

## BUILDING RURAL WOMEN'S CAPACITY FOR NIGERIAN AGRICULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL REFORM: THE ROLE OF NON GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOs)

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### ABSTRACT

*The problem of environmental development in Africa has, over the years, engaged the attention of international community, government, and non-governmental organization (NGOs). In Nigeria, attitudes and policies on environmental resources have hitherto been shaped by narrow economic and gender considerations. Suffice to say environmental issues are best handled with the participation and involvement of all concerned citizens at relevant levels. Environmental development, being an index for human and agricultural advancement should therefore harness the participation of all stakeholders including rural women. The paper posits that rural women form a significant demographic chunk that performs multidimensional roles both at home and on the farms. Unfortunately, rural women are either deliberately or inadvertently neglected by developers when addressing issues that touch on the environment. The NGOs in particular, should henceforth promote availability of micro-finance in agricultural related activities for rural women who are at the center of concerns for sustainable development. The paper concludes with policy options that women's involvement and participation should be enhanced through capital development and skills acquisition in harvesting and food processing and this could be achieved through improved access to environmental education and training, among others.*

**Keywords:** Rural Women, NGO, Environmental Education, Agricultural Development.

### INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria and some other African countries like Ghana, Sierra Leone, Zaire to mention but a few, it is an established fact that majority of their citizenry lived in rural areas and the bulk of these rural dwellers are women (Mabawonku, 2001).

A World Bank study (1989) revealed that women constitute between sixty to eighty percent of the labour force and majority of them are involved in agricultural production, domestic and craft activities (Bako, 2005). They also perform some basic responsibilities such as gathering of wood and fetching of water, food processing and other domestic chores for the entire members of their families. Despite the fact that rural areas are

neglected, women still participate effectively in agricultural production in land clearing, sowing and planting, hoeing and weeding, gathering-in and storage of harvests, food processing and distribution of products.

More often than not, these activities bring them in direct contact with the environment and often times they are responsible for much of the destruction taking place in our environment especially, our rural areas (Mabawonku, 2001). Following the same trend of thought, Mazuri (1992) saw the role of women in the Africa as the custodian of fire, water and the earth. He explained that the custody of fire entails the responsibility for making energy available from firewood

which they fetch from the bush, custody of water serves as symbol of both survival and cleanliness which they trekked long distance to fetch and the custody of the earth which they cultivate and preserve the fertility of the soil.

Unfortunately, rural women in most cases are poor and are either deliberately or inadvertently neglected by developers when addressing issues that border on the environment. Poverty and illiteracy levels of women have compounded the plight of women especially in the rural areas. This condition has further reduced their ability for economic upliftment. One of the consequences of the situation is the high rate of poverty and the fall in the standard of living of most African women. Report from Federal Office of Statistics in 1996 put the total percentage of women found to be poor at 58.8%. This situation tends to undermine women capacity for labour often regarded as their main or only asset for escaping poverty. Illiteracy or lack of education has sub gated women to the bottom of the socio-economic ladder and it has limited their knowledge and understanding of the environment in which they live (Mabawonku 2001).

However, a deliberate intervention of government and other agencies such as the NGOs (through human capital development such as skills acquisition and education policies) could improve the educational status of women and make for their effective participation in various agricultural and environmental reforms. According to World Bank (1995) education expands the capacity of people to make better use of technology and input, export information and adapt more effectively to change.

Put differently, sustainable human development which would enhance the status of women educationally should be accorded to top priority in any national development plan in the country. United Nations Development Plan (UNDP, 1994)

defined "sustainable human development as the development that not only generates economic growth but distributes its benefits equitably, that has regenerated the environment rather than destroying it; this empowers people rather than marginalizing them. It is development that is pro-people, pro-nature, pro-jobs and pro-women".

Unfortunately, the Nigerian situation is far from human-centered development due to some factors such as poverty and illiteracy among others. Women in rural areas are mostly affected by these problems and this in turn hinders their effective participation in development of their environment. It is against this backdrop that this paper examined the role of NGOs in building rural women's capacity for Nigeria's agricultural and environmental reform. Specifically, the paper:

1. Identified problems of environmental development in Nigeria;
2. Described rural women and environmental problems;
3. Examined the role of non-governmental organization (NGOs) in building rural women's capacity for sustainable development and
4. Dighlighted some strategies and actions for building rural women's capacity, being currently embarked upon by Women and Children Development Initiative Foundation (WOCDF).

#### **PROBLEMS OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

According to Agbola (1998), environmental problem in Nigeria, as specified by the third National Development Plan (1975) can be divided into two for the sake of analysis. These are primary environmental problem such as slum housing, inadequate water supply and fecceas and refuse disposal, and secondary environmental problems resulting from the process of accelerated development such as road traffic congestion, air, land, river, and lagoon and water pollution.

Environmental problem is a general feature of most African countries. Particularly in Nigeria, where deforestation is assuming a disturbing dimension in the Northern and Middle Belt areas. In these areas, there is an increasing concentration and pressure on natural environment and the resultant effect is that the quality of the environment inevitably deteriorates (Mabawonku 2001).

Generally, environment affects weather, food, housing and organisation such as animal and other living things (Udoh and Akpan, 1997). In particular, environmental problems have effect on human health and survival. Mabawonku (2001) emphasized that some environmental problems are not man-made but are natural disasters and most of the time, man has no control over them. The author further identified some environmental problems in Nigeria, stating their consequences with the causes. These include:

**1. Deforestation:** This is a common environmental problem in most developing countries especially in Africa. In Nigeria, especially in northern and middle belt areas, deforestation is becoming a serious problem and is a real concern to both government and environmental conservationists. It has led to drastic declines in accessibility of both the wood and non-wood forest products. Women in rural areas have compounded this problem as a result of their continue dependence on forest resources for firewood for domestic use. Some obvious dangers of deforestation are flooding, erosion, soil loss and low crop yield among others. According to United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) estimate, not less than 12 million hectares of tropical forest are lost annually.

**2. Soil and land resource degradation:** According to World bank Report of 1990, this problem is often caused by population pressures, inappropriate farming methods, improper construction techniques and mining activities. And it includes erosion caused by gully, coastal and desertification. The Report also indicated that Nigeria has lost millions of naira annually on environmental degradation in the eastern part of the country.

**3. Waste disposal problem:** According to Mabawonku (2001) this problem is a common feature in Nigeria and it is a menace that pose serious health hazards as industrial and other wastes contaminate drinking water, pollute fresh water, the grazing, farming and all agricultural lands and aquatic ecosystem. The resultant effect of this is that most of the country's ecosystems have been destroyed by poisons.

**4. Water pollution:** The problem can destroy fisheries, agricultural products, food and human lives. According to World Bank (1999) "each year, diarrhea diseases from contaminated water kill about two million children and cause 900 millions episodes of illness". In Nigeria, diseases such as typhoid and malaria are gotten from drinking and interacting with polluted or contaminated water.

**5. Over-population:** In Nigeria, this type of environmental problem is more visible in the urban areas, where people especially the poor live in slums. And more often than not, such poor housing leads to poor environment, poor infrastructure and poor health (Mabawonku, 2001).

**6. Air pollution:** This is another serious environmental problem that results from bush fallowing, domestic fires, gas flaring and transport among others. Apart from the smoke of the firewood used by women, air pollution is a lesser problem in most rural areas.

**7. Oil spillage:** This constitutes another serious environmental pollution in Nigeria. This problem occurred when poor or desperate people damage oil pipe in an attempt to leak crude petroleum from pipe and storage facilities. This is a common occurrence in the riverine areas where oil companies drill crude oil and when oil spillage occurs, both fishes and soils are affected. Apart from the effect of oil spillage on water and land, the health of people of this area has been seriously endangered (NEST, 1991 and Oyesola, 1995).

### **Rural women and environmental problem**

The Linkage between poverty and access to natural resources has features prominently in the on-going concern about environmental reform in many developing countries especially among rural women. Women, notably those living in the rural areas, play a major role in managing natural resources like soil, water and forests. They are producer and caretakers as well as cultural guardians and value the environment in many ways (Dankelman and Davidson 1994). Yet as stated by Abdulsalam (2005) rural poor women have a greater tendency to exploit natural resources at a more rapid rate than may be socially and economically desirable, since they provide and support family needs and they do not have any other means of livelihood except on the environment.

Since rural women have small patches of land to cultivate, little or no assets and inability to raise loans, they have no options than to exploit natural resources (Okoji 1997). The trend in most rural area is recurrent cultivation of purchase of land that ought to have been reserved for adequate regeneration of the vegetation and the restoration of lost nutrients. The resultant effect of this development is that many scattered pieces of land have been turned into Savannah – like land and subjected them to serious soil erosion. Abdulsalam (2005) further emphasized that environmental resources base that should be a means of livelihood is subjected to the stress of degradation, contributing to the risk of impoverishment of users whose livelihood depends on these resources. In other words, the continuous exploitation of these resources had led to stress and environmental degradation, thereby making these poor women both agents and victims of unsatisfactory ecological practices (Okoji, 1997).

Their inability to acquire needed finances to purchase more cooking utensils, has

made it mandatory for them to adopt some fuel practices such as crop residues, coconut husks and rice hulls or elephant grass. Such practices, clearly contributes to inadequate nutrition while partial cooking also causes serious health problems from infection. According to World Health Organisation (1984) smoke from these inferior fuels is often more poisonous than that of fuel wood and slow-burning wood-fuels are capable of producing pollution concentration higher than fossil fuels and subject the women to more smoke pollution than their counter parts in the urban areas.

Rural women who apply agricultural pesticides and are exposed to toxic pesticides are prone to suffer acute or chronic poisoning than their male counterparts. Regrettably this development often makes them more susceptible to abortion and fetal damage (Mabawonku, 2001).

In conclusion, women because of their roles as the world's farmers, suppliers of fuel, tenderers of animals and mothers of all, are more prone to contact disease due to poor sanitation, air and water related diseases. These are further transmitted to other members of their family and these further reduce their income capacity and productivity.

### **The role of non-governmental organization (NGOs) in Africa**

In developing countries of the world, NGOs have been collaborating with the government in several development programmes. Ryelandt (1995) asserted that these organizations can help in two main ways: by mobilizing resources beyond the state budget (possibly by securing fund from international NGOs) and helping the government's programme along with their own. Also they have the exceptional advantage of being close to the target populations and are able to respond flexibly to needs as they arise.

Gupta and Shah (1994), Mitchell (1995) and Chodhury (1996) observed in their various studies that field level collaborative efforts between government, research organisations and NGOs result in the development of low input, low labour and aquaculture practices. Through the use of farm input, rural people are assisted to plan their family and developed their health care among others. In a study conducted among rural women in Cameroon, it was observed that co-operation between the government and NGOs has helped in raising their income and educational level as a means of improving household food security. Other recent studies have also indicated that NGOs play important roles in rural poverty alleviation, most especially in agricultural credit and alleviation of rural poverty (Riddell and Robinson, 1995 and Rego, 1998).

Adebayo (1997) has categorized NGOs in Nigeria as philanthropic and self-help. Philanthropic NGOs are secular or religious organisations which focus on humanitarian programmes. The self help NGOs focus on economic programme or self help objectives among members. A good number of NGOs have played significant role in the development of many African countries. Examples of women international clubs that promote women's liberation, education and environmental sustainability are Zontal International and International Council of Women (Mabawonku 2001). Others like Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Nigerian Fields, the Nigerian Conservation Foundation, the Nigerian Environmental Study/Action and UNESCO have performed creditably in the area of environmental education and sustenance in Nigeria.

It is important to mention some NGOs in Nigeria that have focus primarily on agriculture and poverty alleviation. Notable among them are Imo Self Help Organization (ISHO), Nsukka United Self-

Help Organization (NUSHO), Committee for Women in Development (COWAD), Lift Above Poverty Organization (LAPO), Development Exchange Center (DEC), Country Women Association of Nigeria (COWAN), Alternative Development (Ater Deu), Women Farmers Association of Nigeria (WOFAN), Women and Children Development Initiative Foundation (WOCDF) and Farmers Development Union (FADU). They focus mainly on poverty alleviating activities among the rural poor all over Nigeria (Adebayo, 1997).

#### **The role of ngos in building rural women's capacity for sustainable development.**

The role of NGOs in building rural women's capacity for Nigeria agricultural and environmental transformation cannot be over emphasized. According to Mabawonku(2001) NGOs can encourage women's socio-economic groups and other organisation to contribute to sustainable development. They can also be relevant in the area of providing financial support for women's educational programmes. They can also sponsor research projects that will benefit the rural populace. They can work with government to train women in local languages. In line with their objectives, they can disseminate agricultural information on innovations to rural communities (Lewis, 1994 and Farrington, 1998). They can also be relevant in improvement of rural credit, reduction in input costs and better produce process among others

#### **Building rural women's capacity in Nigeria: the role of women and children development initiative foundation (WOCDF) in Osun State**

In view of the identified disadvantaged position of women, the world has come to accept that gender strategies must be utilized in all development programmes, especially in Africa (Sokoya, 1998). Women and Children Development Initiative Foundation (WOCDF) was

established in Osun State in 2004. The project was borne out of the interest to improve the participatory capabilities of women in the development of themselves and her family. The programme beneficiaries include women and children in the State.

The programme recognizes the peculiarities of women and their multidimensional roles at home and on the farms. The programme is therefore designed to enhance the participatory capabilities of the women in these various roles, towards sustainable national development.

The ultimate goal of the project is to alleviate rural poverty through enhancing living conditions and status of women. Strategies and actions currently embarked upon to build rural women's capacity in Osun State include the following:

**1. Action to improve Agricultural Production**

This is achieved through encouraging women to practice home gardening along with their farming activities. Proven agricultural technologies were transferred or exposed to women with the aim of improving their crop yields.

**2. Relief to Women through Macro credit Scheme (Soft Loans)**

Apart from agricultural production and other related activities, the WOCDF programme functions in making soft loans available. The credit scheme extended to small-scale rural entrepreneurs identifies with the micro-enterprises such as petty traders, small farm holders, food processors and artisans.

The programme also encourages women to form Women Development Unit (WDU) at the local government level and also encourages them to form and join women cooperative societies to enhance their possibility of benefiting from State Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (SEEDs) and Local Economic

Empowerment Development Strategy (LEEDs) programmes.

**3. Skills Acquisition Programme**

WOCDF in an attempt to develop the capacity of rural women operates different kinds of skill acquisition programmes such cream-making, soap-making and handicraft.

**4. Literacy Programme**

Education is fundamental to human development as it enhances and strengthens the power of the body and mind. It is believed that a woman who is literate would understand the rationale behind any improved technology and poverty alleviating strategies more than an illiterate woman and therefore likely to be more receptive to them. It is also believed that a literate woman would enjoy better health and would be more productive than her illiterate counterparts. To this end, WOCDF have introduced and sponsored women's adult literacy programme in the State.

**5. Health Programme**

Just like education, health is one of the fundamental human rights without which s/he cannot function to his/her fully maximum capacity. A woman needs to enjoy optimum health to enable her cope with her multi-dimensional roles at home and on the farm. Realizing this fact, WOCDF has embarked on Women-in-health programme to provide health education and health care for women. Other health programme includes campaign on reproductive health and HIV, trainings on family planning, sponsoring of breast lump test, High Blood Pressure test and eye test among others.

**6. Family Support Strategies**

WOCDF programmes promote and encourage the stability of families. Women are regularly counseled to be faithful to their spouses and fulfill their marital and matrimonial obligations. They are

encouraged to cooperate with their spouses in the task of molding the children, who are the future leaders. Retreats, workshops, seminars and conferences are often organized for women with the aim of enhancing their social status as well as their psychological well-being. Also programmes are organized for the aged, divorcees, single parents and widows.

### CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussions, one can see that the emergence of NGOs in Nigeria is not a recent development. However their number and activities have increased significantly in recent times as they focus more on issues that borders on women and children, agriculture, poverty alleviation and rural credit among others.

The fact that rural women have the most significant role to play both at home and on the farm makes them a special target for the NGOs. In this paper, the exposition on WOCDF programmes has shown that NGOs can help alleviate poverty and build rural women's productive capacity. The study therefore recommends that more women should be encouraged to participate actively in the activities of WOCDF. Government should encourage the formation of more NGOs and developing better policy framework and mechanisms for their operations. Both government and other non-government organisations should emulate the example of WOCDF by initiating programmes that would enhance rural women's capacity for agricultural and environmental development.

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