

Toward Self-Sufficiency

Indigenous peoples are not just victims of political and social change; they can also take charge of their future.

By Robert K. Hitchcock

In 1992, severe drought struck southern Africa, reducing harvests and causing enormous social difficulties. Chronic food shortages now threaten over a quarter of the region's population. In the past decade, the number of families in southern Africa unable to meet their basic needs has doubled. Indigenous peoples in Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Namibia have had to look to drought relief feeding and cash-for-work programs for support.

Some government officials and planners at multilateral development banks suggest that southern Africa's problems are somehow the fault of local people—they have large families, keep too much livestock, or practice environmentally damaging agriculture. Many Africans, on the other hand, point to international agencies and southern African governments, which they believe have undercut the self-sufficiency of southern African households.

In fact, southern African governments have rarely, if ever, consulted with local communities—particularly indigenous ones—on development projects or land reform. People have been forced to relocate so that substantial portions of southern Africa's landscape could be set aside for national parks and game reserves. Hunting laws, too, have restricted people's access to wildlife resources.

Both colonial and post-colonial governments pursued capital-intensive development programs—industrialization, mining, commercial agriculture, ranching. These schemes sometimes required

the expropriation of substantial blocks of territory for private use—often by white settlers, foreign companies, and entrepreneurs.

Even wild plants were not spared. Private individuals exploited both medicinal and food plants upon which indigenous groups depended, thus reducing the plants' availability and driving up their prices. Local households (especially poor ones) that relied in part on natural resources for subsistence and income have had to turn to alternative sources of income or have become more dependent upon other groups for their very survival.

Many communities and individuals in southern Africa are calling for a new approach to development—one that is not socially and environmentally destructive. They argue that they have a right to sustainable development—development that, according to the World Commission on Environment and Development, "meets the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Many in southern Africa see this as the only way to overcome the region's difficulties.

THE PURROS PROJECT

One approach to sustainable development under debate is common-property resource management. Common-property resource systems combine local control of communal resources with measures to promote sustainable use. More and more communities and organi-

zations are advocating community-based resource management as a sustainable development strategy.

An example of a sustainable development program comes from a Namibian nongovernmental organization called Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC). This small-scale development effort, as described by Garth Owen-Smith and Margaret Jacobsohn, aims to improve the lives of several hundred Himba and Herero people in and around the community of Purros in north-western Kaokoland.

In technical terms, the Himba and Herero are called "multi-use strategists." They combine semi-nomadic pastoralism with periodic wage labor and handicrafts and other small-scale rural industries. Like many indigenous peoples in southern Africa, they have a great deal of knowledge of their environment and relatively simple but efficient technology. Their population is small and widely distributed.

The Purros project ensures the long-term sustainability of resources through communal controls, which prevent exploitation by outsiders, and community pressure on individuals who were overexploiting resources. It boasts a community game-guard system that employs Himba and Herero men to oversee 37,000 square miles of rugged mountains and semi-arid sandy plains. The unarmed game guards have stopped the killing of desert elephants and black rhinoceros at a much lower cost than that of the paramilitary anti-poaching campaigns conducted elsewhere in Africa. The Himba and Herero have been aided in this effort by the social pressure they exert on community members to conserve resources.

The Purros project also promotes ecotourism. Tourists pay a levy of R25

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each (about \$12) to enter the area, with community members deciding how to divide the money. Initially, the people of the Purros community intended the levy to provide money to male household heads, but the women objected strenuously. Eventually, the community decided to allocate the money equitably among household members.

Tourists receive guidelines for how to behave in the Purros area. Driving across old campsites, which the Himba consider to be sacred, is forbidden. Community members have asked tour guides to have their tourists stop and greet community residents before taking photographs or purchasing handicrafts. Residents have also given tour guides price estimates for the Himba and Herero crafts. They did this because tour operators, and tourists themselves, tended to pay too little for crafts. Community members, including adult women, and IRDNC staff, have made tourists aware of the need to limit the environmental impacts of tourism, including firewood depletion and littering.

The Purros tourist system represents an institutional response to potential conflicts surrounding resource and land use. By agreeing to fixed rules and by determining specifically those eligible for benefits, the Himba and Herero profit equitably and sustainably from their wildlife and the tourism it attracts, without increasing social tensions and environmental degradation. The benefits they reap from tourism are reinvested in community activities.

ZENZELE: RURAL WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT

At least since the 1950s, in Swaziland—a small, landlocked kingdom in southeastern Africa—rural women have been outspoken about their desire for development-related training. According to a government minister, women have been the backbone of rural development in Swaziland and comprise most of the participants in community-level development

photo by Robert Hitchcock



projects. Yet many women have found it difficult to gain access to training opportunities, particularly those involving income-generating skills. Some also feel that they have lacked secure access to land and natural resources.

For 20 years, the government's extension workers have been working with groups of women who want to carry out communal and mutually beneficial activities. These groups, known as *zenzele* ("do-it-yourself") associations, serve several functions.

For example, the *zenzele* groups allow women to work together to solve common problems, such as running day-care centers or marketing handicrafts. Some have engaged in income-generating activities such as sewing school uniforms, making bricks, or raising and selling crops. Others meet simply to discuss problems facing women. Sometimes, the associations serve as savings clubs where women can pool their resources; later on, members tap into this fund for emergencies or investments.

Zenzele groups are perhaps the most active and progressive development organizations in rural Swaziland. These voluntary associations, which today number well over 200, range in size from a half dozen to 73 members. On average they meet once a week. The members hold elections annually or bi-annually, and officers represent the groups and work on their behalf. Decision making is based on consensus, with each member having her say.

Despite the assistance given to women's associations in Swaziland, many

members responded to a 1986 survey by saying they felt they weren't receiving the training needed for self-sufficiency. Women singled out training programs in small enterprise development and income-generating activities as doing too little to raise the level of their entrepreneurial skills. One reason frequently cited for the failure of training programs was a tendency to be top-down instead of involving participants in the learning process.

In 1984, at the request of rural and urban women as well as development planners, the government of Swaziland, decided to do more development-related training that focused on rural women. Using such innovative techniques as role playing, drama, problem-solving exercises, and community-needs assessments, the government concentrated on increasing incomes, improving agricultural production, enhancing leadership skills, promoting conservation, and raising living standards. Government personnel and rural Swazi women with appropriate skills taught the courses in Siswati, the local language.

Difficulties in implementing the project revealed that women faced many constraints in rural areas, ranging from lack of capital for materials, seeds, and tools to heavy labor demands, especially during the planting, weeding, and harvesting periods. *Zenzele* groups sometimes had difficulty obtaining access to agricultural land from some chiefs and other traditional authorities, who, the women say, were not favorably inclined toward their financial independence.

As the *zenzele* members acquired skills and tried out some new activities, including producing home-made soap, women's confidence increased. They began to argue more forcefully for land allocations. They initiated small-scale projects, including bakeries, pig raising, and horticulture. To obtain the funds for these projects, they approached church and private groups and international donor agencies.

At least one women's group used its

contacts with women in Swaziland's royal family to influence decisions about land and resource allocation. The women asked the king and his council to provide them with land for farming and to intercede on their behalf with chiefs who refused to allocate them land. Members of another *zenzele* association approached the government's regional secretary for land, thus circumventing the chiefs. One group began collecting funds to buy freehold land to set up a large-scale agricultural project. All these women felt that opportunities for access to land and water had improved in part with their increasing involvement in political and economic activities, both locally and nationally.

A goal of many Swazi women has been to form regional women's associations. Two regions, Hhohho and Manzini, succeeded in this endeavor. In the Manzini Region, the women's association, which was made up of the chairs of local *zenzele* groups, established a handicraft storage facility. The Hhohho Region women's association entered into an arrangement with an organization that buys handicrafts and increased its members' incomes substantially. Members of the regional associations are now forming a national women's organization to press for greater rights and more government support for women's projects.

As the size and strength of *zenzele* associations has increased, the relationships between local communities and government departments have improved. In the mid-1980s, agricultural extension workers in the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives began assisting *zenzele* groups more frequently in crop production and marketing. The Rural Water Supply Board cooperated with community-based health workers and *zenzele* associations in running workshops on protecting springs and purifying drinking water. At the women's request, Ministry of Health officials began attending *zenzele* meetings to discuss health and family planning.

The institutional stability of *zenzele* associations is high. Although the groups sometimes lack administrative, managerial, and technical skills, they know where to get them, and many actively seek assistance. There is no question that Swazi women are intent on bringing about sus-

tained social and economic progress in their communities. Their work has given them the opportunity to set their own goals and has helped in identifying potentially useful group enterprises. As a result, women have a greater voice in community affairs.

Women's organizations in other parts of southern Africa are profiting from Swazi women's experiences. In the late 1980s, personnel of the Home Economics Section of the Ministry of Economics and Cooperative and some *zenzele* women traveled to Botswana to discuss development approaches. Since then women from several southern African countries have met to address matters of mutual concern. According to these women, self-help and sustainable community-based development are the keys to future strategies.

COMMUNITY CONSENSUS IS PARAMOUNT

The ecotourism activities of the Himba at Purros and the efforts of Swazi *zenzele* associations to promote the interests of women and their families are but two of many examples of grassroots activism and participatory development that are on the rise in the developing world. People in southern Africa, including indigenous communities and women's associations, have called for more emphasis on sustainable development strategies. Local people must have secure access to resources, including land, labor, capital, and development-related information. They must also be the ones to determine the kinds of projects to be implemented. And community consensus is crucial to success.

Experience in southern Africa has demonstrated that a number of conditions must exist if sustainable development is to be achieved. First is the importance of community control. Communities must control the means of production, especially land and capital. Local institutions should be self-governing, with all members having a voice in resource management. Communities must have the power to make decisions and the authority to undertake projects they deem necessary.

The second condition is size and complexity. Projects must be small enough to be managed by one or, at most, a few

communities. The cost must not overwhelm the capabilities of the local institutions that have to cope with them. And the management and administration of projects can't be overly complex.

Finally, sustainable development requires equality and dialogue. Local institutions should pursue activities that benefit as many people as possible and are equitable in terms of distribution of power and resources. The way in which projects are identified, designed, and implemented must promote ongoing dialogue between local people and development agencies, with the result being a real effect on a project's direction. Fair, just, and socially acceptable mechanisms must be used in resolving conflicts.

In addition, there should be means for ensuring that development activities don't overtax the environment. The institutions involved in resource management must be willing to impose sanctions if individuals and communities fail to comply with rules or guidelines.

Participatory development strategies are now at work in many parts of southern Africa. Using community-based resource management systems, local organizations in southern Africa can promote development without sacrificing the environmental integrity of their regions. Although not all of the efforts succeed, people are learning important lessons. As they themselves note, the future of their communities—and the world in general—lies in the children. Only when the needs of these children are taken into consideration will there be truly successful development and human rights for all.

FOR FURTHER READING:

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Garth Owen-Smith and Margaret Jacobsohn, "Involving a Local Community in Wildlife Conservation: A Pilot Project at Purros, Southwestern Kaokoland, SWA/Namibia," *Quagga*, 1989.