

Africa's Food Crisis:

## Price of Ignoring Village Women

by Sithembiso Nyoni

I am not a very important woman in international terms, but I am very important in that I am directly involved in the struggle. I am very interested in women and sustainable agriculture for one reason: my community and I are in a food crisis. Because of this crisis, we are interested in sustainable agriculture not for luxury, not for economic reasons, but first and foremost for our survival.

We are aware even at village level that the main causes of our food crisis are economic and political. They are a direct result of our governments and multinationals taking the control and the means of production from us, the people, who should have the right to feed themselves. The food crisis is not our problem as before at the village level. It is a national problem and we are just the victims of that national crisis. We are also aware that this crisis is directly related not only to our politics and to our economic situation, but it is also directly related to our environmental crisis in Africa.

Sustainable agriculture, which is controlled by and directly benefits the poor, is a very important component of national stability and also of national security. It is also directly relevant to our environment. As a rural woman, my environment is the basis of my economy and my total survival. It is from the land that I get my food. It is from the land around me that I get my fuelwood and my water.

Therefore, if this land around me declines, my basic survival also declines, and I cannot sustain my life.

As a woman, environmental decline means that I have to walk long miles to fetch firewood and water. I have very little time, therefore, to grow vegetables and other food.

And because the environment has deteriorated, my soils have also deteriorated. So, even if I have seven children and some go miles to fetch water, others miles to fetch firewood and I take another group to the land, we still will not produce as much as my grandmother used to produce. Therefore, if my agriculture has to be sustainable, my environment also has to be sustainable. We have to have a sustainable environment, a sustainable economy - something that will help my total surrounding, my total way of life.

Now, I said that this crisis is not my crisis as a village woman, nor is it a crisis for the rural families, it is a national crisis. From my experience in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa, I have also discovered that it is a regional crisis.

If I were one of those African Third World rulers, do you know what I would do?

I would go back to my people, to the village. I would be aware of the global connections that are acting upon me and my people. But in order for me to be realistic and equip my nation to

stand up and deal with those crises, I would go back to my people and strengthen them first. After all, my power should be their power.

But our rulers today -- our ministers of agriculture today -- are busy interlinking with the multinationals, with international markets, and forgetting that we are the basis of their power. If we are starving, they should be ashamed. While we are starving, they have the power to ask for more and more aid over our poverty.

I would go back to my people because as a village woman, I know what it means to be without a seed. I know what it was in the good old days when I used to go and harvest and come back and select the seed for the following year. And I know that because of the hybrid seed, I can no longer do that.

But I can tell you, when one day I was in a meeting in Harare and I stood up to say that kind of thing the then minister of agriculture stood up to say, "Here is a woman who wants to take people back to the 18th century. That is no longer possible." And yet I know that before, I had control over my seed. I could select the seed for the following year. But because today I am using the hybrid seed, I cannot re-use it. I have to go back to the one who controls the seed.

I know also that my well is in my field so that when I come from my agricultural chores, I can take a bucket of water back home.

## Women's walk

But where I have used lots of fertilizer around my well, my water has become contaminated by that fertilizer.

I know that if you intercrop, some crops during the drought will survive, others will die. But my agricultural experts tell me not to do that because it is primitive.

And I know what roots from the bush I can dig up and mix with what I grow at home in order to make a nutritious meal for my children. But the nutritionists in town think I should feed my children Pro-Nutro and other breads whose names I don't know.

If I were one of those rulers, I would go back to my people because now it is no longer a question of keeping up with the Joneses. It is a question of survival for the village women in Africa. I would go back and help those women to survive.

My crisis is not mine alone: I am just a victim. It is our crisis. Therefore let us leave this room and strive for sustainable systems of agriculture beginning from our environment and then moving on to the political and economic systems that are acting upon me and dominating me in such a way that I no longer think of making a contribution to my own destiny.

If I do not control food, there is nothing else I can control in this world because food is also used as a political weapon on me and my children.

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The vanishing trees are exacting a heavy price from the woman in the Tabora-Urambo tobacco zone of Tanzania. According to tradition, it is they who have to fetch water and collect firewood. Both commodities are now difficult to obtain.

In the dry season Amina Sungura must walk up to 10 kms. from her village of Imalamakoye in the district of Urambo to fetch water. Sometimes the water is so scarce that the family spends days, even weeks, without bathing or washing their clothes. It was not always like that.

"When we first settled here, there were plenty of trees and scrubs, and the water was abundant," she says. "Now even the spring has dried out."

Monica Kasiga, a widow and the sole breadwinner for the family,

spends an average of four hours, two and a half days a week, fetching firewood. When the wood gets scarce and the competition gets intense, it might take her up to six hours. This makes a yearly average of between 520 and 780 hours collecting firewood.

"Something must be done to alleviate women's load," Monica Kasiga says.

In severe cases people turn to burning twigs, leaves, crop residues and even animal dung, thus diverting precious organic matter that should go to fertilise the land and smother weeds.

Soaring fuelwood prices mean that only the better off can afford to buy what they need for curing tobacco and cooking. The rest have to content themselves with walking further and further to collect the vital element.

