

Mainstreaming Gender and HIV/AIDS in environment

IUCN strengthens capacity of members and staff

August 23, 2005

The HIV/AIDS epidemic is undermining southern Africa's capacity to manage biodiversity. HIV/AIDS has not spared anyone – from protected areas managers, conservation organizations' staff, communities alike – and now, as is becoming clear, the environment. As AIDS-affected households lose income earners and capacity for agricultural labour, they are increasingly turning to natural resources both for the market and as a source of food. Within the rural areas of southern Africa, there is an additional problem: the participation of women in decisions on the environment is still weak. Yet, women are also the ones most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. That is creating an imbalance that requires urgent checking.

The World Conservation Union Regional Office for Southern Africa is currently hosting a five-day training course on gender and HIV/AIDS mainstreaming as part of efforts to address this situation. The training is aimed at equipping IUCN staff and members in the region with the skills to deal with gender issues and to report on and collect gender disaggregated data. The training will touch on HIV/AIDS awareness, mainstreaming in wetlands and natural resources management, among others. The HIV/AIDS pandemic is affecting the way staff work and it is therefore essential for development practitioners to be able to identify HIV/AIDS issues and learn how to deal with them when implementing projects.

According to the World Conservation Union project manager and workshop organizer, Wilson Mhlanga, gender plays a fundamental role in the formulation, planning, execution and monitoring of development policies and projects for local, national and regional progress, and in the management and conservation of natural resources. Women contribute a significant proportion of the labor in rural areas; they are involved in harvesting of wild species, they provide most labor for agriculture, and carry out other duties related to family sustenance. It is important therefore for any project that seeks to improve people's livelihoods to pay attention to the role that women can and often play. In addition, women appear to be disproportionately vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. The roles and responsibilities of the women merit special attention in the fight against the disease, and southern Africa's capacity to look after her biodiversity.

Mainstreaming gender and HIV/AIDS is therefore an important part of project implementation. Within the World Conservation Union, gender mainstreaming is an ongoing process, which started in 2002 with support from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The project focuses on mainstreaming gender within the Union targeting Secretariat staff and World Conservation Union members.

By Caroline Gwature