

We Visit African Women Who Farm, Work for Better Lives

As It Is – January 7, 2014

From VOA Learning English, welcome to As It Is. I'm Steve Ember.

Farming in Africa is our subject today, as we explore issues faced by women farmers in Cameroon. And later, we hear about a program designed to protect crops from disease and pests in Uganda and other African countries.

We begin our program today by exploring farming in Africa.

We visit some African women who till the soil – and also work for progress toward better lives. The women face denial of land and hostile cultural traditions as well as the usual struggles with nature.

[Cows]

Let's look in on a farm in Cameroon that a man seized from his sister.

Experts estimate that women farmers produce about 90 percent of the food in Africa. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization says two-thirds of African women work in agriculture.

Activists for these farmers met recently in Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon. Their goal was to develop ways of making jobs in agriculture more profitable.

[Cows Mooing]

Adamu Maino is busy raising cows in North West Cameroon. He takes care of the animals on a piece of family land he seized from his sister, Maimonatou Aisha. By farming on this land, he was following cultural traditions.

But leaders of an African women farmers' association went there to urge Maimonatou Aisha to continue her struggle to recover the land.

"Move on women, move on, women. These are the changing times. Move a little closer when the change is coming. Move on women. Move on."

Activist Veronica Kini sings a song that calls women to "move on" in their search for progress.

"You do not expect a woman who has been cultivating a piece of land for 30 years, and just because she is a woman, she has no right to own that piece of land. They say she is a woman, she will be married to a different family, so she has no right to own the piece of land."

Maimonatou Aisha is one of millions of African women farmers who struggle with problems like getting bank loans.

Simadana Elizabeth was born in Mali. She says these problems are similar across the continent.

“Most of us do not own land. When you go to financial institutions, the banks, when you want to access credits, they ask for land titles. And again you find that most women do not own the titles. So it is a common challenge and we need to get a solution for it.”

Ms. Elizabeth says many women farmers still use old tools and farming methods.

“We have not mechanized the way we do our work, so you find that we use what is commonly known as hoes to do our work. We don’t have a voice, we never get time to come out with one voice and solve our personal problems.”

The Food and Agriculture Organization considers women farmers the pillar, or main support, of African agriculture. In addition to providing most food grown in Africa, they must prepare food for their families.

Alice Kwanjani was born in Kenya. She says many women there are powerless.

“Women are not expected to stand out in the presence of men, so we feel that they cannot express themselves properly. ”

She says women are responsible for most of the activities in the home and even in some communities, like taking care of the children and the sick. Women also take care of such events as funerals and wedding parties.

For three days in Cameroon, the women farmers’ groups examined the difficulties that they believe interfere with progress.

Among their concerns are longtime problems that governments do little to solve. Veronica Kini says the reason is inertia -- a lack of movement.

“We have been saying this over and over again. Can you imagine a women of, let’s say 50 years of age, carrying a bag of around 50 kilograms on the head, crossing a bridge that is not well constructed...I think it is deplorable. We need tractors, we need harvesters. They know what we need.”

The women at the conference agreed to work to help other women gain a better understanding of their rights. Elizabeth Atanganan is president of the farmers’ network for Central Africa. She says this can happen through training. She says the goal is to help women learn to start defending their interests.

Simadana Elizabeth also called for action. She said the time to act is now.

Next, we'll hear about efforts to save plants from destruction. It's As It Is from VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember.

A program to save crops from pests and disease...

Crop disease continues to be a problem for farmers everywhere. The non-profit Center for Agriculture and Biosciences International says pests and diseases destroy up to 40 percent of the food grown worldwide. The center, based in Britain, is trying to change that with a crop protection program. Avi Arditti tells us more.

The program is called Plantwise. In the past three years, Plantwise has trained almost 1,000 so-called plant doctors in 24 countries.

One of those countries is Uganda. Recently, plant doctor Daniel Lyazi set up a table under a small tent during market day in Mukono. The village is about 15 kilometers from Kampala, the capital. People brought samples of diseased plants to his clinic. One farmer brought cabbage covered in slime. Nothing can be done to save his cabbages this year. But Daniel Lyazi's advice may save the next season's crop.

"So he told me there's a small caterpillar which eats [the cabbages] starting from the youngest leaf. He's telling me that the whole garden has been attacked and affected by this caterpillar. I know that it's a diamondback moth."

The farmer has been using an insecticide, but Mr. Lyazi says the chemical is the wrong one.

“So I’m recommending him to use another insecticide and I’m telling him in another planting season he should plant with onions. Onions can repel [the caterpillar] and he can get income.”

He advises the farmer to plant onions between the rows of cabbages as an additional measure of protection.

The clinic lasts about three hours. In that time Daniel Lyazi advises about 20 farmers. The clinic takes place twice a month. It started last year.

The Plantwise program says there are now about 90 of these clinics in Uganda. This year donors spent close to \$300,000 training plant doctors and expanding the system in the country.

Joseph Mulema coordinates the Plantwise program in Uganda and Zambia. He argues that plant clinics are a far more effective way to get advice to farmers than the traditional model. In the traditional model, agricultural extension workers visit farms.

“Plant clinics can help so many farmers in a very short time. In fact, more farmers are seen in a plant clinic session, if good mobilization was done.”

Robert Karyeija is a crop protection officer for the government. He says training plant doctors has been very important. This is because even though there were thousands of agricultural extension workers, they just did not know enough.

“They would be general agriculturalists who knew agronomy but didn’t know much about pests and diseases.”

Since 2010, the Center for Agriculture and Biosciences International has set up Plantwise clinics in 12 African countries. I’m Avi Arditti.

As It Is is a production of VOA Learning English. I’m Steve Ember. Thanks for joining us. We’ll see you next time.