

Kenya Farmers Reap Profits Sown by Joined Hands

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Efforts to improve agriculture in Kenya often miss the mark by targeting men instead of women. One woman spent 20 years organizing female farmers to share investments and training. Now men are joining too, and the women's work is paying off.

BUTERE, Kenya (WOMENSENEWS)--Patting the cup of her bra with a broad weathered hand, Kenyan farmer Hannah Wamaitha indicates one place she's hidden cash from her husband to pay for seeds, food and school fees for four children and two grandchildren. She's tried stashing it in mattresses and cupboards but keeping it on her person seems to be the best bet.

"It is as if my husband smells where money is hidden," said Wamaitha, who, at 63, has tended animals and tilled her tiny plot in Kenya's lush central highlands for her entire life. "Husbands have the attitude that women are like slaves."



Women meet as part of an outreach program to help female farmers.

Credit: Zoe Alsop.

When Waimatha takes milk to the dairy, a clerk there deposits the proceeds into her husband's account. When she brings the harvests from her tiny stand of coffee trees to a cooperative, she is given a small receipt announcing the sum transferred, once again, into her husband's account.

With food shortages around the globe touching off riots from Senegal to Somalia, analysts are trying to find what ails Africa's fields. They are learning that Waimatha's little cash problem may be a crucial part of the world's huge food problem: a culture where men own assets and control investment, government training programs run by and for men, and even international aid that assumes farm labor will be done by men.

"It is Kenyan women farmers who feed this country," said Ruth Oniang'o, executive director and founder of Kenya's Rural Outreach Program, which works to better the lives of farmers in western Kenya. "But they don't do it well enough, because they don't have the proper support. The challenge is that, given our own socio-cultural, traditional setup, women don't own the land. They depend on the men."

Assistance Bypasses Farm Women

Though women produce 80 percent of food in Africa, the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization says, traditional farm support winds up in the hands of men. Banks distribute low-interest agriculture loans to men, who have title deeds for collateral. Government training to optimize output is provided to men. Farm tools that are too heavy or too long for women lie unused in fallow fields.

On every other continent, per capita agricultural production has grown since 1980. In Africa, where 300 million people go hungry each day, it has shrunk by 12 percent.

For Oniang'o, who has been running projects with farmers in western Kenya on a shoestring for two decades, working with women made sense.

"Give a woman 20 shillings. If you go home with her the following day, you will find what the 20 shillings did," said Oniang'o. "But if you give it to a man and you go to his home, it will be like he never met you."

Mama Professor, as Oniang'o is known among the farmers of Western Province, grew up poor in the village of Butere when Kenya was still a colony of the United Kingdom. But life wasn't bad then; the green hills that roll gently down to the shore of Lake Victoria are among the most fertile lands in East Africa.

From Subsistence to Starvation

Oniang'o won scholarships to study nutrition and food science in the United States. By the time she returned in the early 1990s, she was shocked to find that people were starving. The population had exploded, AIDS was killing more people here than anywhere else in Kenya, and a craze for the cash promise of sugar had displaced subsistence crops.

"The women and children would be the ones tilling and toiling away and then the men go and collect the money," said Oniang'o.

Hoping to help the women, Oniang'o offered to build a preschool resource center. They asked for a cattle dip instead.

"There was just too much poverty on all fronts. So the question was, what do you start with?" she said.

And since then, the Rural Outreach Program has provided AIDS education, trained community health workers and built early childhood development centers, in addition to its work on agriculture. If a mother must care for a sick child, Oniang'o says, she will not be working on her farm.

Recently, when Oniang'o traveled to Butere, a chorus came out to sing for her and women offered vats of indigenous vegetables and steaming, doughy mounds of ugali, a Kenyan staple. Children performed skits among the chicken hutches, dairy cattle and plots of hearty crops she's helped them build over the years.

Rural Outreach Program

Today, hundreds of women's groups have joined the Rural Outreach Program; they've written constitutions, elected leaders and, perhaps most important, opened bank accounts, with each member depositing a little more than 50 cents a month.

In exchange, the Rural Outreach Program provides training and livestock, which the groups distribute among their members.

"We now can sleep with some change in our pockets," said Selfa Sennah, 50, the treasurer of the Wakulima Women's Group, which used \$300 from the program to build a group farm, with cows for the group's poorest members. In 2005, the group took a \$900 loan to build a grain store, converting food surpluses into cash by selling between harvests when prices are high.

Three years later, the group has paid back the loan and earned more than \$500.

The men who once kept their wives from attending group meetings are now quietly signing up.

"We left them alone because we thought that a group of women is nonsense," said Columbus Shivosas, who has joined Mulembe Women's Group. "We have started to take them seriously. We have seen the Mama Professor bringing them projects and we have started discovering that they are doing a good job."

It looks as though the world is catching on to what Oniang'o and her farmers already know.

The Seattle-based Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has already committed \$800 million to agricultural development, recently announced plans to support female farmers.

"If we really want to ensure that more food is available to the poorest people on earth, then we must listen to the farmers and invest in them, invest in women," said Catherine Bertini, a Gates Foundation senior fellow.