

# Desertification

## Has a Woman's Face

**FANNIE MUTEPFA** says that land degradation hits women hardest but that they are often bypassed in attempts to combat it

**W**omen, who make up two thirds of the approximately 1.3 billion people living in dire poverty, are more affected by land degradation than men. Their dependence on natural resources for the survival and sustenance of their households make them particularly vulnerable to it. They often lack alternative ways of earning a living – and are less able to invest in sustainable land management – and so have to exploit their fragile environments further.

### Traditional wisdom

Increasing firewood scarcity places heavy burdens on women as they often have to go further to collect it, or rely on mostly inefficient and polluting forms of energy like cow dung. Many governments and NGOs have stepped up efforts to reduce deforestation by providing other sources of energy for domestic use such as solar, biogas and wind. Women should, however, be

more directly involved in the design of such programmes. The high cost of renewable energy is a major constraint for women and every effort should be made to make it more affordable.

Plant and animal biodiversity is lost along with the forests, which are an important source of fruits, medicines and natural products for rural women. Most communities in Southern Africa depend on wild fruits and roots during drought years. Women collect insects and worms from forests, and forest mushrooms also provide a rich source of protein for many rural households. Village women know – through oral traditional wisdom – which trees provide medicines: their loss is a serious matter for them as they are the care-givers in homes and communities – especially so in the face of the HIV/ AIDS pandemic. Forests also provide the raw materials for basket making and other village crafts.

Declines in soil fertility through land degradation, reduce crop yields and compromise household food security. This particularly affects women, as they are responsible for planning meals and cooking. It also especially affects them in the fields as they usually cannot afford to buy artificial fertilizers

and are forced to collect plant residues and other forms of organic manure instead – often an unbearable physical burden. Similarly, drought resistant small grains are not priced to offer incentives to women producers, who are then forced to continue producing unsuitable crops, resulting in failures and reduced yields. There is need for research therefore, with the full participation of women, into crops that will thrive in impoverished soils.

### Conflict resolution

Environmental conflicts over diminishing natural resources – like grazing lands, water sources, and forests – are increasing in many rural areas of Africa. Men usually are at the forefront, given the fact that the fight is usually about ownership and control. Women tend to be left out of arbitration and conflict resolution, with the result that solutions may be irrelevant to their needs.

Land degradation is accelerating urbanization. Able-bodied men leave rural communities each year to try to get employment in towns and cities. The women are often left behind to care for the family and look after the family assets – as well as to perform community productive functions – giving them additional burdens.

The population profile of a typical rural village in Zimbabwe for example comprises: a few very old men, more older women, very few young and middle aged men, many middle aged women, and quite a big number of young children. This hardly allows for equitable sharing of community responsibilities.

### Priority themes

African National Action Programmes (NAPs) under the Convention to Combat Desertification reveal glaring deficiencies in specific interventions for women. Although most highlight such priority themes as integrating land and water management, providing alternative energy sources, information systems, and research and development, these have not been analyzed from a gender perspective to assign interventions according to needs based on gender roles and responsibilities. The UN Millennium Project Taskforce on Education and Gender Equality noted ►



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three dimensions of empowerment that affect women's enhanced participation in development: equal capabilities as measured by health and education; equal access to opportunities and resources; and women's ability to claim their rights and participate in decision making processes. These critical empowerment dimensions have not been incorporated in many of the NAPs being implemented to address land degradation and desertification.

The Convention takes pride in spearheading participatory processes, but the NAPs take a blanket view of communities without disaggregating according to sex, age and class. A review of a list of projects included in NAPs reveals very few that target women as sole beneficiaries. Renewable energy projects, for example, can alleviate the problems that women face in securing fuel wood, but their current design and adaptation often fail to take into account female needs and concerns.

The majority of reports submitted to the Committee on the Review of the Implementation of the Convention hardly mention the strategic role of women in improving the economic environment, conserving natural resources, improving knowledge of desertification, and monitoring and assessing the effects of drought.

Women play critical roles in community income-generating enterprises such as bakeries, garment making and tailoring, soap making, and pottery. Yet the NAPs fail to clearly define the incentives that governments should put in place to create an enabling environment.

Improving information and communications and providing alternative technologies could help women, if based on thorough consultation and participation in their design, formulation and imple-

mentation. Without this process, projects often fail because they are designed using irrelevant or inadequately gender-specific information. This became clear, for example, when women who obtained fuel-efficient mud stoves hardly used them and continued with their traditional ones. There was such inadequate consultation that the stoves could not accommodate some of the women's' cooking pots. There was improper understanding of the materials that could make the mud stoves stronger. And there was limited training for construction of more stoves. This illustrates the fact that women must be included in developing and adapting technology so that it suits their needs.

### Community information

Community Information Centres and kiosks are gaining popularity in many African countries, including Zimbabwe, but it is not clear whether women have been consulted on their location and mode of operation, so that they can use them while still continuing to perform their other community roles. Women must also be consulted on the information provided, so that the centres equip them with knowledge on improved crop production techniques, pest management, water harvesting techniques, post-harvest processing and storage sources of ecologically suitable seed varieties, sources of agriculture inputs, and sources of markets and the prices of commodities.

### Land reform

South Africa and Zimbabwe have indicated that their land reform programmes are critical to fighting land degradation. Zimbabwe's land reform programme stipulates that 25 per cent

of the land should be allocated to single, widowed and divorced women. This is just the beginning of a process toward total empowerment, since, with land ownership, women will be able to borrow and invest in sustainable production, leading to higher financial gains. Land reform should provide an enabling environment that provides for the sharing of indigenous knowledge amongst women from different communities. It could provide for economic incentives such as special lines of credit for women to go into livestock production. It should also encompass sustainable land management, environmental assessments, and environmental monitoring and evaluation, giving special emphasis to the roles that women are best able to perform: in particular they could be trained to track environmental change and land degradation.

### Capacity building

Much has been said on the need to integrate and empower women to manage the environment, and many policy instruments exist on this. But much remains to be done on the ground to ensure that women become the real managers of the environment. Gender mainstreaming must become common practice through effective capacity building and institutional coordination. Implementing the Convention should address fundamental structural and systemic gender inequalities – otherwise sustainable development will forever remain mere rhetoric ■

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