



# Climate Change & Food Security: The Impact on Rural Women

## 1. Introduction

Despite the significant progress that has been made in addressing gender inequalities, women are still amongst the most marginalized groups of society. According to a report on poverty and inequality compiled by Dr Ingrid Woolard; Africans account for 95% of people classed as 'poor' in South Africa, and 77% are women living in rural areas.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the Statistics SA 2015 report on employment disparities shows that underemployment is more prevalent among women than among men. Furthermore, it is recorded that 65% of work predominantly done by women is unpaid, as compared to 25% of men's work.<sup>2</sup> By doing unpaid domestic work women contribute to their communities, but remain restricted in terms of their own economic potential. In turn, they remain disempowered and are largely excluded from decision making and development processes.

## 2. Food Security and Climate Change Patterns

Food security is "a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and preferences for an active and healthy life".<sup>3</sup> Agriculture is central to rural women's livelihoods, and contributes to the overall economic growth of the country. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fifth Assessment Report, access to land and water have a significant bearing on an individual or community's vulnerability to food insecurity.<sup>4</sup> But climate change threatens the sustainability of both water and land resources, thus posing a direct threat to food security. The IPCC report further indicates that the agricultural sector will

be severely affected by factors caused by climate change, including:

- Temperature increases
- Rainfall variability
- Degradation of land and water resources
- Pests and disease outbreaks
- Extreme weather events

## 3. Women in Rural Areas

In many South African rural communities social factors such as age, class and gender determine the use of the natural environment and how resources are distributed. As compared to their urban counterparts, male and female, women in rural areas often lack sufficient access to resources, information, financial services, and technology. They spend most of their time taking care of their households and communities, and carrying out domestic duties such as water and firewood collection; cooking and tidying; caring for children and the elderly; and food production, harvesting and distribution.

Given the workload that these women endure on a daily basis, it becomes difficult for them to focus on their own development when opportunities are presented. Thus, they are faced with challenges of illiteracy and low skill levels. These structural gender imbalances in rural communities are often underpinned by customary laws imposed by traditional authorities: laws which deprive women of access to and ownership of resources such as land, water and livestock, and deny them the right to partake in farming activities and decision-making processes. For all these reasons, rural women and their livelihoods are extremely vulnerable to the threat posed by climate change.

### **3.1 Their level of awareness**

The increase in temperatures, variability in rainfall, and more extreme weather events, all degrade water and land resources, and directly undermine food security; they can lead to crop failure, infestation by pests, and disease outbreaks. Faced with the responsibility of feeding people at both household and community level, women are particularly vulnerable to the impact that climate change has on food security. It is crucial for them to understand, for example, the reasons behind changes in crop yield and soil behaviour, and to know which crops to grow under the different conditions brought about by climate change. It appears, however, that women in rural areas know very little about climate change, the impacts it has on food security, and how best to respond. Very often climate change information is not packaged in accessible terms for them to understand, and many are not sufficiently trained to apply the information so as to ensure resilience.

### **3.2 Their contributions**

Many development policies overlook women's roles and significance, especially women in rural areas. They are often considered last in the process of policy development and implementation. This failure to consider the role that rural women play in development could be one of the reasons women are still viewed as victims instead of central actors. However, women are often the main caregivers in communities, and the experience and knowledge they have could be used towards building the sustainable future to which we all aspire. Given the responsibility of feeding their families, women have through the years engaged in farming, natural resource harvesting, hawking basic goods, and developing entrepreneurial skills. Their expertise in food security; nutrition; and land and natural resource management, could provide additional capacity for resilience against the negative effects of the changing climate on rural livelihoods.

## **4. Roundtable Discussion**

On 16 August the CPLO hosted a roundtable discussion on this topic, which provided a platform for people to engage about the level of awareness of women in rural areas regarding climate change and its impact on food security. On the panel were Ms Dorah Marema from GenderCC-Southern Africa; and Ms Seno Madikiza and Dr

Ikalafeng Kgakatsi from the National Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF). Participating in the roundtable were representatives from business, civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and media.

GenderCC-SA is part of the international UN Women's network, working for gender and climate justice. Their different projects focus on providing training and building the capacity of female smallholder farmers in rural, urban and peri-urban communities. In her presentation, Ms Marema indicated that they use participatory approaches in different projects, allowing the community to play an integral part in the planning, designing and implementation of the project. Through this approach, they are able to gather information and learn more about the challenges that women in particular communities are faced with.

She highlighted that, in most communities, it is found that women are to some extent aware of the effects of climate change; and have over time developed some adaptation methods to help them sustain their livelihoods. But low levels of institutional capacity and resource accessibility have been found to be big challenges, with local authorities unable to render the requisite support services. For example, there is a lack of climate change officers in rural municipalities. Furthermore, the media of communication used to disseminate climate change information are not easily accessible to women in rural areas – newspapers, TV, radio and the internet. In addition, Ms Marema noted that there is limited documentation on gender issues and climate change, and that existing policies have little focus on the topic.

Within the National Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries there is a Directorate of Climate Change and Disaster Management, which is responsible for the development and implementation of policy on climate change and other disasters in the sectors of agriculture, forestry and fisheries. Ms Madikiza gave a presentation on the work that the Directorate continues to do in response to climate change in these sectors. She started by explaining the concept of food security and how it is threatened by climate change. She noted that, as much as the agricultural sector is affected by climate change, it is also one of the main contributors to the problem, through activities such as burning of stubble and waste, high electricity consumption,

and the use of inorganic fertilizers. She also mentioned adaptation measures and how farmers could benefit from management practices including:

- Crop diversification
- Crop management
- Livestock management
- Irrigation management

Ms Madikiza further explained that, in terms of climate change policy development, the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) is the focal point. In alignment with DEA's vision for climate change response, the Directorate develops and implements policies and programmes for the agriculture, forestry and fisheries sectors. These include strategic frameworks such as the Draft Climate Smart Agriculture policy, which is currently in the public participation process for comments. Ms Madikiza also spoke about the methods which DAFF uses to disseminate information on climate change impacts, including:

- The use of extension officers for farmers
- Written material and publications
- Presentations on farmers' days
- Presentations through invitations by stakeholders

Concluding her presentation, Ms Madikiza mentioned that the severe effects of climate change will be felt mostly by the poor, especially in rural areas. Therefore it is important that funding mechanisms be made available for vulnerable farmers (including women); and for gender sensitive policies and programmes to be developed and implemented.

The problem of inadequate consideration for small-scale farmers at grassroots level in terms of policy and practice was one of the main points of discussion at the roundtable. Participants argued that there was:

- Limited access to land resources
- Very little insurance cover for smallholder farmers
- Insufficient access to information
- No proper platform for women to influence policy development based on their experiences.

It was recommended that the local government sphere be capacitated for a more decentralised model of agriculture, which would encourage and

promote small-scale farming; and that the services of extension officers for farmers in the various provinces should be made accessible to women. It was also emphasised that the indigenous knowledge and experience that women in rural communities have accumulated could play an important role in ensuring food security in the face of climate change.

The concept of 'agro-ecology' also formed part of the recommendations suggested by participants. Agro-ecology is a food production system, where indigenous knowledge and the latest science and technology are used in collaboration to create equitable livelihoods and healthy ecological environments. It includes land-care skills such as weed management, spring water conservation, and vegetation to reduce soil erosion, which are skills that women in rural areas already have, and which could help create employment opportunities. It was also suggested that there should be a programme that helps women to transfer their skills of land-care and livestock keeping to the younger generation, thus ensuring sustainability. The linkages between renewable energy, agriculture and employment were highlighted; for example, the use of biogas digesters for generating electricity for agricultural use could create employment at no cost to the environment.

Participants noted that it would be beneficial for rural and urban communities to share information, and to work together to influence climate change policy which will help achieve gender equality in the agricultural sector. Furthermore, Rev Rachel Mash suggested that an opportunity be created for where faith-based organisations to work together with government to increase the level of awareness for women in rural areas regarding climate change; and for collaborations between government and community based organisations to be enhanced.

## 5. Conclusion

Women in rural communities spend a lot of their time nurturing, and meeting the needs of, other people. They seldom have opportunities and time to participate in their own development, thus they are faced with challenges of illiteracy and a lack of formal skills. Agricultural livelihoods become central to their survival and that of the people for whom they provide. Now, while climate change threatens these livelihoods, vital information that could help rural women to adapt successfully is

being communicated largely through media that does not reach them, and in a language, English, with which most of them are not familiar. Climate change information can be challenging to understand at the best of times; it requires interpretation and supporting resources for one to be able to apply it in practice. Meanwhile, our rural communities are still struggling with such basic issues as access to water, sanitation, electricity, health facilities, and proper roads and transport.

Against such a background a serious challenge looms: How can climate change information be made accessible and useful to rural women in agriculture, so that they can respond appropriately and contribute positively to climate resilience and food security?

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<sup>1</sup>[https://sarpn.org/documents/e0000006/Poverty\\_Inequality\\_SA.pdf](https://sarpn.org/documents/e0000006/Poverty_Inequality_SA.pdf)

<sup>2</sup><https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-02-11-02/Report-02-11-022015.pdf>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/y4671e/y4671e06.htm>

<sup>4</sup>[https://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/wg2/WGIIAR5-Chap7\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/wg2/WGIIAR5-Chap7_FINAL.pdf)

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