

Mama trees

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In the rural areas of Kenya, fuelwood remains the main source of energy for cooking, and women are responsible for ensuring a sufficient supply of fuel for their households.

In densely populated areas such as the highlands of Western Kenya, pressure on the natural vegetation for building materials and fuelwood has resulted in widespread scarcity. At the same time, tribal taboos denied women access to and control over trees on family land, which is inherited from father to son. A wife is not allowed to plant trees on her husband's land because planting of trees is seen as claiming the land. The same is true for any management of trees, such as cutting, pruning, and indeed harvesting of fuelwood. As a consequence, women had to collect fuelwood from bushland or small forests which could be several hours walk from their homes.

In the 1990s, the *Kenya Woodfuel Development Programme* (KWDP) set out to find ways to give women better access to fuelwood. After a first appraisal of the predicament by male and female KWDP staff from western Kenya, it was suggested to follow a three-pronged approach consisting of mass awareness creation, discussions with clan elders, and technical assistance to the communities.

Awareness raising

Awareness about the existing fuelwood problems was raised during the annual agricultural shows in the different districts, and during field days organized by KWDP. Tools used included video shows, demonstrations, written information and direct

communication between KWDP staff and visitors. However, the most creative and effective tool developed by this programme turned out to be the *mirror presentations*. A mirror presentation could be a song, a poem, a dance or a short drama. The aim of the mirror presentation was to present the audience with a situation that they would recognize, or even better, that they would recognize as **their** situation. Such a mirror, in which the target group can see itself and the condition they are in, provides the audience with a chance to reflect on its own problems or weaknesses without direct confrontation.

A mirror presentation should be *fun* or *interesting*, but it should also always be *credible* and have a *clear message*. It should portray the current situation with the dilemmas faced by some or maybe all members of the community. Besides this, it also provides the audience with a look into the future: how the situation would look in the worst-case-scenario or how their situation might be if the problem could be solved in a positive way (see Box). At the end of the performance the audience should not evaluate it as just "funny" or "nice" – the performance should stimulate a thinking process in the minds of the people addressed.

Discussion with the elders

Another important aspect of the intervention was discussions with the clan elders (all older men or *wazee*). Meetings were held in the traditional way at the customary meeting places of the clan elders, generally under huge *Ficus* trees, and all discussions were carried out in the local dialect.

When the topic of concern to the KWDP was brought up, senior programme staff sought clarification from the elders about the

Mirror play: the fuelwood problem

This is a mirror play with two players – a woman and a man – which brings up the problem women are facing with collection of fuelwood. A choir of men and women are also involved.

A woman enters the scene, carrying a very small bundle of green fuelwood. She is clearly very tired.

Her husband (a bit angry): "Where have you been so long, woman? I am very hungry and there is no food."

Woman: "I was collecting fuelwood, my dear man...it was so far....my feet hurt and I must have lost a bucket full of sweat."

Husband (tries to be a bit nicer): "I am sorry to hear that, but the children went hungry to school, and I will be late for work. Next time maybe you should look for fuelwood near the house. That should not be so difficult, there are plenty trees around."

Woman (a bit irritated): "My dear man, why do you think I went so far? There is no fuelwood left near the village. The trees that we have are for production, for fruits, for coffee and cacao. Or do you mean I can cut the mango tree?"

Husband: "Oh no, no way, than we will not have nice fruits."

Woman: "Or I could cut the coffee bushes, one by one?"

Husband: "No, no way, than we will not be able to sell coffee!"

Woman: "Well, than I have to cut that shade tree that you like to sit under?"

Husband (shocked): "Woman, are you mad? How will I be able to rest and meet my friends?"

Woman (now really determined): "Yes, the shade tree, and than

you will also not need this chair any more (grabs the seat and threatens to smash it into the ground), this will give me nice, dry fuelwood!"

Husband (tries to calm her down): "Okay, okay, I give up, you have made your point. There is not much fuelwood available." (tries to think hard) "But there must be other materials that we can use for a fire. What about the maize stover?"

Woman: "And what will we feed the cows during the dry season?"

Husband (thinks again): "What about the animal manure? I have seen that that old woman, Ibu Juliani, using dried animal manure for cooking!"

Woman: "Yes, that is true. But she is too weak to walk far to look for fuelwood. And if we burn the manure from our cows, what will we use to fertilize the garden?"

Husband (looks sad): "No, indeed, that way we will not have manure for the crops. I have never looked at fuelwood this way. Maybe we have a big, big problem here!"

The choir starts singing a song about, for instance, *Calliandra* for fuelwood, and mentions the many advantages:

- grows fast, can be grown in or around the garden because it does not become a big tree;
- can be cut every year for fuelwood;
- also fodder for the animals, manure for the plants (nitrogen fixing).

type of plant species men and women were allowed to plant according to clan rules. Naturally, the elders would inform the meeting that trees could be planted only by men, while both women and men were allowed to plant all other plants of importance to their family. Instead of arguing about this regulation, programme staff then requested a clearer definition of what precisely a tree was, and what not. The aim at this point was to establish any possible grey areas in the tribal regulations which could provide an opportunity.

According to the clan elders, trees were the tall-growing, woody plant species as well as the perennial cash crops such as coffee and cacao, typically crops which were under the control of men.

Against the background of the dismal fuelwood supply situation for women, KWDP staff then discussed with elders that certain woody species such as *Calliandra calothyrsus*, *Leucaena* spp. and *Mimosa scabrella* were shrubs rather than trees, especially if constantly lopped for fuelwood, and these species had also no direct cash product to offer to men. The question was then raised to the clan elders whether women could be allowed to plant and manage such species around their homes. KWDP staff also suggested to the wise old men that on farm production of fuelwood would provide an opportunity for women to take better care of their children... and their men!

At the end of the day, clan elders decided to classify certain species as "Mama trees", which women could freely plant, manage and harvest.

Seeds and instruction

The third part of the intervention approach was technical assistance to those farmers who wanted to start growing the *Mama* trees. Small seed packets of the woody *Mama* tree species were made available at subsidized prices. On the paper packets, a short explanation was provided about how to treat the seeds before planting, as well as how to grow seedlings in a small nursery. Backstopping and facilitation in the villages was also provided by field staff of the KWDP in collaboration with government extension staff.

Impact

The acceptance of the *Mama* trees resulted in an enormous demand in Western Kenya for planting material of species such as *Calliandra*

calothyrsus. KWDP, its successor *Kenya Woodfuel and Agroforestry Programme*, as well as several other development initiatives in the area, encouraged farmers to produce seeds. The seeds were bought from farmers for fair prices, and were made available to other farmers. This caused a new twist to the situation. Several male farmers showed great interest in the economic opportunities of *Mama* tree seed production. If used for seed production, the trees could not be pruned for fuelwood – with the result that some women lost their access to the *Mama* trees.

However, an impact evaluation of the KWDP in the late 1990s showed that many rural families in western Kenya were living more harmoniously. Women showed great appreciation for the change in local traditional regulations affected with the help of the programme, because they had now more time for other, more rewarding activities, or even for social activities and relaxation. Many husbands and wives had made a huge step towards empowerment of the family as a unit.

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This contribution is provided on behalf of all other former staff members of the KWDP and its successor KWAP (Kenya Woodfuel and Agroforestry Programme), implemented by ETC East Africa, AACC Building, Wayaki Way, Westlands, Nairobi, Kenya.

