

ABDALAH OVERCOMES THE ODDS

THE SUCCESS OF A PHE PROVIDER IN EDUCATING A MUSLIM COMMUNITY

“Now, people can plan their families and know how to use a condom,” says Abdalah Masingano as he proudly tells how his community has come to accept integrated population-health-environment (PHE) activities.

The 35 year-old Abdalah is a PHE Provider. He lives nearby the Saadani National Park (SANAPA)—one of Tanzania’s newest and the only terrestrial park with a contiguous marine area in southeastern Tanzania. Saadani is home to the rare Roosevelt Sable antelope and the nesting ground for several endangered species of marine turtles. One of the largest threats to biodiversity in this area is the clearing of mangroves and coastal forests for firewood and charcoal making. About 95% of households in the area depend on firewood for cooking, and most use a three-stone fireplace that utilizes only about 10% of the energy potential. These are just some of many pressures that people living around the Park place on the biodiversity rich forest and marine resources of the area.

Abdalah and his 31 year-old wife have two children—a 14 year-old boy, and a six year-old girl. His wife has been on the pill for four years. For two years now, Abdalah has been selling condoms in his village store. He made this decision for simple reasons—he saw that people needed condoms for both family planning and health, and he had come to understand the linkages between the behaviors of people living in the area and the health of the environment.

Abdalah gained this understanding when he was recruited to become a PHE Provider by the Tanzania Coastal Management Partnership as part of its work through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)-supported BALANCED



A traditional three-stone stove. Photo by Elin Torell

Project, which is promoting PHE implementation in biodiversity rich countries. In a two-day training Abdalah learned about integrated PHE and the links between population (family planning), health, and the environment. He has been educating villagers ever since.

“In the past, it was difficult for people to plan their families because they were embarrassed,” recalls Abdalah. As a PHE Provider, Abdalah delivers integrated PHE messages to his fellow villagers. After attending the BALANCED training, Abdalah learned that promoting family planning makes sense for reasons beyond health. Forest and marine resources found both around and inside the Saadani are heavily exploited by local villages—and from a biodiversity conservation perspective, reducing population pressures is just one critical step in protecting this biodiversity.

When people visit his shop, Abdalah takes the opportunity to explain the population and environment connection. Because deforestation is a particular problem in the area where Abdalah lives and works, he promotes the use of fuel efficient stoves.



Abdalah showing a box of condoms for sale in his small shop. Photo by Juma Dyegula

Showcasing his own stove, he explains that by using a simple clay stove—which is made locally—a household can save almost 1.5 tons of fuel wood annually and reduce by 50% the time women spend collecting fuel wood. At the same time, he reminds villagers that when they plan their families they help keep mothers and children healthy. Healthier families also tend to put fewer pressures on—and thus keep healthier—the very natural resources they depend on for food and income.

Initially, Abdalah’s Muslim neighbors were unhappy with him promoting family planning and condom use. They believed what he was doing encouraged sex and prostitution. “They thought

I was lost,” he explains smiling. Fortunately, his wife has been very supportive of him despite the discouraging reactions of his fellow villagers early on in his efforts. Today, Abdalah’s perseverance has paid off. He now sells more than 200 condoms monthly and takes the time to demonstrate to his customers how to use them properly. When there is the opportunity, he also refers his customers to the local health dispensaries for additional

family planning services and commodities. Abdalah believes people respect him now. “I feel good because I am able to help,” he concludes. That “help” impacts both the health and well-being of his fellow villagers and the health and well-being of the environment.

Abdalah and his wife plan to have their third child two years from now.