

Women diversify their livelihoods

by Peter Lowrey¹

Moree, Ghana

The small-scale fishing economy in this community perched on a rocky headland overlooking the Atlantic is as dynamic as any larger economic unit. Any missing link in the production chain – a shortage of fish or wood for the smoking ovens, for example — spurs villagers to brainstorm for a solution and jump to fill the gap.

The following story recounts not only how the community's lateral thinking solved a particular problem, but how it acquired and worked with both local and national allies, setting in motion the momentum for success.

On the happy days when full fishing boats land their cargo on the beaches below Moree, the 60 fishmongers and processors in the women's group gear up for business. They buy all the fish they can afford, carry it up the hill in big tin bowls, gut and clean it, and lay it on racks in the smoking ovens. Wood smoke swirls through the community's alleyways. The product is trucked to Accra, the capital, two hours to the east by road, and elsewhere in Ghana.



Women bid for a limited supply of fish in Moree, Ghana.

Community life is difficult. The men do not always find fish. Women sometimes must travel as far as Nigeria to buy fish to process and sell. During the hungry season from January to May, there is little money to buy food and some villagers get by on two meagre meals a day. Or sometimes on water alone.

Birth of a “brilliant idea”

With firewood for the ovens becoming more and more expensive, the women's group hit on the idea of starting their own woodlot. They approached FAO's Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme, which matched them up with local government fisheries officer, Yaw Sabah, now a member of the Programme's National Coordinating Unit.

“I thought it was a brilliant idea, but they didn't know about planting and maintaining trees,” says Mr Sabah. “So we brought in the necessary expertise.”

Women decided to diversify activities by growing not only trees but also food crops such as cassava, shown here being harvested.



Preparing fish for smoking.

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As part of the Programme method, another National Coordinating Unit member, Doris Yeboah, a trained government facilitator, arrived to “take them through the possibilities of what they could do for themselves.”



Women work in their wood lot.



Cleaning the rack of a smoking oven.



A woman sells her wares in Moree, Ghana.

Attracting powerful partners

In order to bring about dynamic and sustainable economic development, the Programme encourages community groups to form partnerships with powerful interests for the duration of the project, and beyond. Why not get the village chief involved? The local bank manager? Government extension officers? They all have an interest in the growth of the local economy. “By working together, the groups convinced the chief to release land for the woodlot quickly,” notes Emilia Amang, the Programme’s national coordinator.

Future plans

Microcredit is proving less successful in Moree. As of late 2002, only 3 out of 20 borrowers had kept up their repayments, while 17 were 5 months in arrears. On the women’s behalf, a local politician is pushing the project to forgive the loans and start afresh. “Fishing was bad this year,” the women say.

However, the women will soon have new sources of revenue. They have planted cassava, pepper, maize, cowpea, plantain and mango between their trees. The fast-growing acacias are now eight-metres high and ready for cutting in 2003.

“When ocean fishing is bad, we dream of finding a reliable supply of fish,” says Elisabeth Bentum, the group’s financial secretary. “And we want a day-care centre for the children for when we have to travel in search of fish. Most of our relatives are also fishmongers, so we have nowhere to leave our children. If we leave them with an elder child, then that child can’t go to school.”

And the men of Moree? They are supportive and have helped with land preparation and tree planting. But they have not proved as flexible in their choice of livelihoods as their womenfolk.

“Men prefer to stick to fishing,” admits Nana Kodwo Mensa-Bonsu II, Moree’s chief fisherman. “They’ll go and fish elsewhere rather than try something like farming.”

Note

All photos by D. Minkoh/FAO. All six shots were taken in Moree, Ghana.