

# THE ONGOING FOOD CRISIS IN AFRICA AND THE RIGHTS OF FEMALE FARMERS

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*L'auteure examine la crise actuelle dans la production africaine de la nourriture, en relation au rôle que peuvent jouer les femmes de milieu rural dans la lutte pour éliminer l'indigence et la famine qui affligent des millions d'Africain(e)s. Après avoir décrit les troubles créés par le manque chronique de nourriture, elle soutient qu'un rôle central doit être prévu pour les femmes dans tous les efforts de*

*secours, aussi bien par les gouvernements africains que par les agences internationales.*

This paper addresses itself to the general food crisis that is widespread on the African continent. It focusses on the potential role that women in the rural areas can play in the battle to defeat the poverty and famine which afflicts millions of Africans today. The present food crisis in Africa has aroused the consciousness

of the developed countries and a massive effort has been made since the early 1970s to provide relief to affected areas. In 1985 alone, a United Nations Conference on emergency relief estimated help was urgently required for some 30 million African famine victims.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I argue that in order to solve the problems of famine and poverty in Africa, women should be assigned a central role.

## THE FOOD CRISIS IN AFRICA: AN OVERVIEW

A look at the food situation in Africa would indicate that many African countries are beginning to experience serious food shortages – even African countries where there are no discernable climatic, ecological or social reasons for hunger have begun to suffer critical food catastrophes.<sup>2</sup> The gravity of this situation can be appreciated when it is recalled that

countries which, a decade ago, were exporters of food have become net importers. Even Kenya, for a long time regarded as a model for agricultural development, has joined the list of African countries unable to feed their growing populations.

In almost all African countries the food problem has already begun to worry

political leaders and policy makers by generating disturbing political crises: in Egypt the worst urban riots in 1977 were caused by food prices; April 1979 saw serious riots in Monrovia, the capital city of the West African state of Liberia. These riots which left, by the government's own admission, 37 dead and hundreds injured were triggered off by a proposed increase



Credit: MATCH (Ottawa, Canada)

in the price of rice. In Guinea Bissau the coup which ousted the administration of President Louis Cabral in 1981 was generally regarded as a "rice coup."<sup>3</sup>

I could quote many more examples of social and political unrest brought about by the chronic food shortage in Africa.

Thus, in the ultimate analysis the food situation in Africa looks extremely gloomy. For a long time Africans seem destined to play the role of beggars for food aid from the developed countries. Policy makers, technocrats and "development experts" have worsened Africa's

food situation through ill-conceived development strategies. Most of these strategies have failed to improve Africa's record in food production because they have ignored the requirements of an important food producing category: the women in the rural areas.

## THE RURAL AFRICAN WOMAN AND FOOD PRODUCTION

By "food production" I refer to the entire cycle of activity beginning with the planting of crops and crop maintenance to the point where the food substance is transformed into edible form on the table. In this process women in the rural areas play a vital role. They make important decisions in the family, prepare and handle food. They are an integral part of the food production process. Further still, whenever and wherever water has to be carried for purposes of preparing food, women have to carry it.

In developing countries (including Africa), women account for 40% to 60% of the agricultural labour.<sup>4</sup> When food is scarce or expensive, women often deprive themselves for the sake of their families. In many African countries, children – for

whom women often assume greater responsibility – also suffer disproportionately. This is because their rights to food are not equal to those of men. An Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) report gives a clear picture of food consumption patterns: "Unfortunately, in many areas men of the household get the lion's share of available food and in particular the soups, stews and relishes (which women produce). In some African cultures it is still considered ill mannered for a woman to eat much of the more nutritious foods in spite of her high physiological needs."<sup>5</sup> African women and children occupy a very subordinate status in their relationships with men. It is women who do the bulk of the hard work in food production, yet they are deprived

of the right to decide how their products should be used. However, the activities of women in the sphere of food production have received very little recognition from "development policy experts." Their activities are seldom documented in census and labour force measures. Thus it is not possible for their activities to be considered in policy formulation and project plans.

This institutional bias which undervalues the contribution of women in food production is reflected in the projects and plans of both local and international development agencies. Thus projects relating to food production conceived by these agencies often tend to deny women accessibility to productive resources.



## FOOD PRODUCTIVE RESOURCES AND WOMEN IN THE RURAL AREAS

By "food productive resources" I mean those inputs necessary for agriculture which improve the quantity of food output in society. Here one could name items such as credit, extension services, fertilizer, seeds, sprays, stockfeeds and insecticides. Women's access to these resources has tended to be more restricted than men's. Cultural factors reflecting women's social position are partly responsible for this difference in access.<sup>6</sup> In Zambia for example, one can state that rural development institutions such as the Agricultural Finance Company, the Development Bank of Zambia, the Zambia Agricultural Development Bank and the Zambia Federation of Cooperatives carry out policies which are detrimental to the activities of women in the agricultural sector.

It is not true that credit programmes, particularly rural ones, tend to use male-dominated information networks to announce credit opportunities and deliver credit services? Credit and other inputs are usually distributed through agricultural associations which seldom include women, or through extension services staffed mainly by men who tend to interact with male farmers. Rural women are not able to receive information on their

eligibility for credit or help with application procedures. Worse still, women are not normally registered owners of houses, land or other property that can serve as security. Homes and individual land titles are most often in the name of the male head of household. His signature is required in order to use them as security.

This state of affairs can only mean one thing: vital inputs are channelled towards a group that is not really producing food. The real producers get very little or nothing at all – hence their inability to increase output of food which would help ease the chronic food shortage in Africa.

International agencies and local ministries, bureaux, and departments must also be criticised for embarking on costly and prestigious rural development schemes which do not address themselves to the needs of the real producers of food in Africa, the women. It has, for instance, been said that the concept of Integrated Rural Development offers tremendous hope for Africa's stagnating agriculture. It is inspired by a "technocratic vision which aims to develop the rural economy by injecting an integrated package of improved machinery, farm inputs, infrastructures and other technological

innovations which are considered capable of providing the technical basis for increased rural output."<sup>7</sup>

Detailed research has shown of late that the "inputs" and other "innovations" do not filter down to women who do the bulk of agricultural work in Africa. Instead these inputs only enrich medium and large scale farmers. As these well-to-do farmers become richer and richer, they grab land from lower and weaker groups such as the peasantry. The women suffer not only in terms of their domestic chores, but find themselves turned into agricultural, landless labourers on the farms of the rich. Since cash crops are most attractive in terms of monetary rewards, the rich farmers concentrate on these, thereby undermining food productive capacity. Women who are landless find their capacity for food output severely constrained in the absence of land. Such is the danger presented by the development strategies which do not address themselves to the needs and rights of the real producers of food in Africa. It is necessary for the rights of women in the rural sector to be articulated and protected if Africa is to arrest the ridiculous situation of begging for food gifts for her millions of inhabitants all the time.

## A BLUEPRINT FOR THE FUTURE

If Africa is to improve her image to the rest of the world, then food self-sufficiency must be achieved in the shortest possible time. Africa's political leaders must recognise the fact that there is a large gap between their rhetoric on rural development and basic needs on the one hand, and concrete achievements on the other.

The current food crisis in Africa makes political independence a big sham. Africans should realise that food aid can be used as a tool for foreign policy by donor governments and agencies. Unless Africans mobilise themselves effectively for increased food production, "Food Imperialism" will be used to manipulate African governments.

In order to alleviate the food crisis, African politicians and technocrats should realise that it is women who hold the key. If women are to produce the food that Africa needs, then their rights should be articulated and protected. It is high time that politicians stopped the practice of

paying lipservice to the cause of emancipating women. Women's rights should be promoted in such a way as to enable them to have access to crucial productive resources. Institutional mechanisms should be devised to ensure that inputs are channelled to women in the rural areas. These mechanisms should evaluate and monitor the distribution of inputs to ensure that rich farmers do not seize the inputs that should be given to the women.

Women should also be given effective representation at strategic areas in organisations which deal with rural development. Women policy experts would be able to establish at the highest levels of policy making whether programmes will genuinely help the majority of women in rural areas to produce more food. One finds in Zambia that, although some prominent women hold positions which enable them to make front page news, those positions do not carry any substan-

tial authority. Again, politicians should attempt to bridge rhetoric with reality: women should be given positions that would enable them to make really important decisions in Africa.

It is also necessary on the part of the policymakers to treat the African family as a unit with tremendous potential for increasing food production. The practice of only computing the value of work performed by the male head of the household grossly underrepresents the key contribution of women and children. This situation should be changed in the shortest possible time. Africa must learn that, if the food crisis that afflicts and haunts millions of people on the continent is to be overcome, it is necessary to recognise Africa's hidden hope. This hidden hope is symbolised by the millions upon millions of women in the rural areas, who – given access to productive resources – may bring salvation to a hungry continent.

<sup>1</sup>*Zambia Daily Mail* (14 March 1985). The Appeal for more aid to Africa was made by Mr. Bradford Morse, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (U.N.D.P.).

<sup>2</sup>Emmanuel Hansen, "Public Policy and the Food Question in Ghana," *Africa Development* (Dakar Codesria, Vol. 6, No. 3, 1981), p.100.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p.99.

<sup>4</sup>Kathleen Cloud, "Sex Roles in Food Production and Distribution Systems in the Sahel." Paper presented to the Inter-

national Conference on Women and Food (University of Arizona, January 8-11, 1978), pp.62-89.

<sup>5</sup>John L. Fischer, "Summary Report on the Conference on Women and Food," *Ibid.*, p.67.

<sup>6</sup>Mayra Buvinic and Isabel Nieves, "Elements of Women's Economic Integration: Project Indicators for the World Bank," p.9.

<sup>7</sup>For a very informative analysis of the concept of Integrated Rural Development see an article by Steven A. Nkom, "Inte-

grated Rural Development and the Marginalization of the Peasantry in Nigeria," *African Development* (Dakar, Codesria, Vol. 6, No.4, 1981), pp.82-92.

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