



From Geneva to Kampala:

# Isis WICCE Continues to Bring Women Together

by Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng

**I**t is a well-known fact worldwide that Isis is one of the oldest and most productive women's organisations since the 1970s, when it joined other organisations to spearhead women's emancipation. Isis visualised that effective communication enhances change of attitudes since it builds women's trust in their own ability to make decisions. Access to information, ideas, means of expression and solidarity action can enable women to participate actively in searching for solutions to common problems as perceived and defined by them.

Even after two decades of work, the vision remains valid especially to women in the developing world. This has prompted Isis to evolve and grow.

In 1983, that part of Isis which remained in Geneva adopted a new programme that has since become a vibrant aspect of its activities. The Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange (WICCE) programme brings women together from various cultural set-ups to share ideas and experiences in order to break the isolation of women from different parts of the world.

Isis-WICCE moved to Africa in November 1993, thus becoming more familiar with the position and status of African women and getting more involved with women's networks and organisations on the continent.

Being an information and communication service organisation, Isis-WICCE holds to the vision of building a well-informed and gender-sensitive society where women are empowered. Various strategies,

ly. Thus, after a decade of existence, it undertook a process of self-diagnosis and strategy reformulation. The long and exhaustive phase of developing the organisation helped Isis-

programme to fulfil its mandate and have an impact on all targeted groups, as well as to keep abreast of the changing environment in the women's movement, and enable it to create stronger networks.

One major innovation allows the participants in three-week workshops to have hands-on practical experience in their own situation after capacity-building inputs on an identified theme. This strategy has been found not only to be useful to the participants but to their countries of origin and to Isis-WICCE as well. It has been very successful in enabling the organisation to document women's experiences in different circumstances, thus developing indigenous information about women in Africa and other developing regions.

Uganda in particular is a country that has gone through turbulence of conflict and this has brought about disunity among our communities. In the future, a local exchange will be introduced that will give rural Ugandan women an opportunity to share experiences with one another, understand each other's plight and together strategise for a positive way forward for their communities and the country at large. The thinking behind this plan is to demystify the present belief among communities that certain communities are favoured while others are ignored. But this is not the reality in most cases, as far as rural communities are concerned. From the experience of Isis-WICCE's activities here, all rural women in Uganda face similar problems: domestic violence,



1998 Exchange Programme. Women from other parts of the developing world travelled to one of the rural areas (Luwero District) in Uganda to share their experience.

including the exchange of skills and experiences, documenting women's lives, information gathering, producing and sharing as well as networking, pursue that vision.

Since the move to Africa, Isis-WICCE has been faced with unique challenges. These have to do with, for example, patriarchal structures, the high illiteracy rate among African women, inadequate methods available for communicating relevant information to women, language of communication, and the lack of indigenous information among the collection acquired by the organisation since its inception.

The new situation therefore called for Isis-WICCE to review its mandate and commitments in order to work more effective-

WICCE to reflect on its core values and see more clearly how it could relate to the needs of women in Africa, particularly in Uganda. It also helped Isis-WICCE to analyse its internal and external processes in building programmes that have relevance to local situations and at the same time maintain its international outlook.<sup>1</sup>

After the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 which stipulated the declaration and platform for action for the empowerment of women, Isis-WICCE rightly perceived the recommendations reached as the "Covenant for the New Millennium"<sup>2</sup>

#### EXCHANGE PROGRAMME

The structure of the Exchange Programme was reviewed in order for the

poverty due to continuous conflict, lack of clean water, failure to educate their children and worst of all, poor reproductive health. At the same time, as women on whom the country's food security and family depend, they share in the responsibility to build up a more united country.

The Exchange Programme has initiated a monthly dialogue in which issues of concern to women in Uganda, particularly women's rights, are discussed. This activity aims to raise awareness on issues which in many cases have already surfaced, but whose impact upon effective national development has not been sufficiently reflected upon. Isis-WICCE also plans to move these discussions to rural communities where ideas need to be exchanged on the meaning of concepts such as "empowerment of women," "engendering of policies and guidelines that concern communities," "equality," among others.

This rural strategy is planned in collaboration with other women organisations, rural women's groups, community-based organisations, development agencies as well as local government councils.

#### INFORMATION AND DOCUMENTATION PROGRAMME

As indicated earlier, the founders of Isis perceived information as the core vision that would help women uplift their status. It has remained the heart of Isis-WICCE's activities since all programmes are centered on the issue of knowledge and skills as these relate to the ability to access information.

One of the main reasons for the move to Uganda was to tap the voices of the African wo-

men, in order to integrate them in the global women's movement. This became Isis-WICCE's most complex challenge: to start the documentation of women's lives as a mechanism of getting their voices heard. Isis-WICCE explored a new landscape by involving the women themselves in documenting of their own lives. This enabled them to appreciate that the exercise is for their own benefit since the production of their "voices" (infor-

attain their self-determination. War exacts a heavy toll on the physical, mental and psychological health of women. Together with other women's organisations both in Uganda and Africa, Isis-WICCE expects to launch a consultative effort that will lobby and advocate support for these women. Isis-WICCE plans to have a regional training institute where women's community leaders and trainers' trainers would learn skills that would help



After relocating to Uganda, Isis-WICCE realised that women's achievements were not visible. Isis-WICCE started an annual activity to recognise women's achievements. Hon. Margaret Babadiri was being recognised for the work she has done for women with disability in Uganda. Ms. Valsa Verghese, International Board member, handed her the trophy.

mation) would be in their own languages and about their own experiences and thus useful to them. The initial documentation focuses on Ugandan women's experiences in armed conflicts.

The findings from one of the affected communities have already given substance for Isis-WICCE to consider if the objective is for African women, and Ugandans in particular, to

them support victims in their own localities.

Accordingly, an antiwar coalition is being proposed by Isis-WICCE along with groups of women in similar situations (mainly from West Africa). The objectives of this coalition would be to:

- ◆ put pressure on states, through solidarity with other agencies, to end the prevailing war;



- ◆ lobby for support for women in the country that is in conflict;
- ◆ assist in training and developing sensitisation programmes;
- ◆ popularise women's rights and the gendered nature of problems that women face during and after the armed conflict; and
- ◆ collect, process, and disseminate information that would help in addressing the problem.<sup>3</sup>

Another major activity is the creation of effective, conducive and affordable mechanisms of disseminating information locally, regionally and internationally. In this regard, Isis-WICCE has been faced with the challenge of reaching illiterate and disadvantaged groups in rural Africa where community media are lacking in most parts. It has been found necessary to initiate rural information units as pilot projects. Here tape recorders are made available so that rural women can record their views and share these with other communities as well as the general public through the mainstream media.

Isis-WICCE plans to progressively introduce new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to enhance the accessibility and visibility of rural women's experiences in Uganda and Africa in general. It is within this framework that Isis-WICCE needs to seek out relevant partners to identify and create effective means of making this possible. Partners at the community level would participate more in terms of content and of course give communities the chance to be directly involved in processing, producing and disseminating

information. Isis-WICCE's future direction in this matter looks promising, with the various initiatives taking place at all levels to help women organisations make their voices visible and accessible through an affordable and efficient means of communication. Therefore, the strategy is to use integrated channels of communication.

#### PUBLICATION PROGRAMME

A lot of information on African women is being generated by Isis-WICCE and other women's organisations in the continent. This is received in various formats, i.e., through ICTs, visual, audio and print. Since we have three levels of clientele (national, regional and international) the future direction of the programme is to effectively reach out to all of them. The publication programme remains a mouthpiece for Isis-WICCE and its production will be shared with the rest of the world through our website <<http://www.isis.or.ug>>. Meanwhile, the publication programme continues to repackage information in forms that suit our clientele, i.e., radio programmes, talk shows, video programming as well as simplified booklets, using information acquired through local generation and through the new information and communication technologies (Internet).

It is important however, to note that women in Uganda still have not interacted much with the new information and communication technologies. Even those living in cities have not had the opportunity to get near a computer and therefore, they do not relate the technology to their well-being. In the future, Isis-WICCE plans to

open an Internet café where women from all walks of life can have hands-on basic training in the use of ICTs. The strategy is also aimed at:

- ◆ encouraging women to use ICTs;
- ◆ enabling them to receive and send messages worldwide; and
- ◆ demystifying fears of the technology.



#### CONCLUSION

If women hold up half the sky why can't they have the opportunity and the right to freedom of opinion and expression, as well as to gain access to valuable information that can promote their self-determination? ♪

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<sup>1</sup> Isis-WICCE Change Process and Strategy Formulation: OD Intervention Report. 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Covenant for the New Millennium: The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. California, USA, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> The Aftermath: Women in post-war coalition. June 1999.