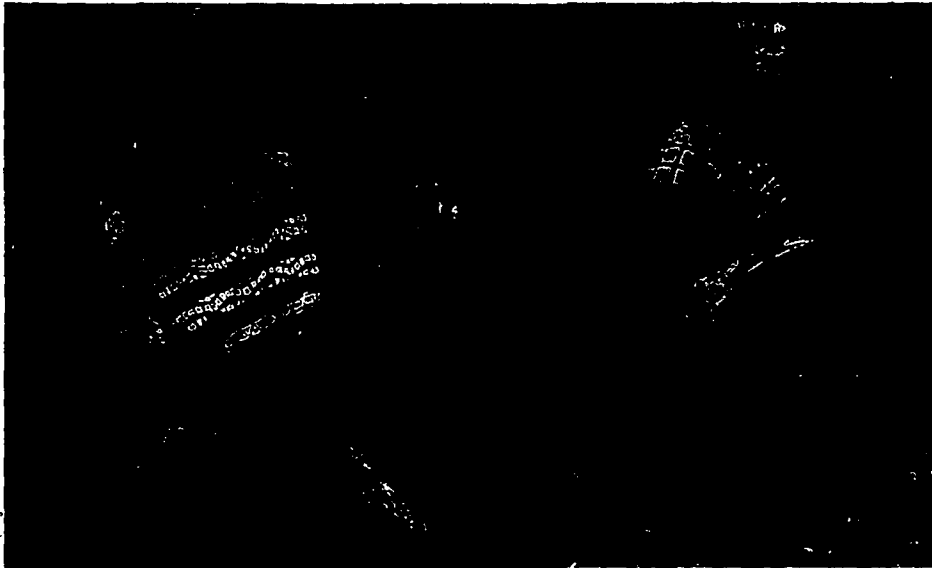


African Women and Environmental Concerns: Cause or Victims?

By Sithembiso Nyoni



UN/Rey Witlin

Sithembiso Nyoni is the founder of the Zimbabwe-based Organization of Rural Associations for Progress (ORAP), one of the largest grassroots movements in Africa. She is also the first and only woman in the Zimbabwe Forestry Commission of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism as well as the Derelict Lands Board in the Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Resettlement. Ms. Nyoni is on several international boards, among them IRED and World Council of Churches. With a Master's degree in rural development and extensive experience in mobilizing rural communities, she is a valued representative of the people.

It is common knowledge that African women carry the heavy load of their continent's survival. Through debt payments they are expected to extend their responsibilities beyond their family, and they are pressurized to respond to national and international crises by providing shelter, food, water, fuel and other basic necessities of life. These expectations come without consideration of the means of production and access to resources.

Rural women's most needed resources are land and water. It is well-known that the rate of environmental degradation in the South is

accelerating, and that the status of the majority of women and children in these regions is worsening in a variety of ways. Women and the poor are often blamed for this state of affairs. They are regarded as poor land managers. "They do not appreciate nature. They cut down trees, kill lovely birds and innocent animals. They overstock and overfish. They have no sense of preserving and conserving water soils and fisheries."

Women are not to blame; they are victims. Factors such as globalization of the economy, the affluence supporting certain life styles, and environmental hazards are largely to blame. These influences bring poverty to the rural women, and poverty then pushes them to over-exploit the environment.

Structural Adjustment and Trade Liberalization

Soon after independence, Zimbabwe passed labor and other laws in favor of women and low-income groups. Men and women earned equal pay for equal work; producer prices were favorable; prices of basic commodities were controlled. As a result,

communal farmers, most of whom are women, increased their production from 14% before independence to 60% ten years later.

The recent introduction of Structural Adjustment and Trade Liberalization is threatening this situation. Price controls have been lifted, and government subsidies on basic commodities removed. Everybody is now expected to pay for education and health services. Prices are shooting up by the day. As I write this, the prices of cooking oil, bread and maize meal have gone up 30%. Although the producer prices have also been increased, the equation just does not balance. The little that Zimbabwe had achieved in terms of uplifting the rural poor may now be reversed. Already, families living in drought-prone zones and in land classified as unsuitable for agriculture show signs of decline. Pockets of poverty will increase and the poor people will be pushed to further exploit their environment to survive the imposed economic pressures.

A major cause is that the World Bank's and the International Monetary Fund's strategy of globalization of the economy through debt payments and international trade in various countries tends to support the affluence of a few at the expense of the livelihood of many.

The Environment, Commerce and Growth

In ORAP efforts are being made to bring environmental awareness to related programs. Village communities, most of whom are women, are mobilizing themselves for organic mixed cropping in order to enrich and preserve soils; to plant indigenous trees; to identify their use and values; and to protect them. People have

(continued on page 12)

and expand beyond U.S. boundaries to include colleagues in other parts of the world. For more information on this network, contact the author.

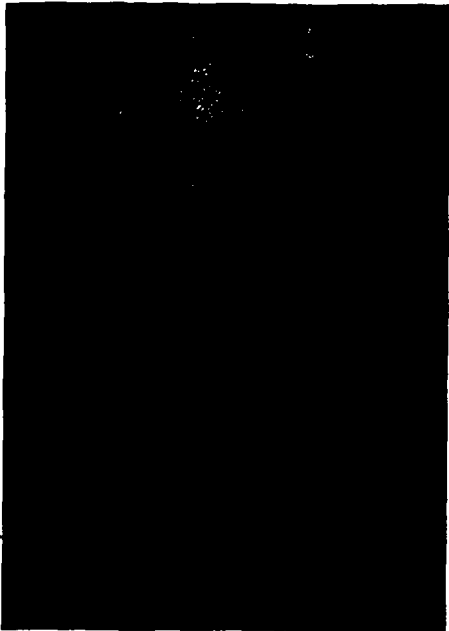
TechnoServe provides technical assistance to medium-scale agricultural enterprises and institutions in the developing world, and has a commitment to the promotion of computers in development. For more information regarding the use computers in the field, please contact Alberto Espinosa or Jim McKinney at TechnoServe, Inc., 49 Day Street, Norwalk, CT 06854; Tel.: (203)852-0377; fax: (203) 838-6717.

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UN Photo/John Isaac

regained their deep respect for nature. All this was possible because there was economic space. But where economic pressures exist and poverty is the norm, people spend most of their energy trying to survive rather than worrying about the state of the environment.

The rural poor are not the only group exploiting the environment. Commercial firms continue to cut down thousands of trees each year from indigenous forests to produce timber and furniture for local and export markets, largely to meet the needs of the affluent. The very poor do not benefit from this, and are directly affected by the environmental changes caused by the resultant deforestation, change of rain patterns and drought. This in turn affects the water supply, soil and fisheries; in other words, all agricultural activities which are the basis for their livelihood are affected.

The globalization of scientific advances has changed the face of the world for the better, but only for a few people. For the poor it has produced more pollution, toxic waste and environmental hazards than it has economic, social and development benefits. In May 1988, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) adopted a resolution which, among other things, declared the importation

of hazardous wastes of any kind into Africa as a criminal act. (ECA Environmental Newsletter Vol. No. 1 August 1990. p. 3). Such waste is often poured into rivers, making the water, which is women's major resource, impossible to use.

Despite such a resolution, toxic waste still reaches women in villages through insecticides and pesticides. Fruits and vegetables sprayed with toxic chemicals without proper instructions have caused health hazards and death. Such chemicals have been known to cause environmental imbalance by destroying some insects which live on those which destroy crops, so that those insects then become a worse menace.

Environmental problems cannot continue to be blamed on women and the poor alone. Solutions to these problems need to be both international and site-specific in order to take into account global economic forces as well as cultural and socio-economic factors. As a grassroots movement, ORAP will continue with its awareness-building and practical, environmentally-sound approach to development, as we believe that success in preventing and overcoming problems is achieved in small steps.

The Organization of Rural Associations for Progress (ORAP) is an indigenous Zimbabwean grassroots movement for rural development, formed by Zimbabweans in 1981, soon after independence. ORAP aims at equipping people with the necessary incentives for self-help development. The main objective of ORAP is to empower people through the "zenzele concept" (self-reliance) and to encourage people to combine their efforts, labor, skills, ideas, knowledge and materials to improve their living standards. Δ



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