Community Theatre: 
The Voice for empowered African Women Farmers

Women Farmers: the Pillars of African Agriculture

Women farmers are the pillars of African agriculture. They are responsible for growing, selling, buying and preparing food for their families. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), over two thirds of all women in Africa are employed in the agriculture sector and produce nearly 90 per cent of food on the continent.

Yet even as the guardians of food security, they are still marginalized in business relations and have minimal control over access to resources such as land, inputs such as improved seeds and fertilizer, credit and technology. A combination of logistical, cultural, and economic factors, coupled with a lack of gender statistics in the agricultural sector, means that agricultural programmes are rarely designed with women’s needs in mind. As a result, African women farmers have no voice in the development of agricultural policies designed to improve their productivity.

The Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN) is working to change this. Recognizing the critical role that women farmers play in ensuring household food security, in July 2009, FANRPAN launched Women Accessing Realigned Markets (WARM), a three year pilot project supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The project seeks to strengthen women farmers’ ability to advocate for appropriate agricultural policies and programmes in Africa through an innovative tool, Theatre for Policy Advocacy (TPA). The WARM project is piloted in Malawi and Mozambique.
A History of Theatre for Development

Africa has a long history of sending messages through drama and plays. Through theatre performances, the work of African poets and actors has challenged policies and human rights abuses. Theatre, by its nature, is cultural as it involves song and dance, ceremonial rituals, the society and people. Theatre therefore becomes a way of life and defines a people.

In Africa, theatre is used as a medium of education, problem solving, dialogue and as a mobilisation tool on developmental issues such as literacy, health, sanitation and agriculture. An arts expert once said, "Theatre can be a tool to exchange and impart knowledge, serving as a mechanism for conscientisation. It can also be used for mobilisation of people and for communication purposes."

Community theatre is an especially powerful medium for communicating ideas in areas where literacy rates are low and shared conceptions of what is and what should be are primarily cultivated through social interactions and traditions. It is a way of leveling the field, breaking barriers and addressing topics that are deemed taboo.

Bringing out the Community Voice Using Theatre for Policy Advocacy

Theatre for Policy Advocacy (TPA) is a form of participatory theatre that allows women farmers to engage their communities in developing solutions to their problems.

TPA performances are structured around issues that are pertinent to a particular community and its unique problems. A script is written and the scenes are played out to sensitise the community to the inherent problems. This is followed by a series of facilitated dialogues where various members from the different tiers of the community (youth, working men and women, community leaders, NGO staff, elders) articulate their challenges and propose solutions. It is at this dialogue forum that leaders and community champions are identified and nominated to take issues further.

The plays act as mirrors to community problems and can be harnessed in a number of ways:

- The interactive approach enables communities to be absorbed into the “action” and ask relevant and searching questions
- The actors can use their characters to herald change and the public can propose solutions
- The story does not end “when the fat lady sings” but the “conversation” continues in the community in the form of informal and facilitated dialogues.
The Mozambique Story

The key themes of the Mozambique script were agricultural inputs, role of agro-dealers, market access (transport and infrastructure), market prices. The script tells a story of the daily struggles of rural women farmers trying to access markets to sell their crops for a better price in order to make a living.

Marieta, Safira and Joaninha wake up early each morning to walk a long distance to reach the bus stop; where they can take a bus to reach good markets that can pay them fairly for their produce. They carry the baskets, boxes and bags, on their heads. Safira is a victim of domestic abuse; she has been badly beaten by her husband to a point where she is now lame. Whenever she manages to sell some of her produce she must give the money to her husband who spends it all on alcohol.

At the market, Marieta’ is selling poor quality produce, this is because she does not use fertilizer, and she does not have enough money to buy pesticides. When the dealers arrive, they offer the women low prices for their produce and the women refuse to sell to them.

If they do not sell anything they have to take their produce back home risking spoilage and rotting. Joaninha is under pressure to sell because she desperately needs money, so she decides to sell at the offered low price. Her fellow women are angry with her because they had agreed not to accept the low prices. But even so, all the money Joaninha gets, she has to pay the people who she owes and also use some for bus fare going home. In the end, she has nothing but empty pockets.

The women spend all day at the market and when the sun in setting they decide to go back home without selling anything. To go back home they struggle to find transport as the last bus has already gone. When they see the district administrator’s car approach, they decide to flag him down and engage him to present their challenges.
In Boane, seven women farmers were identified and trained on theatre performance and facilitated community dialogues. After the training, these women farmers conducted TPA performances in Bairro 25 de Junho, Chitevele, Txonissa, Marien Ngouabi (Bairro 3), Eduardo Mondlane, Massaca 2, Gumbane and Mulotana.

In Marracuene six women farmers were identified and also trained on theatre performance and dialogue facilitation. After the training, these women farmers conducted TPA performances in Samora Machel, Segundo Bairro, Xipungana or Terceiro bairro, Ngalunde, Primeiro Bairro, Massinga, Paindi and Sibakusi.

During the TPA performances, a number of community members were able to identify with the characters portrayed by the women farmers in the play. In the post performance dialogue, One woman farmer stood up and said: “I was laughing as I was watching the play, but this woman is me, … This is what happens to us everyday.”

In the discussions that followed the performances, community members opened up about the challenges that they face and they were able to come up with possible solutions. For example with regards to challenges of accessing quality seeds and fertilizers on time, the communities recommended that local government should set up small shops at central points where farmers can purchase agricultural inputs before the planting season.

To respond to the challenge of unscrupulous dealers who offer farmers low prices and then take the produce and sell it for high prices in Maputo, the community had two suggestions, (i) the government should intervene and set standard prices that apply across the country (ii) farmers should come together and sell their produce as a group so that they get good prices instead of selling as individuals.

Finally with regards to pest and disease control and new technologies, the communities requested the government to second an extension officer who can teach farmers on which pesticides to use and to teach them new and effective farming methods.

**Key Recommendations from the Mozambique TPA**

In order to empower women farmers and promote farming as a business in rural communities in Boane and Marracuane recommended the following:

- Creation of effective local markets with regulated prices that serve women farmers better
- Simplification of the process of access to rural finance
- Equipping women with knowledge on new farming technologies and create opportunities for them to access and utilize the technologies
- The development of infrastructure such as roads that link rural communities to markets and storage facilities to prevent post harvest losses.
Acting it out in Advocacy: The Case of Malawi

In Malawi, the TPA performances were facilitated by Story Workshop in partnership with the National Smallholder Farmers Association of Malawi, Bunda College of Agriculture and the Civil Society Agriculture Network (CISANET).

Story Workshop conducted six performances in villages in Kasungu and Lilongwe, Malawi. The performances were attended by over 10,000 men and women from the communities as well as by officials from the Ministry of Agriculture, Traditional Authorities, officials of district assemblies; District Commissioners, Members of Parliament and representatives from farmers organizations, community based organizations and NGOs.

The Malawi Story

The Malawi script was based on two prominent issues faced by women smallholder farmers: lack of land ownership and lack of access to input markets.

The script tells the story of two women farmers. The first woman is a widow facing challenges supporting her family of five after her late husband’s relatives have seized her best farmlands. The second woman is married and is always fighting with her husband who does not support her in producing food for the family. He squanders money from produce sales and disregards his family needs. Furthermore he sells the coupons for subsidized inputs that his family receives from the government’s Input Subsidy Programme and buys beer with the money.

In a turn of events the women meet at the borehole and discuss their challenges. Other women join in and also explain that even with an access to farm inputs: low literacy levels, poor exposure to good produce markets and lack of effective agricultural women oriented policies they will not progress as farmers. Concluding the discussion one woman asks “but where can we report all these issues? Who can listen?”

As the story ends, things have gone from bad to worse in the married couples’ home. A debt collector has come to collect some money from the wife who got the credit on the basis that the husband will pay after receiving money from their tobacco sales. The husband became so furious because he has used all the money. He beats the wife so much that the community intervenes and takes them to the chief’s court to resolve their issues.
Highlights from the TPA Performances in Malawi

In Kasungu, three community theatre groups were formed namely in Nyamayajiwa (consisting of 13 Women, 7 Men), in Mduka (consisting of 12 Women, 18 Men) and in Kankowa (consisting of 16 Women, 12 Men). These groups were trained on TPA and dialogue facilitation over a five day period which was then followed by the performance day where they showcased their newly acquired skills.

In Lilongwe, three community theatre groups were also formed namely in Kankowa Village (consisting of 16 Women, 12 Men), Chimphedzu village (consisting of 12 Women, 5 Men), Tidi Village (consisting of 16 Women, 4 Men) and in Sokelele consisting of (consisting of 10 Women, 8 Men).

Key challenges identified by women farmers in the post TPA performance discussions in Malawi:
- Lack of access to farm inputs.
- Lack of access to good markets for selling crop produce.
- Lack of access to land.
- Gender based violence

The TPA performance in Mduka village, Traditional Authority Kaomba in Kasungu district Malawi was attended by over 3000 people. Also in attendance was Member of Parliament for the area, Honourable Ken Kandodo Banda who is also the Minister of Finance.

Honourable Members of Parliament and Minister Kandodo urged the community to develop a village development action plan to address issues raised. He also urged the community to make use of the Village Development Committee in making sure their voices were heard.
The performances in Malawi were very interactive, with members of the audience being involved throughout by way of actors posing questions to the audience and also giving the audience a chance to voice their views on the different issues.

In the post performance dialogue members of the community and the various stakeholders present discussed in detail the issues highlighted in the performances. Community members were given equal opportunity to ask, comment, respond and suggest on the various issues that affect women farmers. Such open interaction gave women the opportunity to suggest the possible solutions to the problems that affect their farming.

In Chimphedzu village when the issues of access to input markets was raised, women said that there were malpractices at the Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation (ADMAC) markets by officials involved in distribution and selling of subsidized inputs.

Mrs. Alice Kishombe the Agriculture gender Roles and Extension Support Services Officer (AGRESSO) who attended the TPA performance on behalf of the District Agriculture Development Officer responded to the concerns of the women farmers and promised that the government will intensify security at the markets and will work with chiefs and traditional leaders to help women farmers redeem the coupon fairly.

Mrs. Daniela, a married mother of four, who relies on their four acre farmland as their only source of income had this question to ask the District Agriculture Development Officer (DADO) during the post performance dialogue in Sokelele Village in Lilongwe Malawi
Women Farmers Speak Out

The TPA performances in Malawi and in Mozambique were successful as the entire process ensured community involvement and the active participation of women farmers. The project has given women farmers in Malawi and Mozambique a voice that they never thought would be heard. This is what they had to say during following the TPA performances.

• We have too many difficulties because the seeds are very expensive. Once everything is ready in the field, agro dealers want to buy our produce at low prices. Everything we are using to produce is very expensive but we can’t see the returns. Woman farmer from Estevelle Village in Mozambique

• I really enjoyed the performance. I would like to comment about the scene where the women blocked the street. This is the way to show our government that we exist too. All the conflict in the play is the result of transport difficulties. Community Leader, Massaca 2 Village in Mozambique

• I have always wanted this kind of forum to raise my issues.’ Lezinathi Daniel, a woman farmer from Sekolele Village, Lilongwe District in Malawi

• I seem like a person without a home, because at my husband’s village they said I belong here and I have no land there... back here they say I do not have land either because I am supposed to be at my husband’s village... so where do I really belong?” asked Ida Pofera, a woman farmer in Sokelele Village, Lilongwe District in Malawi