



Cultivating knowledge and crops in sub-Saharan Africa; Women key to sustainable development

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Women account for 75 percent of the agricultural producers in sub-Saharan Africa, but the majority of women farmers are living on only \$1.25 per day, according to researchers from the Worldwatch Institute.

"The lack of access to information technology and the inability to connect rural enterprises to banks can prevent women from obtaining vital financial services," said Danielle Nierenberg, director of the Institute's Nourishing the Planet project, a two-year evaluation of environmentally sustainable agricultural innovations to alleviate hunger.

Despite the challenging circumstances that women in developing countries face, important innovations in communications and organizing are helping women play a key role in the fight against hunger and poverty.

"Access to credit, which provides women farmers with productive inputs and improved technologies, can be an effective tool in improving livelihoods in Africa and beyond," said Worldwatch Institute's executive director Robert Engelman.

Worldwatch researchers traveled to 25 countries across sub-Saharan Africa to meet with more than 350 farmers groups, NGOs, government agencies, and scientists, highlighting innovations, such as better extension and communication services, that are helping farmers improve their livelihoods.

The findings are documented in the recently released report, State of the World 2011: Innovations that Nourish the Planet.

Nourishing the Planet highlights four innovations that can strengthen women's agricultural capacity: providing microfinance credit, providing access to the global market, providing extension services, and providing organizational support to women's projects.

***Providing women with microfinance credit. Globally, women fall well short of receiving the same financial benefits and opportunities as men. Only 10 percent of the credit services available in sub-Saharan Africa, including small "microfinance" loans, are extended to women.**

The New York-based nonprofit Women's World Banking is the only microfinance network focused explicitly on women, providing loans of as little as \$100 to help women start businesses.

Microfinance institutions from 27 countries provide the loans to women who in many cases have no other way to access credit.

***Providing women access to the global market. In Africa's Western Sahel, the production of shea butter is boosting women's entry into global markets.**

Women-run cooperatives across the region are tapping into the global demand for fair trade and organic beauty products by selling the skin-care cream they produce from the shea nut crop to cosmetics firms such as Origins and L'Oréal.

These "responsible" companies in turn pay fair price for the products and invest in the women's communities.

***Providing women with extension services. In the United States, outreach programs like Purdue Cooperative Extension Services offer training for women to grow their businesses and increase profitability. And in Uganda, agricultural extension workers have introduced women's groups to "coolbot" technology-solar energy and an inverter-that can be used in traditional reed, mud, and thatch shops to reduce temperatures and prolong the shelf lives of vegetables."When extension programs invest in women farmers, the payoff can be huge," write Dianne Forte, Royce Gloria Androa, and Marie-Ange Binagwaho in State of the World 2011."Women receive an education, raise yields, increase their incomes, and improve the nutritional status of family members, contributing to the wellbeing of entire communities."**

***Helping women work together. Around the world, numerous organizations are helping to empower and support women farmers.**

In the United States, American Agri-Women, a coalition of farm, ranch, and agribusiness women's organizations, works with more than 50 state and commodity affiliates on legislative and regulatory matters as well as on student and consumer education.

And the country's National Women in Agriculture Association helps socially disadvantaged women in rural areas obtain resources administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, with the mission to "educate, develop, network and create bonds of sisterhood among all women."

With a large percentage of women worldwide still lacking necessary services, it is time that policymakers include women, respect what they know, and stand beside them in pursuing the right to equality for all women.

The ideas and technologies for the success of women are available, and development programs have the opportunity to thrive if they embrace the knowledge and skills of women farmers.