



## Women, wood and work: In Kenya and beyond

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**Fuelwood projects, the author argues, have failed both to involve women and to see the fuelwood crisis in this larger context. In Kenya, however, women did something about it - and on their own.**

- When referring to wood scarcity problems and the Third World "energy crisis", it is first important to realize that fuelwood collection is only part of a larger burden of work and strenuous labour. Perhaps the most valuable and scarce resource in the world is *human* energy. Poor people in developing countries - both men and women - should be viewed in relation to this larger energy burden, for generally they have to work very long hours for very little return.

Most of the tasks done for survival are outside the cash economy; furthermore, in many societies they are done primarily by women. Women shoulder the labour for tasks vital for the provision of basic needs, including fetching water, collecting fuelwood and gathering and grinding food, as well as, in many cases, the numerous tasks involved in subsistence agriculture.

The simultaneous demands for satisfaction of different needs can produce conflicts or competition for a woman's time and energy. How she uses and allocates her time and expends her energy affects the very welfare and nutrition of the household members (Wiener, 1981; Tinker, 1982). Furthermore, throughout the world, increasing numbers of women have become heads of households, meaning that their subsistence work and their cash-earning activities are less often shared with men.

It should be understood that, from the perspective of poor people at the local level, "wood scarcity" and "fuelwood shortages" are very seldom seen as an isolated problem (Juma, 1982; Wisner, 1981; Hayes, 1981; Thrupp, 1982b, 1983). This is only *one* of many tasks creating an overall human energy burden. In fact, the wood scarcity problem is a manifestation of much broader, deeper-rooted problems of poverty, such as the maldistribution of income and land, and structural inequalities. In the same sense, deforestation is a result of a number of wood-use, land-use and land-tenure factors, including clearance for agriculture, settlement and commercial timber purposes. In the context of these broader dimensions, the issues of tree availability or household energy wastage may tend to seem minor. And, with recognition of these structural factors, it cannot be assumed that commonly

recommended solutions such as agroforestry or community woodlot schemes, even if widely diffused, will necessarily provide solutions for reducing women's burdens, for alleviating their oppressed conditions or for redressing macro-level deforestation problems (Foley and Moss, 1983).

Nevertheless, the recognition of these deeper, more intractable dimensions does not mean that project interventions have no benefits or potential. However, it does suggest an urgent need to clarify and fully recognize the limitations as well as the possible promises of such projects.

With the impact of development programmes and the introduction of new technologies, further inequities and negative factors have affected women, intensifying their work burdens and preventing them from contributing to development. Some project efforts have supposedly been oriented especially toward women, but they tend to be superficial and marginal, often confined to such tasks as sewing, menu-preparing and child-care. Such a trend may, in fact, hamper women's integration into broader development processes. Even the newer "appropriate technology" projects, which often contain sincere efforts to include women's participatory action, have not avoided some of the traditional biases and problems, and still tend to perpetuate male-oriented dependency relationships, patriarchal organizations and technocratic approaches (Hoskins, 1979, 1981; Carr, 1982; O'Kelly, 1978).

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**Women's efforts do not necessarily provide answers for overcoming deeper injustices and inequalities, nor can anyone pretend that their forestry projects alone will reverse the trend of diminishing wood resources.**

## Case study: Kenya

Such historical and conceptual discussions reveal many problems and stress the urgent need to overcome past problems and inequalities. Through the Kenyan case study, some promising aspects and opportunities can be examined through the actions of women's groups. The Kenyan example provides further justification for women's control, but it also illustrates a number of limitations on it. Finally, it also suggests some redirections that should be taken to ensure full success.

In Kenya, both government and non-government programmes have been implemented in the attempt to help alleviate what is seen as the "fuelwood crisis" and the problems associated with increasing rates of deforestation. Such efforts have emerged partly in response to the national and international attention being given to this issue, including the widespread publicity from the 1981 UN Conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy, held in Nairobi. These various programmes are directed toward (1) production/supply of wood, i.e., reforestation, tree nurseries, agroforestry, community woodlots, etc.; and (2) consumption/demand mitigation, i.e., improved fuel-efficient wood-burning stoves, more efficient wood-to-charcoal conversion, alternative sources of energy development, etc.

Among the various efforts in this area, considerable promise has emerged through the activities of women's groups. Kenya's women's organizations have been relatively

successful and show promising potential for the future, especially when compared with other efforts which, even though they are well funded and on a rather large scale, tend to be less successful and are often characterized by the basic problems that have been discussed.

But before an evaluation and comparison of the success of these projects, the meaning of "success" must be clarified. For this analysis, the main criteria of success are not associated with quantifiable measures such as numbers of trees planted, rates of return, or numbers of stoves produced - that is, with "supply-side" factors. Nor is success related to the overly ambitious goal of halting deforestation or dramatically cutting national energy consumption by a certain number of British thermal units. Rather, the criteria of "success" are related to end-use, to distribution, and to the impact of the benefits; that is, to the effectiveness of projects not only in diffusing the innovations but in meeting the needs of those who bear the heaviest burdens (women, in particular) and in enabling those people to acquire benefits.

## Promises and problems

Women in Kenya have a strong basis of organization, both in formal groups and in an informal sense through spontaneous "self-help" work teams. Kenya's national network of women's organizations is quite unique, and it is stronger than women's networks in other countries. It has historical roots, emerging partly as an outgrowth of the mutual aid *harambee* ("let us pull together") movement, which is strongly supported in Kenya as a basis for cooperation and to promote solidarity.

### WOMEN WORKERS IN ETHIOPIA members of a producers' cooperative

Women's clubs, which started during the colonial era, were originally elitist, and some groups have still carried on class restrictions and biases. However, most have changed their early orientations and now usually promote the involvement of women at all socioeconomic levels, in addition to being involved in a diversity of projects and activities. In 1978, the women's organizations involved over 500 000 women, including 500 different local groups, and they have expanded greatly since then. Funding for the organizations comes from membership fees, contributions, occasional appropriations from local government committees, and various private grants and institutions. The women sometimes organize in a manner parallel to local government structures, but they are not part of the bureaucracy.

Tree-planting. The National Council of Women of Kenya is one of the major networks, and it has developed a particularly strong and active tree-planting programme, begun in 1977. Its objectives are not only fuelwood-related; they are intended also for conservation and for multipurpose use of trees, including commercial wood, poles, fruits and ornamentals, and for averting the desertification process more broadly.

The programme has two major components: the Green Belt movement and tree nursery development. Both are carried out through local women's groups and are overseen by the central Nairobi office. Both are administered on a request basis, whereby local groups send in application forms for tree seedlings and simple tools. The central office then responds to requests, distributes seedlings, maintains central seed nurseries and keeps remarkably well-organized records and follow-up reports on the activities of the local groups. It is also directed by strong and charismatic leaders.

Of the two components, the Green Belt project is of less significance in the context of

this article. It involves the planting of a small number of demonstration trees, primarily for publicizing conservation and environmental improvement, particularly for commemorations or special celebrations. It tends to be an "awareness-raising" activity without direct social benefits. The local women's groups sponsor these events, and large audiences often attend the ceremonial plantings, but women themselves may not even be directly involved in planting and maintaining the trees. This component, however, has served its purpose of attracting attention and popularity: as of 1982, there were approximately 200 Green Belts in Kenya.

The tree nursery component, on the other hand, is of particular interest, being a "social forestry" project. It involves the full participation and active work of women members, who care for the nurseries, which are often on communal plots of land. It incorporates a larger number of trees per project and provides a system of cash-incentive contracts with the women for tree-raising. In cases where a communal plot is not available, women may raise seedlings on their independent farms. When seedlings are mature, the central office of the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCW) purchases the seedlings from the women for about US\$0.50 per seedling, so that each woman receives cash payment for her labour and her product. The local groups also place requests for a certain number and type of seedlings desired for a particular location to be re-allocated to women members. The central office attempts to fulfill these requests and redistributes the trees to rural areas, giving priority to particularly needy areas. As of August 1982, there were over 50 of these NCW nurseries, and this programme has also been steadily expanding.

### **PREPARING SAPLINGS IN GHANA**

The tree nursery component is promising and "successful" in several ways. Not only are women producing large numbers of healthy tree seedlings with high survival rates but, even more important, local women themselves are fully involved: they receive the direct benefits and also have strong potential for improving their own welfare. They get immediate returns from the cash-payment system, and they also have an interest in the long-term returns when the trees are mature. Furthermore, consideration is being given to the end-use and distribution in at least attempting to provide the trees to the most deforested areas and the neediest women. These projects contribute both to the broader aims of the women's organizations and to the reforestation needs of the nation.

Visiting such nurseries, any observer is immediately struck by the impressive managerial and "technical" capabilities of the women, the well-maintained trees and nursery grounds, and the enthusiasm and commitment of the women involved. This success has been possible largely because of the role that women themselves are playing. They are in control of the projects, including the management, the decision-making, the physical work and the end-use. Also, the women see the benefits of adopting this innovation, as it will potentially ease their own burden in such activities as collecting fuelwood and selling fence-poles. Finally, the social aspect of group *harambee* builds enthusiasm and a sense of pride.

Weaknesses. When interviewed, the local women did not perceive many problems in developing and expanding nurseries. Needed inputs, such as shovels and watering-cans, are generally well provided, and technical advice is occasionally sought through the Forest Department, with the women remaining in control. The participants expressed interest in the project for multiple use of trees beyond just fuelwood.

### **PREPARING SAPLINGS IN GHANA AND IN LEBANON in Kenya, it is organized**

## on a national scale

There are, however, several limitations and problems in the actual effectiveness of these efforts to relieve women's burdens. Many of the problems stem from the nature of the women's groups in a broad sense. In general, four basic areas of weakness were detected by the author:

- The groups rarely reach or involve the very poorest and most-burdened women. This may be due to membership restrictions, location of activities, lack of access to information, lack of time and energy, work demands or other constraints.
- There are some questions about various features of the tree nursery projects. For example, although they are locally based, management is perhaps over-centralized, creating a reliance on the central office for ensuring that the payment and distribution/allocation aspects are carried out. Moreover, the cash payment itself may distract attention away from the value of the trees in themselves, and it is conceivable that a system of paying labour on a time basis rather than for the "product" would be preferable.
- The existence of charismatic central leadership creates a situation in which the perpetuation of the programme depends to a large degree on the president and her promotion efforts. This puts great demands on the leader and raises some questions about the sustainability of the project after she leaves.
- Although their projects may be constrained owing to lack of resources such as land or water, women often do not confront these deeper socio-economic or political conditions; nor do they generally try to dispute legal structures in instances when they lack land or water rights. Yet these kinds of barriers may pose strong limitations on what the women can actually achieve in developing their forestry and nursery projects.

## EGYPTIAN WOMAN COOKING A MEAL improved wood stoves are needed

### **Suggested future actions**

In assessing the overall significance and contribution of the women's groups, a great deal can be learned that can be applied to future actions and to other developing countries. The Kenya case is just one among many that show the potential of such groups. There are a number of project-level strategies and steps that can be taken to strengthen capacities and potential.

- Women's groups should formulate their own project designs, organizations, decisions and objectives in relation to their needs, priorities and specific socio-economic, cultural and resource constraints. In wood-related activities, as shown here, they are in a particularly good position to make decisions.
- "Time-budget" surveys done by planners are sometimes recommended in efforts to measure and assess women's tasks; however, these surveys are not generally sufficient for understanding the women's time and work burdens, and they do not reflect the intensity and nature of work burdens. Women are in the best position to know which problems and time constraints are most important.

- Women's groups such as those in Kenya should share their experiences and strengthen one another in such activities. They should also learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses. Also, successful groups should approach government officials at all levels of planning to explain the importance of their efforts, provide evidence of progress, establish legitimacy and, if necessary, acquire government support and inputs. Women who are experienced in such projects, regardless of whether they have "professional" credentials, should offer to be chief advisers to government planners for community forestry or nursery projects.

As well as for the promotion of initiatives among women, changes must be made from the point of view of politicians, planners and government agencies. Breaking down traditional patterns and biases is not easy, but project officers and foresters, as well as planners in aid and donor institutions, must give women full responsibility and support. The task of changing "conventional" orientations will become increasingly easier as male directors and planners come to appreciate and understand the important roles that women can have, and to recognize that women's efforts will contribute to the larger objectives of the society as well.

Hopes should not be exaggerated in this context: women's efforts do not necessarily provide answers for overcoming deeper injustices and inequalities, nor can anyone pretend that their forestry projects alone will reverse the trend of diminishing wood resources. However, if oriented in the ways that have been discussed in this article, these projects can help lead in successful directions.

Finally, apart from "strategy" issues, there is another important lesson that can be discerned from this study, namely that women's groups should be encouraged to address power relations and political issues and that they should not be co-opted into existing structures that mute their potential contribution. Women's efforts will not have full impact if they remain mere depoliticized "pawns" or peripheral actors in other people's development schemes. Rather, they need autonomy, visibility and decision-making centrality, as well as political and economic power in this area they know intimately.

In this sense, then, "women would work". And they must be given a chance. With appropriate orientations, they can make clear contributions toward relieving their own burdens, averting wood-scarcity problems, building socially beneficial resource projects and promoting the broader goals of development.

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