

Since 2005, IRD's *Women First* program has provided business and entrepreneurial training and created a means for sustainable income generation and financial independence for women.

### **Program Objectives**

- Improve the economic status of women through small business skills training, the provision of rotational in-kind credit and the establishment of a sustainable supply chain of marketable products; and
- Strengthen the knowledge of women in regards to basic health care and HIV/AIDS prevention, including skills to discuss sexual and reproductive health issues with their children.



IRD is a charitable, non-profit, non-governmental organization that focuses its operations in regions of the world that present social, political, and technical challenges, and is a specialist in conflict and post-conflict settings. IRD's mission is to reduce the suffering of the world's most vulnerable groups and provide tools and resources needed to increase their self-sufficiency. IRD has current operations in 30 countries in six core sectors: democracy, governance, and community development; economic growth and public-private partnerships; sustainable food and agriculture systems; health; infrastructure; and relief.



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# **Women First Program**



## Improving the Economy

Through the *Women First* program, IRD creates connections between the private sector and women's groups. In Zambia Province, IRD has established product supply chains between the provincial distributors of Unilever, Africom, CIM products, and other companies and the women's groups. IRD has trained members of the groups on small business skills and provided them with start-up baskets of products on a rotational credit basis. IRD also established a system of prizes to stimulate growth of sales. In 2008, participating women achieved an average monthly sales volume of more than \$18,000.

Local traders in rural markets often take advantage of limited or non-existent competition to maximize their profits. As a result, the majority of the households in rural Zambia face inflated prices for products essential to daily life. The *Women First* network provides

these basic products — such as

soap, detergent, oil, pasta, sugar, matches and candles — at prices that are on average 20 percent lower than the same products offered in the local markets.

## Empowering Women

Women's groups are used as a platform for the majority of nutrition, health, and HIV activities in Mozambique. Increased knowledge and support from peers are highly valued by rural women in Mozambique, even as income generation continues to be the major concern in a woman's daily life.

The *Women First* program integrates gender-focused HIV/AIDS activities with the economic and social development of women so participants don't feel they have to choose between earning money for food and learning how to keep their families healthy. Women participating in the program have disposable income to improve food security, access to health care services, and access to education. In addition, women who have their own incomes are economically independent from men and able to negotiate for healthy relationships with their partners.

## Promoting Healthy Behavior

IRD monitors and program officers use manuals developed with the women in the communities served that are based on their own needs. The curriculum on health and HIV covers the following topics:

- An understanding of good health, and how the body functions to keep itself healthy;
- Basic health, hygiene, and nutrition;
- Prevention and identification of symptoms for common illnesses;
- Sexual and reproductive health;
- HIV/AIDS and opportunistic infections;
- HIV testing and prevention; and
- A range of social issues about gender and HIV/AIDS.

The entrepreneurial curriculum covers training on the rotational in-kind credit, as well as the basics of operating a small business such as market dynamics, calculating profit margins, and bookkeeping.

