

Rural Poverty and Women's Response to Economic Policies in Africa

By

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Introduction

The link between rural poverty and economic policies in Africa appears obvious. This is in view of the fact that, the performance of the informal (rural) economies, is to a large extent influenced, directly or otherwise by the macro-economic policy environment. Policies on farm produce and energy (fuel) prices, as well as the currency exchange rates provide quick examples of how economic policies can affect rural poverty, especially among women. The vicious cycle of poverty is a well-known concept which appears relevant in this regard.

While it may be true that the African policy environment is not at its best, there is evidence to show that, not all the economic policies are inhibitory to the participation of women in the process of rural poverty alleviation. In this connection, it may be relevant to state here, as has been done by most writers, that the problem with most economic policies in Africa, has been that of poor implementation; occasioned by a continual interaction of various socio-political and other factors. This reality illuminates the complexity of the task involved in dealing with rural poverty from the economic policy angle.

A concise review of women's efforts to contain and reduce rural poverty on the African continent, within a largely poor-policy-implementation environment is the focus of this paper.

The discussion will begin with a contextual definition of poverty, followed by an examination of some relevant economic policies. It will conclude with a brief presentation of women's response to these policies in their (women's) effort to alleviate the rural poverty level within the African continent.

What is Rural Poverty

Against the background of *poverty* being generally considered in relative terms, this paper will limit itself, first, to that definition which describes poverty as the inability of individuals or groups of people to provide for themselves and their immediate dependants such basic necessities as food, clothing and shelter within their own geographical and/or social environments.

Further, the (rural) poor will include those who are compelled to consume but are unable to "replace" their natural resources in an effort to provide the highlighted basic needs. Broadly speaking and for the purpose of this discussion, such natural resources will include soil, water and forest resources.

Some Economic Policies in Africa

According to a report to the Development Fund for Africa (USAID 1993):

The economic crisis of the formal economy (in Africa) forced governments to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and donors for special financial assistance. That assistance which came tied to policy conditions was packaged in Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP). As a result, the rapid decline of the formal economy was arrested and reversed.

(Similarly), the impact of the economic reform on the informal economy was substantial... particularly in rural infrastructure... while the balance of payments support meant that items such as soap, clothes, tools and matches could be bought rather cheaply.

(However).... the economic and political changes that have occurred in Africa are fragile. Many serious (macro) economic problems remain."

Most African countries are still grappling with the serious economic problems that have resulted from policies emanating from the

adoption of SAP; although, as is already clearly stated in the quoted reference, SAP was not a completely "no-gain" intervention. It recorded some successes especially at the initial stages of implementation in some African countries.

The cases of Solomon Bukededo, a farmer in Central Uganda and Roster Chindindindi, another farmer in Zambia, according to a recent report (*African Farmer*, 1995), present some clear illustrations of the foregoing USAID report. Both farmers were encouraged to obtain loans on relatively easy term for agricultural production. But by the time Chindindindi's crop was ready for sale, an economic reform programme had made it cheaper to import from South Africa than to buy from local sources, thereby leaving him with severe marketing problems.

In the case of Bukedeko, the phenomenal increase in the interest rate charged by the State-owned bank from 25 percent a year when he borrowed to 50 percent five years later made it impossible for him to pay back the loan. There are many rural dwellers in Africa whose experiences are similar to Chindindindi's and Bukedeko's.

Another 'SAP-induced' economic policy that appears to have heightened rural poverty level in Africa was the progressive devaluation of the local currency. In global economic terms, this intervention appeared justifiable; as most of the currencies were overvalued. However, the lack of appropriate control mechanisms dealt devastating blows to most rural economies.

In may African countries, 'unfocused' currency devaluation resulted in sharp increases in the cost of such important items as kerosene, matches, gasoline, diesel, fertiliser and local transport; which in turn resulted in adverse effects on the rural economies.

The impact of economic policies on women activities in most rural communities in Africa goes beyond the experiences of the two men cited in the earlier part of this paper.

For example, according to Mehra (1994):

National development and donor-assisted agricultural and rural development programs, instead of helping to alleviate rural women's farming constraints and enabling them to improve their

productivity as part of an overall strategy to raise farm output, have historically bypassed them. Because governments and donor agencies assumed that women were household, rather than economic producers; they either ignored women's roles entirely or provided them with information and training suitable only for their household production roles and not their equally important economic roles.

While the foregoing assertion may not be entirely true in some African countries, the following example provided by the same author, appears to illustrate what happens in some cases:

In the more recent literature, Saito and Weidemann (1990), reported on a village livestock project in Burkina Faso that failed because information and resources on small animals were directed at men, even though women were primarily responsible for small livestock production.

The issue of Land Rights in most African countries is another policy area that deserves some mention, in view of its strong economic policy implication. Merha (1994) quoting Panayotou (1993) stated that:

Lack of proper access to and control over land affects farm productivity in a number of ways. First, as banks often require land as collateral for credit, lack of title to land constrains women's access to loans.

It must be stated at this juncture, that *not* all economic policies in Africa are discriminatory or unfavourable to the effective participation of women in the process of poverty alleviation.

The decision by the Federal Government of Nigeria to create a ministry to address women affairs specifically, (although may not be a strictly economic policy) appears to be a good starting point in the process of women empowerment from the policy dimension.

In addition, a report in the *African Farmer* (1995), states that Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni has "gradually and systematically" removed a number of road blocks that prevented (rural) women from participating effectively in the process of national and rural development.

Women Response to Economic Policies in Africa

The response of women to economic policies in Africa will be considered from two perspectives - the role of relevant NGOs on one hand and the role of the rural women themselves on the other.

In this connection, women response will be discussed under the following headings: Co-operative Movements; Rural Credit Programmes; Income Generation; Sustainable Agriculture; Advocacy role; Women Health

Co-operative Movements

The activities of the host organisation - DEC - in the process of economic empowerment of rural women in Nigeria through co-operative activities deserves some special focus.

According to Asogwa (1990)

(Through some facilitation support from DEC), rural women in (Eastern) Nigeria are organising themselves into grassroots level self help project groups to enable them learn from one another and help one another to get economic power through their production.

The above assertion by Asogwa has been confirmed by many national and international rural development workers who have visited several of DEC projects in Eastern Nigeria.

On a different but relevant note, Iyoha (1991) reported that "In Niger state (of Nigeria), the women co-operatives are so materially strong that men go to them for loans."

Success stories like the above two are now spreading all over the continent through the efforts of organisations like DEC, Enugu, Nigeria.

Rural Credit Programmes

The Nigerian Community Development Trust Fund COWAN, Nigeria, Development Exchange Centre (DEC) Bauchi, Nigeria, the Institute of Cultural Affairs, MENA, Cairo provide good examples of organisations, that have embarked on economic empowerment activities through their rural credit programmes with women groups.

The collaboration, often in the form of revolving loan schemes, have enabled numerous women groups achieve varying degrees of economic self-reliance.

Income Generation Activities

The Nigerian Integrated Rural Accelerated Development Organisation (NIRADO), Lagos, TechnoServe, IRED West Africa, Lagos, the Food Basket Foundation International (FBFI), Nigeria, the North-South Consultants Exchange in Cairo as well as the Institute of Cultural Affairs, Côte d'Ivoire, are just a few examples of NGOs that have focused on income generation among rural groups as a component of their programme delivery strategy. Some of these NGOs focus specifically on women groups. And quite happily, the women are taking up the challenge seriously; with reports of some remarkable achievements by some of the women groups.

Sustainable Agriculture

Fertilisers, apart from being detrimental to soil productivity on the long run, have become too expensive in many African countries for the rural people to afford. 'SAVE', a sustainable agricultural production programme, is the Institute of Cultural Affairs, Zambia's (ICAZ) response to economic policies bordering on fertiliser use.

'SAVE', in certain cases is focused specifically on women groups in several villages of Zambia.

The 'Jubraka' in the En Nahud Province of Sudan, is the local women's strategy to deal with the problems arising from limited resources for farming in the rural areas. Under a 'Jubraka', the group of rural women organise themselves into a form of co-operative that combines market gardening with small ruminant production on small parcels of land. In some cases a 'Jubraka' also engages in such other small scale economic activities as handicraft.

Advocacy Role

Women in Nigeria (WIN) is one of the many women advocacy groups in Africa. Through the activities of these groups, a lot of fundamental human right issues are addressed to enable women participate more effectively in the process of rural poverty alleviation.

Women Health

Central to the issue of poverty alleviation is good health. The Association for Reproductive and Family Health (ARGH) Nigeria, and the Women's Health Organisation of Nigeria (WHON) are examples of many organisations across Africa that have focused mainly on women health. Other organisations such as the Community Life Project (CLP) Lagos, Nigeria, focus more on such specific areas like AIDS and related health issues.

The various training programmes of these NGOs have improved the health status of rural women thereby enabling them (the rural women) to contribute more positively to the process of rural poverty alleviation.

Conclusion

The role of women in rural poverty alleviation is too important to be ignored. This is in view of the fact that women, besides their household production roles, are engaged in major economic

production activities in their own right; sometimes with greater relative involvement than the men.

The present economic policy environment in Africa provides some conducive atmosphere for women to play their identified roles. However, available evidence indicates that there is much room for improvement.

On the other hand, there is sufficient evidence that women have utilised the available opportunities; although more active participation by more women appears necessary in this important component of integrated rural development.

Based on the foregoing, it will appear imperative for African governments to improve the policy environment to enable women participate more effectively in poverty alleviation strategies.

The challenge for women, therefore, is for them to (continue to) see their role in poverty alleviation as indispensable, but at the same time, complementary to those of the men and the governments.

These considerations appear crucial to the issue of rural poverty alleviation as Africa prepares for the next century.