

Overcoming barriers: promoting women's local knowledge

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Introduction

Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance. (Kofi Anan, UN Secretary General)

In the Millennium Declaration, agreed to by world leaders at a special session of the United Nations (UN), governments committed themselves to a vigorous campaign to eradicate extreme poverty and improving people's livelihoods around the world. The resulting Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) established, for the first time, targets and indicators for each of the eight goals.

Women's empowerment and equal participation in the economic development of communities and countries have been recognized as fundamental prerequisites for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Not only is this subject addressed in MDG 3, it is vital for the realization of all other goals aiming to bring poor developing countries out of the continuing poverty trap. 'Attempting to achieve the MDGs without promoting gender equality will both raise the costs and decrease the likelihood of achieving the other goals' states the introduction of the UNDP Gender review of national MDG reports. (UNDP 2005, also see Kabeer 2003)

Five years on, progress is being reviewed and results recorded. The outlook for Africa is less than promising. While declarations, pledges and publicity events proliferate, the hard evidence on the ground paints a far from encouraging picture. There has been little progress in reducing the number of hungry people in Africa. Kofi Annan, in addressing a high level seminar in July 2004, called for increased action:

Hunger is a complex crisis. To solve it we must address the interconnected challenges of agriculture, health; nutrition; adverse and unfair market conditions; weak infrastructure and environmental degradation.

Agriculture continues to be the major economic force in African countries. From 70-90% of the population live off the land, most of them as subsistence farmers or pastoralists operating a wide range of different farming systems, developed over centuries. Traditionally, women and men, while having different but complementary roles in agriculture and food production, shared the responsibilities for the secure livelihood of their families. The cultivation of different crops and varieties of the same crop has protected farming communities and families from the unpredictability of rainy seasons and drought periods. Yet, more than 60% of

Africa's lands are defined as drylands, namely arid, semi-arid and sub-humid lands. As a result of climatic conditions, population pressure and human activities, more than 70% agricultural land is termed degraded, and more is degrading rapidly (UNCCD fact sheet).

Land degradation is a global problem. However, because of high levels of poverty and the dependence of farmers on natural resources for subsistence, the impact on rural populations in Africa is particularly severe. Women, as the primary domestic food producers, are the most vulnerable group. Land degradation, the depletion of soil nutrients and reduction of agricultural biodiversity as well as insecure land tenure or land use rights have exacerbated their poverty and economic and political marginalization. Additionally, they are confronted with barriers as a result of national and international socio-economic trends. Commercialization of agriculture and globalization has further undermined their position. It is estimated that of the extremely poor people in the world, most of whom live in rural areas, 70% are women.

This article highlights women's local knowledge in food production systems and environmental sustainability and discusses the increasing difficulties, resulting from continued degradation of the environment, in securing their families' food requirements. We analyse the political and cultural obstacles women face in being recognized as equal partners in policy and strategy developments in areas that impact their lives. The international environmental treaties and obligations on the international community provide the context for the discussion. We explore positive trends and opportunities within the framework of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification and Drought (UNCCD). To conclude, recommendations are suggested addressing both civil society and politicians alike.

The international policy context

International recognition of women's roles

A literature search reveals that there is no lack of studies and surveys describing the challenges and difficulties experienced by poor rural populations, and women in particular, all over Africa. There is no shortage of suggested strategies and policy proposals addressing the problems. A recent review of national reports on the implementation of the MDGs using a gender lens reveals that despite commitments from governments and the international community, little progress has been made (UNDP 2005). Why does the deplorable situation continue? What is lacking in the efforts to strengthen women's participation in policy and strategy developments? What are the obstacles to the recognition and validation of local knowledge, in particular that of women? One aspect of the globalized economic context is the increasing marginalization of women in terms of access to information and communication technologies (ICTs). Despite the relevance and effectiveness of their actions, their historical and current knowledge, the women of the drylands face serious impediments to sharing their knowledge and competencies beyond their immediate environments. Given these obstacles, how can the necessary cooperation between rural women and policy makers be achieved?

In the context of international policy, such as the UN Biodiversity Convention (CBD) and its subsidiary or associated bodies, numerous commitments were made concerning the protection

of local and indigenous knowledge and rights of the knowledge holders. 'Benefit sharing' was introduced as a means to compensate communities for their knowledge of the biological diversity and its traditional uses (CBD Article 15). Yet still, progress in this area appears to be hampered by commercial and political interests. Men and in particular women, who from one generation to the next have preserved judiciously the diversity of the genetic resources for nourishment and health, and shared this expert knowledge freely, have been sidelined or ignored in terms of their expertise as partners in technological cooperation (Burrows 2005).

The UN Convention to Combat Desertification and Drought

In contrast, the UNCCD has taken a proactive partnership approach. It advocates the recognition and validation of local expertise, specifically women's skills in cultivating and preserving crop biodiversity, including the traditional farming systems of which they are an essential component. Even so, the requirements of institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) with its regulations concerning intellectual property rights, and the stances of member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) regarding the multilateral agreement on investments, limit how far the recognition can go. Farming communities, and in particular the women farmers, have little chance to be heard in the framework of international negotiations. Knowledge of these international bodies and their operations is unavailable to local populations other than through intermediaries, such as their political leadership or non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

The UNCCD, negotiated following the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), benefited from increased civil society participation established for UN consultations and forums with UNCED. It has been increasingly regarded as the 'development convention' thanks to its holistic ecosystem approach to the environment. It regards the socio-economic conditions as a major contributing factor in land degradation and desertification, and insists that poverty of the affected populations be addressed at the same time as environmental degradation. As a result of the active participation of civil society groups in the negotiations, particularly from Africa, several key principles were enshrined in the convention. For example, in addition to establishing the requirement of a bottom-up approach, it explicitly attaches importance to the roles of women. Participation of women is recognized as fundamental at all levels and in all aspects if programmes that implement the convention are to be successful.

While the UNCCD is intended to be implemented primarily at the community level and planned and coordinated through National Action Programmes (NAPs), evidence suggests that this has not happened adequately. NAPs require the participation of all stakeholders, including women and youth. Following common practice of researchers in the field of gender mainstreaming and pro-poor development strategies, the UNCCD requests baseline data to be sex-disaggregated so improvements in the conditions of rural women could be better assessed and more targeted programme action taken. Countries are required to report at regular intervals on their progress achieved in reversing land degradation and improving the livelihood conditions of their rural populations. Reviews of the most recent round of NAPs, however, have found that women have been seriously underrepresented and their needs and aspirations sidelined or ignored (Poulsen, 2003).

International network of NGOs concerned with desertification

Civil society participants in the international negotiations for the UNCCD coordinated their participation and lobbying through a loose network, RIOD (the acronym from its French name: réseau des ONG pour la désertification). An important objective of RIOD was to strengthen North-South solidarity with communities at the forefront of combating desertification. The network contributed considerably to the UNCCD philosophy for a bottom up approach and the inclusion of traditional knowledge into the work of the Committee of Science and Technology.

Given the importance attached by the UNCCD to the partnership with civil society and to the bottom-up approach, the strengthening of community voices is an urgent priority. The majority of NGO participation at the UNCCD sessions has been from developing countries, with the largest regional representation from Africa. Many of these groups are lacking resources to combine their international lobbying role with their primary responsibilities towards their local partners and communities. National Focal Points, mirroring the government system of coordination for NAPs, have taken on the responsibility to network with community-based groups and operate as a communication node to subregional and the regional structures providing feedback to the international policy level. The communication systems of RIOD are still evolving and they are seriously hampered by lack of financial resources for networking responsibilities and rely primarily on volunteers (Knabe 2003).

Women and Desertification Caucus

The important role of women in combating desertification is underscored throughout the UNCCD. While women are primarily mentioned as one group among others in the community, such as farmers and pastoralists, they are also recognized as a special, particularly vulnerable, group. During the negotiations for the convention and its national implementation programmes, civil society (CS) groups persistently highlighted the conditions women face in the drylands. Women delegates, supported by their male CS colleagues, regularly reminded delegates of the plight of rural women and stressed the importance of local knowledge and skills in sustainable natural resource management. A Women and Desertification Caucus, spearheaded by African women delegates, coordinated the lobbying activities at the negotiation table. The Caucus members presented best practices and success stories from the field, challenging the majority view that women were primarily helpless victims when combating desertification and extreme poverty. NGO women participants reminded delegates time and again of the leadership role that women should and can play in pursuing strategies for effective implementation of the convention at the national level, demanding that women participate at all levels of policy and strategy development. Funds, specially earmarked for women's programming and capacity development should be accepted as one of the prerequisites for ensuring the engendering of implementation processes of a convention that holds more promise for women's empowerment and equality than any other international environmental agreement (Knabe 2004).

Community action and local knowledge

The UNCCD accentuates the need for a bottom-up participatory approach in policy-making and implementation, and emphasizes the importance of partnerships at all levels and between all stakeholder groups. This engenders a sense of partnership with local populations. It means putting local population needs first, engaging them directly, giving them clear incentives to combat land degradation through the promotion of local initiatives, and actively involving all

resource users in the planning and decision making. This emphasis promotes action from community-based organizations (CBOs) of women's and farmers' groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), etc. Finally, the convention stresses the inclusion of traditional knowledge, in particular that of women, as essential.

The term 'traditional knowledge', used by the UNCCD, overlaps with the definition of other common terms: indigenous or local knowledge. The terms are often used interchangeably. (World Bank n.d.) In this article, local knowledge is used as the broadest inclusive term. Local knowledge describes the totality of information and experience gained over long periods of time in a given community. It incorporates local traditions and reflects the ongoing adaptation to socio-economic, cultural and environmental conditions. (Manual 2005, fact sheet 4.1)

Women's role in combating desertification and drought

Women's traditional role in agriculture

In Africa the saying goes that the products of land and forests are the women's market place. The land and forest feed the rural populations like a buffet with products varying by the season. Women have been the primary guardians of these resources for thousands of years. They collected, identified, selected, and preserved them. They also derived a multitude of medicines from them and used them as a basis for numerous commercial activities, such as oils and honey.

Women have long played a predominant role in family and community in the drylands of Africa, where the essential natural resources are constantly under threat of degradation. Acting as the cultural guardians of their communities and being rooted in these fragile ecosystems has forced women to search for solutions and develop adaptation strategies to sustain their families' livelihoods. Women's knowledge and know-how, developed over a very long time, has been passed down the generations. Their knowledge is based on consistent observation, testing and practical analysis of results. In some cultures, women can move freely and share their expertise with other women. In others, they are restricted to the family compound and information is passed from mother to daughter.

To illustrate this point, we have highlighted women's knowledge and techniques in conservation of genetic resources and the technologies they have developed for their multiple uses. In many African societies, women have traditionally used small plots around the house to grow a variety of foods (FAO n.d.). In Ethiopia, for example, they used the land around the house to test varieties of popular or unusual crops. Women monitored the plants' progress while performing other chores. The most successful varieties were selected and cultivated in the family's field. Women also experimented with intercropping and cross-pollination. As women were responsible for seed selection and storage, they became knowledgeable of the seeds' performance in terms of drought-tolerance and pest resistance. This detailed knowledge of seed varieties and performance became vital for the family's food production and survival (Knabe private papers). In effect, these genetic resources have been preserved thanks to the local technologies, developed for generations, in particular by women (also Appleton 1995, quoted in GST Gateway).

Importance of agrobiodiversity

Many crop and plant species have multiple uses beyond nutrition in the areas of health, energy, agriculture and culture, and have allowed local populations to survive in hostile environments. The diversity of genetic resources of plant and animal species needed to secure the livelihood of the family are described as agrobiodiversity (Manual 2005 fact sheet 1.1). Wild plants and minor, companion crops, have been complementing the staple diet, providing additional nutrients and protecting families from food scarcity in times of failure of the major staple crop. 'Local knowledge and culture can therefore be considered as integral parts of agrobiodiversity management, because it is the human activity of agriculture that shapes and conserves this biodiversity' (Manual 2005 fact sheet 1.1). In fact, agrobiodiversity is environmentally sustainable and can improve productivity and food security.

Women's and men's roles and responsibilities in agrobiodiversity are distinct, and reflect their respective responsibilities in the household and community. Gender specific knowledge has often been underestimated by outside observers, extension agents and development NGOs and usually led to women's specific knowledge being ignored (Bunning 1996, FAO 1999, World Bank 2004). Even today, women in rural Africa share their knowledge with other women. While this activity is restricted, in some cultures, to family members, elsewhere women use communal time for information sharing. In Mali, for example, news exchange is part of the early morning millet pounding chore by small groups of women. The only drawback in the introduction of a motorized mill, as they saw it, was the loss of these precious group meetings.

Disappearance of local knowledge systems

Agrobiodiversity management and the importance of a rich genetic diversity of plants, trees and associated life forms as an integrated farming system has been underestimated by many outside observers and advisers. Desertification and environmental degradation, combined with the introduction of alien species into fragile ecosystems, have increasingly undermined local species survival. Hand in hand with the disappearance of agrobiodiversity goes the loss of local knowledge on the management and conservation of local resources.

To illustrate the threat to knowledge and techniques as applied by women, the following example stands for many. The neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*) has become an important resource for communities in many parts of Africa. It is easy to cultivate, drought resistant and thrives in poor soils. While imported to Africa less than 100 years ago, its properties were quickly recognized by the women in the drylands. They have become masters in the collection and extraction techniques of the neem's seeds and leaves for multiple products and uses. The oil contributes to food conservation and natural protection against bacteria infections. Consequently, neem is used to produce antiseptic soaps and creams. The dried neem powder is used for soil fertilization. The tree serves as a windbreak protecting the soils from erosion. Numerous local tree species such as the baobab or the karité (shea) are used by women efficiently to improve their living conditions. As a result of extensive periods of droughts, these trees are at risk from disappearing in certain countries. Species diversity is decreasing making the trees more prone to infestations. The protection and preservation of native tree species and their genetic diversity is essential for people and environment.

Increasingly, much of local plant genetic diversity is coveted and exploited by international companies while residents, especially women, who have preserved them, are excluded from

any benefits, and their knowledge is being ignored and undervalued. Even where women are allowed to manage these resources according to their traditional methods, externalities are increasingly threatening their survival. Dryland farmers are generally far removed from the places where such genetic resources produce enormous profits and they are not able to benefit. Genetic material and related pertinent information is gathered from villagers on a case by case basis, yet little is returned regarding the intended use of this material. Here we see a problem in the lack of local participation, of justice and of equity in technological cooperation (Burrows 2005, McGown, 2006).

Obstacles to gender equality

Feminization of poverty

In assessing progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, numerous studies have been highlighting the increasingly challenging situation of rural populations in Africa (MEA 2005, Blackden 2003, Kabeer 2003, also Chant, 2003). Analysts are increasingly moving beyond the solely monetary aspect of poverty and its measurement of one or two dollars a day and realizing the complexity of rural poverty. When analyzing it, the concept of poverty needs to be broken down into several aspects. The major obstacles that inhibit improving the livelihood of communities include the scarcity and fragility of natural resources, such as land, water and agricultural and forests resources. Obstacles are compounded by lack of access to basic services such as health care and education.

The role of land in poverty reduction has become a major topic of research and policy development (IFAD International Land Coalition n.d.). In drylands, insecurity of land access and tenure undermines the economic confidence of the rural poor. In most African countries, women cannot own land and are given use rights by male family members. Any improvements in the quality of the often marginal land, may result in them losing access and with it the results of their farming know-how.

Time poverty is a major contributing factor to the feminization of poverty that is often underestimated in externally introduced community support programmes. While this is a concern for both sexes, women are more dramatically impacted. Household chores, such as fetching fuelwood and water take inordinate time, preventing women from conducting more productive activities or benefiting from learning opportunities.

Energy poverty is closely linked to time poverty. For example, having access to light in the mornings and evenings would allow for literacy training. The fundamental importance of energy as a tool to break out of the poverty cycle is expertly analyzed in a recent survey among 15 communities in Senegal. While men and women in the communities often agreed on the challenges they are facing, the more dramatic situation of the women was evident. (Denton 2005) Feminization of poverty is thus the accumulation of these factors as well as social, economic and cultural barriers that impact women in their daily lives.

Feminization of agriculture

Increasingly, observers speak of a 'feminization of agriculture.' The number of female-headed households is constantly growing (IFAD n.d.). The access for women to natural resources and

essential services has not improved. Seasonal migration, primarily of men, has been a common feature of the dry seasons in the Sahel and other drought affected regions of Africa. Usually, women, in particular those with family responsibilities, stay behind in the villages and have to fend for themselves and their children. Relying on their know-how and the village community networks, women have developed extraordinary survival skills and specialized knowledge of cultivation of plants and crops. They have become experts in the identification of wild plant species and effective medicines. However, with increasing environmental degradation, the supply of uncultivated foods that had supplemented their diet has become scarce or disappeared altogether. External interventions by extension agents, development workers and government bureaucrats, not fully appreciating the fragile balance of the local ecosystem, have often contributed to the disappearance of essential food supplies. In many rural communities, women have traditionally not attended village consultations with visitors. Their views were consequently not presented. With the growing number of female extension workers and CBO representatives, the situation is slowly improving. It is now more generally accepted, at least among NGOs, that separate meetings for men and women are a necessity if know-how and views of women are to be fully appreciated.

Impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has created havoc to human lives and livelihoods in many parts of Africa. The long term consequences on communities and countries are too devastating to fully visualize. In rural areas where subsistence farmers have managed to survive in unfavourable environmental conditions, the onslaught of AIDS has destroyed the fabric of families and communities, and created havoc with agricultural production. The findings of a multi-agency UN mission to Southern Africa were summarized in the press release:

The HIV/AIDS pandemic is compounding the premature death of thousands of productive people – particularly women – across the region, and is wrecking the livelihoods of millions more while sowing the seeds of future famines... Women are the pillars of the family and community – the mothers, the care-givers, the farmers. The pandemic is preying on them relentlessly, threatening them in a way that the world has never yet witnessed. (Lewis 2005)

In parallel, traditional local knowledge, in particular held by women, will also be under threat.

Political, economic and cultural barriers

While some progress has been recorded in the level of political representation of women in many African countries, these developments do not automatically reach to local governments and the grassroots level where barriers to participation persist (UNDP 2005, Ballington 2004). Blackden summarizes:

Gender inequality in access to and control of a wide range of economic, human, and social capital assets and resources remains pervasive in Sub-Saharan Africa, and is a core dimension of poverty in the Region. (2003)

It is estimated that women in Africa receive less than 10% of all credit going to small farmers. (IFAD 2003 quoted in Rural Poverty Portal). The trend towards commercialization of agriculture in many Africa countries focuses on cash cropping, usually the domain of male

farmers, further undermines the role of women in agrobiodiversity and environmental sustainability.

A fundamental aspect that needs to be addressed in this context is information poverty. It is widespread among women in rural areas in Africa and contributes to the existing political and cultural barriers that women face. Women's literacy rates are much lower than the national averages. In many communities women are excluded from extension services and lack access to important environmental data. They are being ignored regarding their own contributions to the community's local knowledge. Inter-gender relations vary from culture to culture, however, certain generalized features seem to be accepted by communities and observers alike. The communication networks are gender-based, meaning that men communicate with men and women with women. Women's local knowledge is usually transmitted verbally among women in the family and, where possible, in the community. It is only more recently, that efforts have been made, primarily by women development workers, to record the information and explore means for dissemination beyond the narrow ranges in the community.

An integral part of information poverty is the lack of training and capacity strengthening for women. In the constantly evolving environmental conditions in the drylands, women's local technologies and knowledge have limited success and cannot by themselves provide long-term solutions to a phenomenon like desertification. However, most extensions services, capacity training and programme interventions continue to be focused on men, based on the assumption that they, as heads of household, will share new information and learning with the women. This is unfortunately seldom the case and women are left out of these important initiatives (UNDP 2005, IFAD 2000).

Women fighting back

The obstacles and difficulties women are still facing in their struggle for equality and recognition of their knowledge and skills are enormous. Report after report, especially from the international agencies like UNDP, IFAD and FAO, provide evidence that the rhetoric of women's rights and equality is generally promised by governments and agencies but not matched by actions. Gender mainstreaming, intended to achieve these goals has not worked and concepts are being questioned and revised (Kabeer 2003, UNDP 2005). Efforts by women and civil society groups to focus on programming for women are often ignored and sidelined. Recent studies such as the Millennium Assessment Reports criticize the continuing marginalization of women in Africa in development policies and programmes. The recent UNDP review of gender in the National Millennium Development Reports expresses concern at the lack of gender equality indicators and sets out a series of recommendations for each MDG (UNDP 2005). The need for gender sensitivity training in agencies and governments alike is increasingly being accepted (Evers 2003, UNDP 2006, UNRISD 2005).

Local women's groupings

Despite these distressing realities, women have been quietly and often invisibly improving their position. In many communities across Africa, local women have initiated their own projects to assist each other and to improve livelihoods and communities. Informal networks have passed essential information from generation to generation. More recently, local women

leaders have spearheaded the formation of women's groups with the aim of creating solidarity networks, in particular in communities devastated by AIDS. In the Sahel, women's groups have adapted the traditional group savings systems designed to assist those group members in times of need. Today, applying literacy and numeracy skills to micro-credit system, women plan their finances better, understand the basics of market forces and invest in market gardens and other economic activities. Women's groups and co-ops are integrating new knowledge with traditional knowledge when coordinating market access for local produce. Their knowledge is essential for the new cooperatively managed cereal banks that provide grain supplies during lean seasons and stabilize food crops prices in local markets (Chavez 2003).

As women active in these initiatives are quick to express, such new developments have increased their confidence. They are now better equipped to address new challenges and obstacles. More often, they are speaking up at community gatherings and insisting on having their voices heard. Although mainly restricted to their community, with the support of a growing number of CBOs, national NGOs and some international NGOs, women are sharing their local experiences. For example, women farmer exchanges, linking women from one group to another in a given region, are especially successful as they are enabling consultations on all aspect of food production and social-economic issues. Unfortunately, such projects, despite their importance, are confined to individual case studies. To date no region-wide comparative studies have been undertaken that could provide a more general overview of this multitude of initiatives.

Farmer innovators

Local knowledge of men and women farmers has been gaining in visibility thanks to the spread of innovative action research methodologies. Increasingly, participatory planning and evaluation of community-based programmes, built on the well-known Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) system, are being used to develop and share best practices. More and more national and international NGOs promote and support local innovation and work closely with local farmers to record and promote their know-how and expertise.

In a groundbreaking study on farmer innovators in Africa, more than 1000 locally conceived and implemented initiatives were documented by the research team. They demonstrated that substantial positive results are being achieved by men and women farmer innovators (Reij 2004). The study found that women innovators are usually less known outside their women's networks. Gender sensitivity training among the local partners was found to be an important aspect for improving the gender balance in the identification of innovators. The research team identified 20-30% women among the farmer innovators. It was easier for women farmer innovators to be identified when women were involved in the identification (UNCCD 2005). The farmers' techniques and practices varied considerably, from region to region and between women and men.

Chris Reij stresses the need for exchange visits among farmer innovators as they will invariably test out new ideas from other places and adapt them to the local conditions. Village workshops, where new ideas and experiments can be discussed and reviewed, should be organized as frequently and widespread as possible. Subregional and regional workshops provide the framework for policy development and allow for lobbying for change of government interventions at the national and regional programming levels.

The UNCCD Secretariat recently published a compilation on traditional knowledge which brings together the results of numerous studies and consultations related to the topic (UNCCD 2005). The numerous contributions address with concern the many different aspects of gender imbalance. Recommendations are made regarding tools and methodologies designed to reverse the situation. The criticism is explicitly addressed at the local leadership, national governments, international development agencies and expert advisers.

The need to upscale local knowledge

Lessons learned from these and many other projects being implemented in different regions of Africa need to be shared and further developed. While the agro-ecological conditions vary enormously and local cultures are very diverse, the basis for change and dramatic improvements are present and provide viable solutions to the ongoing challenges faced by women and men in many rural regions of Africa.

A systematic recording of the multitude of successful projects linking local knowledge with innovation is an essential prerequisite to further develop environmentally sustainable agriculture and food security systems in Africa. Women's participation in this is vitally important:

If agricultural research is to achieve impact that benefits poor people, it is vital that farmers participate directly in technology development. The participation of women is especially important, because their access to appropriate technology has a critical effect on household food security and on the well-being of children.
(CGIAR 2005).

Emerging networks and initiatives

Civil society networks are multiplying in Africa, aiming at building on expertise gained and lessons learned and sharing these with other communities. They are still mainly local or national with few of them regional or even international. The gap in communication between local knowledge systems and international knowledge management persists. ICTs, while not yet widely available in Africa beyond urban centres, have facilitated the gathering and dissemination of best practices and expertise. International agencies have established topic-based knowledge networks or gateways to facilitate access to relevant material, such as the World Bank's Indigenous Knowledge Programme (<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/AFRICAEXT/EXTINDKNOWLEDGE/0,,menuPK:825562~pagePK:64168427~piPK:64168435~theSitePK:825547,00.html>) and the UNDP's MDG Knowledge Network (<http://www.undp.org/mdg/mdg-net.shtml>) Both approaches rely heavily on individual women and men intermediaries to provide the linkages.

A serious roadblock is the lack of financial resources for upscaling local knowledge and sharing it through community exchanges or generally accessible databases. Until now, networking does not fall under the programme priorities for funding agencies, whether national or international. Participation in consultations, seminars and conferences is often seen as a luxury that does not contribute to fighting poverty and environmental degradation. However, as has been spelt out, sharing of expertise and development of integrated

knowledge systems are essential for success. A new multi-agency initiative, TerrAfrica (<http://www.terrafrica.com>), might facilitate a new approach to networking and knowledge sharing in Africa. Launched in October 2005, it has set itself an ambitious work plan in three interrelated programmatic activity lines: coalition building; knowledge management, and investments.

The Africa RIOD Network

The Africa RIOD network, the civil society coordinating partner of TerrAfrica, has set itself the additional challenge to promote networking and information sharing among groups and networks in all African sub regions. The Women Caucus on Desertification has drafted a concrete plan of action for the next three years. A new generation of young women professionals has taken the lead to work for change at the community level in their respective countries while at the same time attempting to build a 'competency network' of connected subject focus task forces. Task force topics include agrobiodiversity, land issues including access to land and land rights for women, biodiversity, water management, and forestry. The task force coordinators are connected virtually and intend to share their information on the various discussion boards available. These intended initiatives are encouraging. Many more such projects need to be developed in a coordinated way to make the impact that is required and desired.

International opportunities

This year marks the tenth anniversary since the UNCCD came into force. To recognize the importance of desertification as a global challenge, the UN General Assembly has declared 2006 the International Year of Deserts and Desertification (IYDD). The General Assembly expressed 'its deep concern for the exacerbation of desertification, particularly in Africa, and noted its far-reaching implications for the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which must be met by 2015' (UNGA/RES/58/211). It further stressed the need to 'to raise public awareness and to protect the biological diversity of deserts, indigenous and local communities and the traditional knowledge of those affected by this phenomenon.'

IYDD is a call to action for civil society, governments and the international community to strengthen their resolve to achieve the MDGs in Africa by 2015. They are urged to multiply their initiatives to implement the commitments made nationally, regionally and internationally for gender equality and women's rights to full participation in programming, policy and representation.

Recommendations

In the Introduction we asked why the efforts to strengthen the participation of women in policy and strategy developments are not showing better results. We have described the rich knowledge base of communities and the specific knowledge that women have developed over many generations. We have illustrated aspects of this knowledge and explained its importance for the present and future survival of fragile ecosystems in Africa. Finally, we have explored the different levels of obstacles and barriers that bloc women's equal participation and ensure their own social, cultural and economic wellbeing.

Important policy commitments have been made by the international community, political leaders and national governments in international conventions, regional declarations and national legislations. Manuals and analytical tools have been developed to assist the training of officials, local leaders and civil society groups (UNDP 2006, also Evers 2003, Ott 2002). In order to achieve the MDGs, urgent and comprehensive actions are needed.

The following lists a selection of priorities that emanate from our analysis. It reflects the demands by many who have studied the subject matter in depth :

- Women's access to resources for the validation and promotion of local knowledge and know-how;
- Promotion of an engendered vision in the implementation of the UNCCD;
- Financing of studies to produce inventories of knowledge and competencies of the women;
- Strengthening of women's capacities in all relevant aspects including leadership and programme management and evaluation;
- Recognition of women's rights in terms of land and natural resources as well as intellectual property rights of local genetic resources and their management; and
- Special designated funds at women for women's programmes.

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Abstract

In many regions of Africa land degradation and desertification are increasingly threatening people's livelihoods and the integrity of ecosystems. Women, as the families' main food producers, are particularly impacted. Traditionally, women's contribution to food security and environmental protection in agrarian societies in Africa has been a fundamental aspect of long term sustainability. Yet too often nowadays, when searching for solutions, and/or when agricultural policies and land management strategies are developed, whether national or international, women's voices are bypassed and their know-how belittled or ignored.

For more than 10 years, an international civil society network on desertification (RIOD) strives to bring local expertise to the international policy and negotiation tables. RIOD promotes the important exchange of local expertise and scientific knowledge in this field. The article discusses experiences at the local level. It reviews obstacles at the community level and to the necessary exchange of experiences at the national and international levels. It concludes with suggesting ways for overcoming barriers and encourages lessons learned. The year 2006 has been designated by the United Nations as the International Year of Deserts and Desertification. This is providing a timely opportunity for focus on knowledge systems for African drylands that give equal weight to women's local knowledge in sustainable land and natural resource management.

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