

Women in Development Mobilize Grassroots Enterprises to Reduce Household Poverty

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the roles African women played in reducing household poverty through local enterprises that resulted in feeding their families, sending their children to school and contributing to community development. Their determination was to implement and invest in self-help enterprises in order to counter the incidence of household poverty and eventually bring about social change. A literature review section distinguishes theoretical from empirical approaches to study poverty and leads this study to some important conclusions. The results paint a picture that explains a world in which women live in poverty as they face gross inequalities and injustices from birth to death—from poor education, poor nutrition, vulnerable and low-pay employment, and acts of discrimination that women are likely to suffer throughout their entire life.

KEYWORDS

Extreme Poverty, MDGs, Poverty Alleviation, Rural Poor, Women in Development

INTRODUCTION

Mobilizing women in poverty reduction projects in East Africa is part of a United Nations (UN) global ongoing agenda which has the broadest consensus by the international community (Noel, 2006; United Nations, 2012). Recent UN reports indicate that extreme poverty rates have fallen in every developing region. The UN claims that globally, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) targets on the proportion of people living in extreme poverty has been met five years ahead of the target date. About 700 million fewer people lived in extreme poverty conditions in 2010 than in 1990 (United Nations, 2015a). Poverty rates and number of people living in extreme poverty fell in every developing region—including in sub-Saharan Africa, where rates are highest. The proportion of people living on less than \$1.25 a day fell from 47 per cent in 1990 to 24 per cent in 2008—a reduction from over 2 billion to less than 1.4 billion (United Nations, 2010). Despite this impressive accomplishment at the global level, 1.2 billion people still live in extreme poverty.

In East Africa, and Tanzania in particular, these positive trends are visible particularly in urban areas but less observable in rural areas where most women live; and where 80% of the population is engaged in agriculture, a sector in which the incidence of poverty has only decreased by 1.3% — from 38.7% to 37.4% (Mashindano, 2009; Osberg, & Bandara, 2012). The underlying explanation for this difference between rural and urban populations seems to be the slow growth in agriculture, on which most rural poor make a living. Because agriculture is the main livelihood for many people and contributes to a quarter of the GDP, the development of agriculture becomes essential for the pursuit to reduce poverty in Tanzania.

During 2001–2007, agricultural output in Tanzania grew only by 4.5 per cent per year compared to the 9.4% annual growth in industry and 7.7% growth in services (Osberg, & Bandara, 2012). The mining and construction sub-sectors in the industrial sector grew more rapidly at 15.2% and 10.8%, respectively. The end result is that in Tanzania, agriculture's share of GDP dropped from 30.6% in 2001 to 26.2% in 2007 (Bagachwa, 1994, and declined further to 25.6 per cent in 2008 (Bank of Tanzania, 2010).

For this reason, policy-makers reckon the “poverty reduction movement” as the most important goal of development policy for a nation with goals to eradicate extreme poverty by 2025 (United Republic of Tanzania, 2005). Consequently, efforts to generate data and develop definitions of poverty are believed to be critical to policy-makers because they allow the measurement of changes in poverty over time, comparisons across space, and the identification of poor households or individuals targeted in poverty-alleviation programs (Bagachwa, 1994; Cooksey, 1994; REPOA, 2005).

This article presents a story of *Jitahidi* women entrepreneurs in Tanzania and explains how these women overcame household poverty at the micro level. The task was to establish grassroots cooperative business activities for women with assistance from microfinancing institutions. *Jitahidi* is a Kiswahili name coined to represent women's efforts that support poverty reduction and development. Simply put, *Jitahidi* is an expression that signifies a local metaphor that reflects the ‘pulling up oneself by the bootstraps’ or ‘to improve or succeed by one's own efforts.’ This metaphor represents the story of grassroots initiatives taken by women entrepreneurs poised to harness the collective power of local women in the region. Their determination was to implement and invest in self-help enterprises in order to address the incidence of household poverty and eventually bring about social change.

Through this case, the study examines the invisible but vital roles African women play in reducing household poverty through local enterprises that result in feeding their families, sending their children to school and contributing to community development. Analysis of the women's story reveals a tacit but cogent argument that women's economic enterprises are part of the global project to reduce poverty; and women entrepreneurs, though not recognized, are a great resource in Sub-Saharan Africa region (Hallyward-Driemeir, 2013). The theme that runs throughout the narrative on *Jitahidi* Women's enterprises is about aspirations and desire to address incidences of poverty and social change in order to overcome gender discrimination, socio-economic inequalities and gender oppression—for example, domestic violence (Jagire, 2014).

A study of development issues of African women requires a multifaceted approach and it is an involved task to address them. To disentangle some of the problems in view of the *Jitahidi* women's collective effort of reducing household poverty in the region is complex and intricate, especially because of the limited availability of reliable data on many non-income achievements, particularly for cross-country comparisons (Birdsall, & Londono, 1997). Previous studies that analyzed the status and trends of poverty focused on the incidence of poverty measurement (Ravallion, 2001). Studies in various disciplines such as women's studies (Namabira & Kamanzi, 2013), women's cooperatives (Kamanzi, 2010), women in agriculture (Longwe, 1990), gender studies (Malhotra, Schulte, Patel, & Petesch, 2009)), and sociology (Kamanzi, 2012), tackled these issues and continue to strengthen whatever arguments are proffered in relation to these pertinent problems. However, poverty as experienced from women's point of view has not been a subject of social science in Tanzania.

Cooksey (1994) and Longwe, (1990) reviewed the research on poverty. Both cite the Cornell study, which shows that the extent of poverty is more widespread in rural Tanzania than in urban Tanzania. If the poverty line is set as the income required to be able to consume 2100 calories daily plus a set of other basic needs, then 58% of the rural population is poor but only 29% of the urban. Perhaps taking 2000 calories per day as the minimum requirement puts well over half the rural households below the poverty line.

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