rights was in particular intended to enhance the resilience of women and children in families that had lost the head of household, usually the husband and father. The denial of the rights of women to participate in the decisions that affect them and their families was therefore a key area to address.

If the capacities of people affected by HIV and AIDS were to be raised to a level where they could assert their rights, as well as acknowledge and respond to the rights of others, the understanding of these rights by the general public also had to be enhanced. This was undertaken through information campaigns with community sessions, radio programmes, theatre, and pamphlets and posters on will-making and laws governing inheritance matters among other topics. The programme also supported birth and death registration.

Additionally, there was a need to provide legal services, such as legal counselling, representation in court and help with alternative dispute resolution proceedings. Relevant government and community leaders, including probation and social welfare officers, other government staff, cultural and religious leaders, the police, and local councillors, were also supported. The programme furthermore set out to apply its experiences for policy development and law reform. One of its key strategies to reach its beneficiaries however was the use of community volunteers, to which we now turn.

3. The Community Volunteers

In other Plan projects, community volunteers had proved effective in mobilising communities, in raising their awareness and in delivering legal aid. Consequently, the design of the *Legal Rights for People Affected by HIV/AIDS programme* placed much reliance on implementing activities through a cadre of volunteers.

Community volunteers and their selection

In Kawempe and Kamuli, community volunteers were expected to exhibit a sense of solidarity and a high level of commitment. They would be locally-rooted, know the context, and be able to identify with their clients and understand their problems. Programme plans envisaged that at least half of the volunteers would be women, with a 'deployment' of one woman and one man in each village or urban zone. Eventually, working in tandem with government institutions and civil society organisations whose capacity would also be developed, the volunteers would become a lasting community resource and contribute significantly to sustaining the outcomes of the programme, an important principle that informed the initial design work.

It was envisaged that the volunteers would mobilise communities and conduct simple legal awareness sessions; give immediate legal advice to those in need and, where necessary, resolve disputes within their ability, or refer clients to legal officers, programme offices or other appropriate institutions. They would work an average of 20 hours per month.

The volunteers were recruited among farmers, health counsellors and mobilisers, retired professionals, other residents and volunteers who had been previously associated with Plan projects.

Data collected in 2006 show that volunteers came forward for several reasons, the most prominent being a desire for recognition in their community, wanting to help the neighbourhood, and to gain experience and knowledge. In total, 168 volunteers were eventually recruited and trained. Sixty-eight were selected in Kawempe (46 of whom women), two for each of the 34 zones in the six parishes, with another 100 (48 women) for 15 parishes in Kamuli. They were nominated according to availability, willingness to serve their communities, permanent residence in the locality, and good character. Being literate and commanding local respect were also qualifying factors. It proved difficult to find women volunteers, especially in Kamuli and in the Muslim areas of Kawempe, as the cultural context was a hurdle and the residential format of the initial training proved a further obstacle for many. Several women however went forward because of their earlier interaction with Plan, for instance as members of community water committees or because of their involvement in HIV-related activities, such as post-test clubs. In contrast, in other areas of Kawempe, there were low numbers of men volunteers, as urban life requires a mobile, often employed male labour force.

The volunteers were selected on the recommendation of local residents, while others were elected: their names were proposed by those who knew them and believed in their abilities to deliver. As one volunteer points out, it was question of trust (Box 2). In Kawempe, names were forwarded to the Local Councils who put them before the residents to endorse. In Kamuli, volunteers described how the communities decided who would best serve them: through the Local Councils in villages and parishes, meetings were held to introduce the programme and the names of potential volunteers put forward by the community.

Box 2: Being selected as a community volunteer

- **John Bosco Mayinja** in Kawempe stressed the importance of trust as a selection criterion: *“It was a huge responsibility and a humbling experience when the community trusted us. It was hard to let them down after that gesture of trust.”*
- **Margaret Nakalema** (right), one of the volunteers in Kamuli, explains the selection criteria: *“One had to have been affected by HIV/AIDS; to be a resident of the area and, if a woman, one who had not left her marriage or not thinking of leaving soon. And you also had to be social with people. I was chosen because I qualified and other women feared coming out to stand. I was unopposed”.*



Support from the programme

Although the volunteers were based in their respective communities, they benefited from considerable support from the programme offices. According to the volunteers met for his study, this proved invaluable. It included training spread over several years, with annual refresher courses: this covered several areas of the law (such as aspects of the Children’s Act, relevant laws on domestic violence, will-writing and inheritance laws), court practices, registration of births and deaths, as well as awareness raising, communication, counselling and dispute resolution skills.

The training methods included lectures, role plays and questions and answers sessions, as well as placement for 3 or 4 weeks with various legal and other institutions, such as the Police, the probation offices, or the magistrates’ courts, to obtain practical skills. The training was accompanied by session plans for the field meetings, as well as facilitator’s notes, visual aids and other reference materials developed for the purpose. There were also frequent follow-up visits, review meetings and quarterly reflection events where further training and clarifications were given, as well as providing a platform to learn from each others’ experiences, to assess progress, and to identify solutions to challenges met.

Material support was also provided in the form of bicycles, gumboots, raincoats and umbrellas, and stationery to record activities. A monthly allowance of Uganda Shs 20,000/= (approximately US\$ 9) was paid to help the volunteers with stationery, bicycle repairs and other costs.

Volunteer work in practice

Day to day, the volunteers mobilised and held community legal awareness sessions, offered simple ‘first aid’ legal assistance, mediated and resolved disputes, assisted in will-writing and linked those in need with the programme offices, the police and other law enforcement agents. They helped FIDA to follow up certain cases and, where necessary, held meetings with clan leaders and Local Councils. They also distributed information materials, including forms for will-writing and simplified booklets on relevant laws and human right provisions.

In the first year of the programme, the volunteers were overwhelmed by the demand for their services and they ended up working almost daily. They reported that abuses in the community were so rampant that each handled at least two clients every day, and that there were also on occasion even approached at night. A 2006 study found that they would spend 7 to 15 hours weekly on

community work, rather than the anticipated 20 hours per month. However, with time and growing legal awareness, some clients started to handle the problems themselves or contacted relevant institutions unaided, since they had by then been advised on the appropriate office to approach.

Pressure on time was especially strong in urban Kawempe: although the volunteers' work there was similar to that in Kamuli (Box 3) - where apart from periods spent in their fields to grow their own food, the rest of the time was free to serve their community - volunteers in Kawempe, by contrast, were faced with the many competing demands of urban life, starting with having to find money to buy food. This however did not deter them: they mobilised the communities for all the awareness sessions that were organised and still found time to handle the individual cases. Over the years, community volunteers have held information sessions attended by thousands. In 9 months in 2009/10, for instance, they met with almost 16,000 people in Kamuli and 6,700 people in Kawempe.

The challenge of being a woman volunteer

Female volunteers have had a more challenging time than the men, although they worked just as hard. This partly stems from their domestic responsibilities: women are caretakers of their home, their children and even their husbands. One of them, Aida Wagodo, for instance says: *"The men have more time than women so, although we do the same work and have the same knowledge, we cannot do as much as they do because of many responsibilities."*

Some women were also reluctant to put themselves forward for volunteer selection, not only because of the cultural expectation that they should stay at home, but also because of a perception that any public involvement would expose them to the dangers of promiscuity. In addition, women volunteers were handicapped by their initial lack of self-confidence, arising from culture and socialisation: this affected their work, especially in the early period of the programme. Joseph Mwase, the volunteer coordinator in Kamuli, shares this observation (as well as common stereotypes): *"When we started, the women were shy and less effective. In our first year, they were not even willing to follow up a*



Box 3: A day in the life of a community volunteer

- **Richard Lubaale** (above), a community volunteer in Kamuli says: *"In a day, I wake up to do some farming or to attend to my other businesses because being a Community Volunteer is voluntary work so I have to sustain myself in other ways. I make a timetable to sensitise people, so even if you don't find a crowd, you sensitise them because that's what you planned for the day. I don't postpone because of low attendance. Cases come in the morning and at night. So an appointment cannot be postponed."*

"Sometimes it is challenging because I am a boda-boda (motorcycle taxi) rider - it's my business - when you make a programme to sensitise the community at 2pm for example, a customer may come at around 1.30 or 2pm and he/she wants to give you business. I give up the business at that time to attend to people because I don't want to get a bad name or to be seen as a non-serious uncommitted volunteer. I lose out on that business because I like what I do as a volunteer. But it is not easy to make such compromises because I have a responsibility for my family too".



Box 4: Woman volunteer : working with others

- Proscovia Nabirye (left), a volunteer in Kamuli, talks about the importance of programme review meetings and working with others: *“We have monthly review meetings to discuss what we have done, what we have failed to do or where there is a difficulty and discuss solutions. Among the solutions is not to do the work alone but to involve other volunteers. So whenever I have a dispute to settle, I invite volunteers from other zones, even from other parishes if they are available. This has made a change because people get to hear from other volunteers and they find out that what I teach them when I am alone is true.”*

case alone or to handle a mediation session alone without consulting a male volunteer. Even in terms of grasping issues, women were slow.”

As a result of these factors, male volunteers have handled more clients than their female counterparts but, in terms of efficiently handling clients and giving them appropriate advice, there was no evidence to suggest that men were any better than the women. The 2006 survey data however shows that women volunteers are more

likely to provide counselling services than the men, while their male counterparts are more likely to be involved in conflict resolution activities. Women volunteers also used the review meetings and their peer to overcome some of the obstacles they faced (Box 4) and, as we shall see, soon provided important role models for other women in the community. In so doing, they disproved the cultural perception of women being unable to perform the tasks the programme ascribed to them.

Programme support to the community volunteers has been all-important



A quarterly review meeting (right) and a support visit in Kamuli (2009)

4. Impact On Women's Decision-Making

The precise changes brought about by the programme in the ability of women to take decisions, and those changes that can specifically be attributed to the work of the community volunteers are not easily traced. This is because there are other factors (both linked to the programme and external to it) that contributed to change in the programme areas at the time. One for instance was the appearance of a radio station in Kamuli that gave women an opportunity to learn about national and global changes favouring women's rights (though some women were only tolerated listeners). Other NGOs also started working in these areas, some with a specific focus on women's rights. Finally, as an elder remarked, the level of education among women was also rising (Box 5). It was at the same time that Plan Uganda also supported other educational and health programmes in Kamuli and Kawempe.

It is however clear that the Plan/FIDA programme also significantly contributed to change. Interviews with programme staff, with community members who met the volunteers, and with the volunteers themselves indicated several areas of improvement related to women's decision-making powers. Some of these can be traced back to the community volunteers' involvement in legal information sessions, in making access to justice for women easier and, more generally, in helping raise women's self confidence, participation and ambitions.

Increased knowledge

Providing legal information was an important strategy adopted by the programme and volunteers played a vital role in mobilising and informing their communities. Volunteers went on house to house visits, went to churches and mosques and sensitised. They also used other opportunities, such as funerals, market places, social gatherings and community meetings. In 9 months in 2009/10, for instance, they met with almost 9,000 women in Kamuli and 3,600 in Kawempe.

This has awakened many women. For a start, volunteers contributed to increased knowledge about their rights to own land and to inherit

property. Volunteers have thus helped women realise that they can control resources and participate in decision-making, whether in the household or in the community, as much as men. Imam Kinyiri Hamuza, a religious leader in Kamuli says *"There has been some influence from those community volunteers. They insist when mobilising that people must go for community education. Every woman's attitude changed after attending; there is much awareness about legal rights. I know a lady, Sarah: she owns cattle and can decide what to do with them. Her husband is happy that she is hard working."*

Box 5: Women's growing self-confidence

- **Kenneth Bagimba Kaita Mabandha Lotan** (below) in Kamuli is the Clan Head of Bayisemuwayo, the Ensense Clan. He says: *"Today a woman chooses who to marry and she cannot be forced. Even some cultural requirements and rituals that used to be performed at death are no longer compulsory. A woman may choose to do them or not. The clan is no longer involved in distributing the property of the deceased people."* He adds that it is because of world-wide development trends, as well as more accessible education than before; Plan Uganda and other organisations have also contributed to changes. It is also because of politics: *"There are a number of women parliamentarians who have inspired other women and in many of the parishes where I am the clan leader, women are participating in politics"*. He concludes: *"Women are now treated fairly and this has helped them enjoy their rights: for example, in my family, I cannot allow them to be disinherited"*.



If women have gained knowledge, the same goes for some men. Even those who do not attend the sessions learn something from their wives who do, or from other participants. Many have been forced to change their behaviour, for instance when they marry several women and force them to share the same roof (Box 6). According to one of the women beneficiaries in Kawempe, *“Since I got to know that the family is ours, contrary to the tradition that the home and the children belong to the man, I started questioning the use of family resources. I asked the man how much he earns and why he wastes money on alcohol which we*

could use for family improvement. Now we have bought two plots of land together and my name is included on the title”.

The interviews underlined how keeping women ignorant was a form of control: as they gradually realised that they were equal human beings to men, that they were entitled to express themselves, to own assets and co-share responsibilities, they begun to assert these rights. Access to information has thus been decisive in helping women to protect their rights and to see some change in their homes.

Box 6: Helped to assert her rights

■ **Annet Babirye** (being interviewed, below) in Nawango Parish, Kamuli says *“I have been married for 23 years. After 12 years of marriage, my husband married another woman, then another and later another two. He brought them to live with me and we were four women living in the same house. This brought conflicts. Every time we were quarrelling and fighting among ourselves, our husband would instruct one of us to discipline the other and when we did not do this, he beat us himself. There was no peace in our home for very many years.*

“When FIDA came to teach us the first time, they talked about human dignity and about domestic violence. I continued to attend every session. Some sessions were facilitated by visitors too, but I liked everything they taught us. I decided that the situation in my house needed to change. I talked

to the volunteer in our area and he took me to the FIDA office in Kamuli and after narrating my story, the man was summoned and was instructed to separate us and to prepare a house for each one of us. This was two years ago. As of now, all the other women have left my house. He has built for two of them and the third lives in a rented house. It is hard to live with a man with so many wives, so I have to work very hard and take my children to school. In fact when one of our daughters was enticed by a man to leave school and got married at thirteen years, my husband consented after they had given him 400,000 shillings (US\$ 180) but I objected and insisted that she should go back to school, I invited the volunteer who talked to her and counseled her, she accepted and she is now in S.4 and in a boarding school and, because I started a small business, I can pay her school fees”.



Self-confidence and access to justice

Volunteers have also contributed to building the confidence of women to challenge the customary laws and abuses that undermine their worth and dignity. Women for instance now resist the sale of family land without their consent and get involved in controlling farm produce, thereby increasing their access to secure means of livelihood. Even the clan leaders agree that, because of the volunteers' work, 'property grabbing' is not as common as it was before the programme started. The sale of matrimonial homes by husbands is now also rare and resisted by women. Thus, a Kawempe resident, whose husband had acquired a loan from money lenders using their home as security, opposed having their home attached when he failed to pay. No sale was possible until an agreement was reached on the mode of repayment and the home was spared.

One reason for this change is that the volunteers have worked towards increasing women's confidence to seek legal assistance outside the family setting. During a nine-month period in 2009/10, for instance, volunteers have themselves handled 1,542 cases in Kamuli and 1,483 cases in Kawempe, mostly related to domestic violence, child neglect, and land disputes (in Kamuli). Volunteers have also increasingly taken decisions in 'property grabbing' cases and these are respected. One of them, Betty Mutegi, after narrating how she helped a mistreated wife to obtain justice from a bigamous husband observed: *"The husband apologised and agreed to build a separate house for the second wife. The community then took matters seriously- that was a good example and men don't want to be ashamed. Reporting them to the authorities is a shame."*

The constant community-based presence of volunteers has therefore provided alternative legal services and reduced delays and corruption when handling cases. Imam Hamuza put it directly: *"When FIDA came and put volunteers in the communities, it became easy for women to access justice. They go straight to the volunteers who don't take a coin and problems are solved immediately. How? Community volunteers settle the matter. If it is beyond them, they take the culprits to the police, to FIDA or to the Court."* They have also guided Local Council Courts and, by handling cases themselves, have reduced their

case loads. In Kawempe, Zamini Nsibambi, the local counsellor responsible for women's affairs observes: *"As far as legal issues were concerned, women had been so stigmatised by society: even though the Local Councils existed, a woman would rarely go there to have her problems heard. First society did not approve, secondly the council was composed of many men and she would feel shy to start telling her story. Moreover, some were asking for an unofficial 'filing fee' and most women were not working, so they did not have the money and would not go for legal assistance. The police was even worse; women would not take their problems there, especially those concerning their husbands. The work of the volunteers has indeed changed this situation"*.

One clan leader met in Kamuli also observed that, because volunteers are close to the community, local residents feel they are being watched and monitored, so the abuse of women's rights has decreased. The authorities representing the Administrator-General office in Kamuli estimated that 60% of the inheritance cases they handled in 2009 were referred by community volunteers. The policeman in charge of the family protection unit in Kamuli also noted a reduction in the crime rate in the programme area: *"These volunteers helped us prevent crimes. Domestic abuses reduced tremendously. When people come here to report cases they say they have been sent by community volunteers"*.

Economic empowerment

Women have always been responsible for the production of food for the family. Despite this, the type of food to be planted, where and in what proportions were men's decisions. All matters that involved income generation were also a man's preserve, including the sale of farm produce.

This has changed in the programme areas. With their growing self-confidence, some women are involved in generating income for their families and may have small businesses, such as running a shop, a beauty salon, having a market stall, and selling second-hand clothes.

Women now also recognise that the responsibility for the family and for raising children is shared by both spouses, but that they can also meet some of their own needs without having to ask their husbands. According to Joyce Bagala, a volunteer

in Kawempe, most women are now involved in increasing family incomes and they are now able to take more decisions regarding their health and that of their children because they can meet some of these expenses. She attributes this change to their work, sensitising the community together with the FIDA lawyers.

Women who have sought the services of community volunteers confirm this (Box 7) and say that they can also make wills, like the men. In Kawempe and Kamuli, over 9 months in 2009/10, volunteers helped will-writing on more than 1,100 occasions, helping 600 women in the process. This is a major breakthrough resulting from women's awareness of the opportunity to inherit property. As Proscovia Nabirye, a volunteer in Kamuli said: *"Whenever I call for a community meeting, I emphasise the importance of will-making, even for women. People used to think that making a will means dying the next day and women thought that a will is for men because they did not have any property rights. Now they all make their wills and some even bring them to me for safe keeping."*

Box 7: Women and increased decision-making abilities

- *These women were meeting to plan their group income generating activities, including weaving mats. When asked about their attitudes towards women's empowerment, they indicated that these have changed, thanks to the volunteers and the awareness raising sessions. A member of their group for instance resisted her brother-in law who wanted to take her as a wife against her will after the death of her husband and in spite of family pressure.*



Taking decisions and leading outside the home

Finally, through community volunteers, women have been encouraged to participate in development initiatives that are not necessarily related to the Plan and FIDA programme. This includes agricultural projects and micro-finance lending where the number of women participants is growing.

There is also more involvement in politics. Zamini Nsibambi in Kawempe again shares her view: *"Women were not joining politics, as this was seen as a preserve of men. Women who first became members of Local Councils were there as a legal requirement but in terms of participating in the Council's decisions; they did not contribute anything, only sitting to reach a quorum. Even myself, I was nominated because they wanted a general secretary and because I had done secretarial studies, they just gave me that post, I did not campaign".* Women now more frequently attend Local Council meetings and raise issues of concern, whether it is domestic violence or films encouraging children to miss school. The Councils sometimes follow these issues up and some cases are referred by them to the volunteers.

The District Chairperson of Kamuli also observed that, while a number of development projects that encourage women participation have been introduced in the country, the Plan/FIDA programme broke new ground, as some women who were reluctant to join were persuaded when they saw female volunteers being bold and even being consulted by men. They became role models in their communities (Box 8). He also believed that the volunteers contributed to disproving the notion that women cannot lead, adding that some are leaders in community, school and church projects: in this way, they are also recognised to be part of the whole community's development efforts. This, he stated, had been the result of the volunteers' training, counselling and encouraging women to participate in various activities.

Despite the fact that most women adhere to a religious faith, the decisions that relate to running religious affairs were also traditionally taken by men. Today however, there are also some changes: in most management committees of religious institutions, especially of the churches, women are represented and hold a decision-

making position. According to Lovinsa Kayaga, the Chairperson of Nawango Parish in Kamuli, largely because of the volunteers' sensitisation work, out of seven members on the parish management committee of their local church, three are women.

Box 8: Community volunteers acting as role models

- **Imam Kinyiri Hamuza**, a religious leader in Namisambya, Kamuli says: *"Rebecca Mukembo, is the chairperson of the church committee for development and women. She is also the vice chairperson of the school management committee. These female community volunteers are of course a point of reference for women. Seeing women become volunteers showed these other women that they can also be leaders and can speak before a big congregation and they can teach their fellow women."*
- **Margaret Nakalema**, in Nabirumba parish, Kamuli recalls: *"There was no respect for me because I have AIDS. I feared facing people because there was discrimination. No one wanted to associate with me. Now that I am a community volunteer, they listen to what I tell them. There was also sensitisation about the rights of people infected with HIV/AIDS. I became confident. Other women who feared coming out saw me and what I do. Their fear was removed. They now stand up for their rights"*.

Changes among community volunteers

What about impact on the women volunteers themselves? Exposure to new knowledge and experiences was a key form of support received from the programme. As a result, they said, they can now confidently access other institutions – such as the police, the probation officers, even the courts - for consultation and referral. Mentoring further empowered them and strengthened their confidence. A volunteer in Kamuli says that training built their confidence *"When you go to the village now and start talking about the law and what it entails, believe me they listen and abide by what you say. This was not the case before we joined FIDA."*

Joseph Mwase, the volunteers' coordinator in Kamuli adds: *"When female volunteers gained confidence to talk about their human rights,*

they became role models for other women in the community. Other women also started to want to change and be like them." By becoming examples, some of the volunteers have in turn become village consultants in matters of the law. As the local councillor, Lovinsa Kayaga for instance said, she consults the volunteers in her area in 80% of the cases she handles to seek a legal opinion.

Some volunteers have also become local leaders, including Local Council members in their villages and parishes. Among the 68 volunteers in Kawempe, no fewer than 18 women have become Local Council leaders. The figure for Kamuli is 11. In Kawempe, other volunteers were also recruited for the first time to serve as counsellors at the local government health centre because of their involvement in the programme.

This has not been easy for the women volunteers (Box 9): before joining the programme, more than half were housewives but all of them are now engaged in some income generating activity to improve household incomes after negotiating with their spouses.

Challenges

As one might expect, the volunteers also faced challenges that limited the impact of their work. Some were of a practical nature: a number complained of worn-out bicycles, the need for new raincoats, and the small monthly allowance in comparison with the costs involved to effectively do their work. Nevertheless, partly thanks to their careful selection, all the volunteers stayed the course of the programme, although 6 sadly passed away (all were replaced; in the case of men by their spouses who had become well-informed in the meantime).

Volunteers have also been victim of their own effectiveness and the great demand for legal services: this is especially the case in Kamuli where legal aid was initially provided through the programme office, then over time by the volunteers and other trained resource persons, clan and local council leaders. A number of clients therefore come from within and outside the programme areas and we noted above that many volunteers ended up working at all times of the day, and even at night. A volunteer remarked: *"Some clients call at night expecting you to run to their rescue; when we refer cases to the police, people come back to us, the*

Box 9: Community volunteers undergoing changes

- **Aida Wagodo** (below, being interviewed) a community volunteer in Kamuli talks of her achievements: *“I am a leader myself - a treasurer for the Village Council and Secretary for the Parish Council. If I were not a community volunteer, I think I would not be courageous enough to stand for any council position. Because I have AIDS, I always feared to say anything in the community and I always kept at home. When we were taught about the law, this helped me much. I was introduced as a leader, that’s where my involvement in community issues began. Now women come to me if they want to start up something: a small business or when wanting to sell their produce, they ask me the best thing to do. I have been a point of reference for other women and the community at large. Women come to me for counselling, advice and to settle their disputes”.*
- **Margaret Nakalema** is a volunteer in Kamuli: *“The first success is with myself. Two years ago I had misunderstandings with my husband. He used to see me as a threat because I was informed and taught communities about their rights. He opposed everything I did and used to say that I have other men because I go far to do FIDA work. He then denied being a father of my children. He spread this rumour to the village. I felt bad. We went very far until I took him to court. He was told to have DNA tests. It was found that the children were his. He apologised and now we’re OK. I regained my respect. He now supports whatever I do and he even helps me out. I have become a secretary for environment at the Village Council and a Council Secretary for the Parish”*



police needs money and they are poor; people outside the programme area come to us to be served and they insist”.

This success may also explain the initial reluctance of local councillors towards the programme: they felt that their posts were being taken over by the volunteers, they could no longer charge a fee, and some volunteers (especially men) were seen as potential political competitors. Some volunteers have also spurned team work, which limits information sharing and collaboration amongst themselves. However, with continuous review meetings and open discussions, this attitude gradually changed.

More importantly, culturally ascribed gender roles change slowly, and need more intensive, longer-term efforts than a 6-year programme can provide, even in the relatively geographically limited programme areas (Box 10). Indeed, most women have been socialised in a patriarchal society and have deeply integrated traditional gender roles and values. In these circumstances, a self-made, self-taught feminist woman is exceptional. A few sessions to raise gender awareness as part of women’s leadership training may therefore not always be sufficient. Agnes Nalumansi, the acting Town Clerk in Kamuli for instance observed that housewives take loans from micro-finance institutions and are responsible for the repayment, but men often take the money and use it as they wish. In terms of economic control, women, she said, therefore still have a long way to go: *“Culture takes men as the family heads. Even where women contribute a larger share of home maintenance, it is never seen as a woman’s contribution, it is always attributed to a man, so he has to show that he is the head and he has to exercise his power by controlling even what a woman produces.”* In terms of resource ownership, it has similarly been observed that if a woman buys land and puts it in her own names, this raises suspicion that she wants to separate or divorce, a reason for men to insist on controlling land, and even the proceeds from crop sales. When women get seeds and other support from a government programme, they sometimes therefore still fear to fully access these services without their husbands’ authorisation.

Changes are also gradual with regard to reproductive health. In Kawempe, for instance, unmarried women have a say in family planning issues, but wives find resistance from their husbands and, if they succeed, their spouse

may marry other women who are willing to give them children. For Hajat Watongola, a District Women Councillor in Kamuli, *“men have the final say in terms of sexual and reproductive matters. A woman cannot freely negotiate for safer sex or the size of the family. Although there is less domestic violence, it is still there. We still have cases of defilement and child abuse like early marriages. We still need more sensitisation and the community volunteers really still need support in order to remain as active.”*

While cultural values also explain men's continued reluctance to engage fully with the programme, a number of them expected financial gain from attending the awareness sessions. But there were other reasons too: as one volunteer said, *“In all the awareness sessions men are just dragged in, while others just refuse to attend. It is because they abuse women and they don't want to change their behaviour.”* In Kamuli, another volunteer shared a similar view: *“We were threatened by men who said that we break up marriages; that women who are sensitised disobey their husbands. When men see women volunteers in the community, they say we help women take their properties.”* Such constraints were also linked to the perception of the programme, especially in the early years: *“We had a big task of correcting the misconception*

that FIDA is a women's thing and this still is not completely gone. So some men shun the activities because they believe only women will benefit”. As time went by, however, with sensitisation and some men benefiting from the programme, the perception started to change.

Some constraints were also associated with the particular circumstances of a programme area: Kawempe, for instance, is a low-income area with a mixed population, with different cultural beliefs and practices. What would be accepted in one ethnic group is not accepted in another and this diversity had to be understood by the volunteers. This was different in Kamuli where everyone shares similar cultural values.

Finally, many legal provisions contradict cultural beliefs and practices; and reconciling them did not prove easy for the volunteers. They found the programme agenda a challenge in the first place since they emerged from the very same cultural context: *“Winning the trust of the communities was not so easy. These are the people we had lived with for a very long time and we believed in the same things. So seeing us change all of a sudden and telling them to do things differently was not an easy task and it was a limitation especially at the beginning”*, says Joseph Mwase, the volunteer coordinator in Kamuli.



Box 10: Traditions are still an obstacle...

- **Fredrick Mbuga** (left), a child advocate in Kamuli, says that although much has changed, traditions ascribing gender roles are still having a hold, especially on men:

“Women are becoming more financially literate but the men have not yet appreciated this level of shift in responsibilities so they shun most of the development and other income generating projects which are now helping women to contribute more financially and this may lead to conflicts in the homes”.

5. Lessons Learnt

The resilience and evolution of the local cultural context

The programme experience showed that getting women involved as volunteers, especially in Kamuli, was sometimes difficult, mainly because of a cultural context that did not encourage them to participate in community activities and that had deprived them of the minimal education level needed to be selected. An understanding of this context and its dynamic nature therefore proved essential. Equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice but communities can see this equality as an impossible goal. Men keep saying that a man is a man and can never be equal to a woman in any aspect of life. Some women agree, as they have been socialised into traditional roles which they cannot easily change. The weight of women in community decision-making is therefore still small. Much as they have a right to participate in decisions that define their lives, when their husbands accept their involvement in economic and other activities, wives still often see this as a privilege given to them. Nevertheless, those met agreed that the community volunteers encouraged them to come out, to say what they want and to become visible forces of change.

Sensitisation in the community therefore needs to be long-term and inclusive of all. Awareness leads to confidence, it does not come in the first sessions. Information and sensitisation campaigns will in all probability need to be sustained for some years yet, and target household heads, clan leaders and elders. These duty bearers are central in upholding human rights and once they are won over, the likelihood of success is higher. As the District Chairperson in Kamuli noted, some men feel they are losing their power, leading to the resentment of any project that is threatening their privileges, and even resulting in domestic violence.

The efficacy of the volunteer approach

The programme was designed to greatly rely on community volunteers, especially for community mobilisation and information, follow-ups and referrals. The volunteers were an available resource that could be harnessed, thanks to their knowledge of the local environment and sense of solidarity, and thus reinforce work with people in position of authority, whether clan or local council leaders, the police and other government staff.

There is evidence that these design assumptions proved to a great extent correct. Most importantly, the volunteers provided a local link and local understanding: to reach the community, there was a need for an entry point, using people who knew the context and in whom the people believed. Zamini Nsibambi in Kawempe says: *“The use of community volunteers in the programme was a well thought-out approach. The communities have their own dynamics and in order to fit, you need a good introduction, which the volunteers had. They introduced the programme and they educated the residents to accept it and this contributed to its success.”* Community involvement was another aspect emphasised in the programme design and the residents indeed selected their own volunteers. Hajat Rehema Watongola thus says: *“Having volunteers, who were as common as anybody in the community, come to teach about human rights and human dignity also helped many to change.”* And they provided a permanent presence: a village council chairperson in Butabala, Kamuli remarks: *“While other organisations conducted activities like human rights awareness, they would come for a few days and then leave and come back after some other time, which was ineffective.”*

There were other factors for success too. One was the consistent support given to the volunteers, with regular re-training and collaboration from the professional and accessible programme staff. All the volunteers interviewed exhibited knowledge of their roles and responsibilities: *“The continuous*

training by FIDA empowered us to understand the law and to use it to empower communities. We can now see the changes that are happening because of our work", boasted Mr Kasiribiti of Kawempe. The continuous follow-up and reflections allowed for further sharing of experiences. The working relationship was productive and strengthened the volunteers' confidence, until they became a reference points in their communities, whose advice was sought, including by Local Councillors when handling matters in their courts. The training and other communications materials also provided information for further reference and kept the minds of the volunteers alert. According to Ann Nayiga, a volunteer in Kawempe, these materials have been of great help, especially now that the programme offices have closed.

Another contributory factor was the involvement of men in the programme, including influential male office-holders and cultural leaders. The decision at the outset to embrace men as community volunteers paid off, and evidence suggests that men are more effective in dealing with men, and women with women.

Third, the collaborative referral system was crucial to ensure the volunteers' effectiveness. The programme introduced them to the different law enforcement agents, including the police and Local Council leaders, and the volunteers recognised the importance of working with them. One of the clan heads in Kamuli for instance remarked that cultural leaders are now more respectful of women's rights than before, because of their constant interaction with the volunteers. Volunteers have found it fairly easy to refer cases, even to the courts. Paul Kavuma, a volunteer in Kawempe, also observes that being a link between communities and other service providers resulted in clients referred by the volunteers to these institutions being given adequate attention. Lovinsa Kayaga in Kamuli gives an example of this effective networking: *"In most of the cases I handle, I seek the volunteers' advice and sometimes call them and we handle the matter together. After they were trained, justice became possible for the woman because they were unbiased and objective. Many women have learnt to speak, the volunteers' awareness sessions encourage them because some of these volunteers are women and when they speak, men in the audience listen"*.

Several respondents pointed out the link with enforcement. According to the Kamuli District Chairperson, *"Although there had been some human rights training in Kamuli, the FIDA Programme brought in the enforcement aspect: if one abused another's right, the provisions of the law would actually be enforced, even by going to court. This helps, especially in terms of child rights and inheritance. It also gave the women confidence that there were laws that actually protected them, rather than culture alone. It is not enough to give knowledge without providing the means to enjoy and protect such rights in a practical manner, which the volunteers and the programme staff provided and this created the difference"*. Fredric Mbuga, a Child Care Advocate in Kamuli shares a similar feeling: *"Because volunteers are available and the communities know that they are knowledgeable in matters of law, they listen to them and this has even made some men change their behaviour for fear of being taken to the volunteers"*.

Prospects for sustainability

The programme also worked on the assumption that volunteers would eventually constitute a community resource that would contribute significantly to sustaining its outcomes. Once there was a critical mass of community resource persons with knowledge of the law and legal rights of people affected by HIV and AIDS, then activities such as will-making and dispute resolution in the community would be sustained.

With the programme closing, is this likely to happen? While duty bearers and community volunteers may currently be active and supportive, it is not easy to predict their future attitude and enthusiasm and whether the Government will provide the necessary financial resources, as its involvement has so far mostly been in respect to the referral system. In future, it is likely that Government will have to be continuously lobbied to provide equitable access to justice at the local level. Nevertheless, the programme worked in close collaboration with other institutions and these will hopefully continue to provide a point of contact for the volunteers and the community at large.

All the same, there are signs that the motivation of some of the volunteers may diminish with time.

This may in part reflect what was noted above as a contributory factor for programme success, the strong linkage between the volunteers and the programme offices. While, on the one hand, some volunteers will continue because of their dedication, their political ambitions, or their desire for respect and recognition, and while it is possible that they will receive support from other projects, an important link in the referral system will have been severed. Questions and fears unsurprisingly emerge: as one volunteer observed, *“These days without FIDA it is hard to refer difficult cases”*. The volunteers interviewed also expressed concern about not being able to meet the transport costs to follow up cases or to accompany clients who do not have the knowledge or confidence to approach legal service providers on their own. Another fear

stems from an aspect of the mobilisation method used: providing refreshments to the information session participants, although a wonderful tool for bringing people together, created a sense of dependence in those who felt that the refreshments were their entitlement. As a result, as one volunteer said, *“These days without FIDA, when we mobilise for awareness raising, we get a low turn up. It is because FIDA used to come with soft drinks and snacks. They expect us to do the same.”* A third issue concerns the volunteers’ allowance: when asked if they will continue their work when the allowance is no longer paid, many responded that they would, but outreach work would have to be scaled down, as they would have to buy stationary and sometimes pay for transport costs.

Box 11: The Kawempe Legal Rights Initiative: Preparing for the future

The community-based organisation formed by the volunteers in Kawempe to take their work forward is called the Kawempe Legal Rights Initiative. Registered in April 2010, the Initiative is composed of 68 volunteers, 46 of whom women. Membership is open to all the volunteers in Kawempe, provided they pay a membership fee of 20,000/= (9 USD) and a monthly subscription of 2000/= (90 US Cents), to cover some of the office costs, such as transport and stationery. The Initiative also includes local government officials, such as the Probation and Social Welfare Officer, a representative from the Police Family Protection Unit and from the Family and Children’s Court, and representatives from the local councils. These have strengthened the organisation’s local legitimacy and referral network.

The volunteers are motivated to pursue their work because, they said, the knowledge they have acquired during the programme period must not be put waste and having an organisation to carry on is, in their view, a good way to ensure sustainability. Secondly, some of the members are aspiring politicians and this is a good way to become known and to keep in touch with potential voters.

The Initiative is now locally known; it has begun to handle cases and offers mediation services. In the last month, 18 cases have been handled at the office, in addition to ‘field’ cases. The office in Kawempe, with equipment and furniture donated by Plan, is open every week day. The volunteers have developed a roster so that each one provides one day per month to attend to clients at the office.

The Initiative is also registered with the Legal Aid Service Providers Network (LASPNET) and it has established a working relationship with other institutions, including the police, the courts and other LASPNET members, where cases can be referred. Other partnerships are being developed: members have participated in a national Legal Aid open week and are soon signing an agreement with a local organisation that offers psycho-social support to vulnerable families. Future activities include carrying out awareness sessions in the communities, conducting mobile clinics, and resource mobilisation for the organisation itself.

The Initiative is not without meeting challenges. The degree of competence among the volunteers is uneven although, because they work together, they are able to learn from one another. Time to attend to clients is limited, there is a need to *“find money for survival”* and some members do not attend to their responsibilities regularly. Covering transport costs to visit clients and to follow up cases is also a problem: *“we find that sometimes we just write to the Local Councils and in some cases we do not get feedback from clients. The clients expect us to work like lawyers and when we refer the cases, they feel they have not been helped.”* Raising the monthly office rent of 100,000/= (USD 45) is also a challenge: the members plan to acquire tents and plastic chairs for hire, using the subscription fees, as a temporary income earner as they prepare to write funding proposals. But there is optimism: *“We hope to build this into a big organisation one day and this also motivates us to work hard.”*



Costa Nakimuli handling a client at the Legal rights Initiative office in Kawempe



Two Kawempe volunteers at the national legal aid week.

Secondly, a degree of dependence on the programme legal staff affected some volunteers' ability to be independent, especially in the early years of the programme. It was then difficult for a person not empowered to handle simple cases without consultation and to have the creativity to find solutions appropriate to the community's context. At the beginning, even cases that were straightforward as far as the law is concerned, proved complex in terms of the social and cultural environment, and the use of mediation and alternative dispute resolution was new. With time, the programme ensured that the volunteers received further training from a professional legal training centre and become better equipped to handle cases. Their secondment to legal and other institutions to acquire hands-on experience in handling different cases also increased their confidence.

On the positive side too, the volunteers have formed themselves into local organisations to continue providing services (Box 11). Plan helped to obtain support to draft their constitution and to register, and they have joined the Legal Aid Service Providers' Network (formed by a group of non-governmental organisations) to access the funding that supports its members. The limited life span of the programme could however have

been better communicated to the volunteers at the outset and managing the programme to ensure sustainability proved at times difficult, partly because of partnership challenges between Plan and FIDA and partly because volunteers' organisations were not part of the original programme design. They were therefore not formed in the early years of the programme period and planning for them only started in 2007. While this may not constitute an lasting obstacle, the organisation in Kamuli has only just acquired an office (to be financed through members' monthly contributions). In Kawempe the organisation has an office but lacks funds to meet its field transport costs. Mr Kasiribiti, one of the founders and president of the Kawempe organisation, says that it is hard to run such an office without funds but membership contributions help and there are plans to launch a fundraising drive.

Such organisations may well prove an important instrument for sustaining the programme achievements. A learning point is to incorporate such a strategy at the outset. This would allow volunteers to be further supported towards sustaining their work beyond the programme lifespan, to build their confidence and prepare them to handle tasks with less support than hitherto, with competence and assurance.

6. Conclusion

Community volunteers, working with other service providers, have proved an effective strategy to bring about change in both Kamuli and Kawempe. The volunteers themselves expressed a sense of satisfaction at having contributed to this. As one said, *“The work is so involving but we enjoy it”*.

Volunteers were not the only factor for change, and neither was the Plan/FIDA programme, but they played a vital role. They raised awareness of legal rights, they became local consultants in will-making and birth and death registration, they became village arbitrators, and, thanks to their confidence and self-esteem, they became important role models. Their careful selection, their local reputation and willingness to learn, and the consistent support given to them, all contributed to their success. The collaborative referral system was also essential to ensure the volunteers' effectiveness.

Access to information appears to have unlocked the situation in which many women had found themselves and has led to their enhanced participation in decision-making in the family and the community, in different aspects that affect them, including financial decisions, controlling family assets, fully participating in children's

welfare and refusing sexual and other forms of exploitation. Working with men, whether decision-makers or volunteers, also contributed to programme success. Hence the evidence of increased acceptance of these changes by men, including men in position of authority, such as local councillors, government officials, and clan heads who (in Kamuli) are the custodians of cultural values and customs.

An understanding of the local cultural context and its dynamic nature, of power relations in all institutions of society, from the family to the holders of public office, therefore proved all-important. Further, the type of change sought by the programme could only be achieved through sustained and wide ranging efforts. Sensitisation in the community was long-term and all-encompassing, but change can only be incremental. Continuous sensitisation leads to confidence, and information and awareness campaigns will still be needed, particularly for household heads, elders and clan leaders, whose support is vital to uphold people's rights. In future, volunteers may indeed become an important pillar of a strategy to sustain the results of a necessarily long-term initiative to address the deep-seated causes of gender inequity.

Community volunteers at work



Eron Mugalu, a volunteer in Kawempe, assisting a woman client, victim of severe abuse.



Community volunteers in Kamuli.

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