

No transport, no money

Dilemma for female farmers

Transport is key to the lives of rural women in Limpopo for many reasons. For instance, access to transport allows for crops to be taken to the market timely and for more money to be earned. Transport also allows for learning and information sharing, writes **Lulu K. Mmakola**.

Like many women in the world, women from Kwadikwang Nursery and Lahlapapadi Goat Project in the Capricorn district of Limpopo province, wake up every morning, hoping that each day may be the day on which their distress will end. An everyday fight against poverty and food insecurity does not seem to be a friendly path, especially in a male-dominated field such as the agricultural sector.

In the strive to fight against poverty, food insecurity and stereotypes that suggest that women in rural areas are passive and uneducated about farming, these women started their own projects with an intention to create jobs that will not only benefit them but everyone in the community. This is mainly because 'our children are hungry', they reported. From these heroic statements there is no way one cannot believe that women have always had an interest in the development of their lives, communities and households just as it is argued by various supporters of feminism.

Starting these projects was not

merely for selfish gains, like others would have it, but were developed with a vision and goal to help community members during times of need and for communal events. This in itself shows that women can be deemed as significant contributors in the development of their communities and that they possess the potential to transform their communities. Moreover, to these women, agricultural development is most important because they see it as a way towards job creation and poverty reduction in their households, through their direct involvement.

Nevertheless, regardless of their efforts to break free from poverty and food insecurity, female farmers in the Capricorn district struggle to pursue their dreams in agriculture. These women often have to face challenges in fulfilling their daily duties and tasks. Apart from perceiving themselves as inferior to their male counterparts as far as their knowledge is concerned about agriculture, women's voices remain unheard by those who are meant to be supporting them, especially as far as transport is concerned.

Generally, transportation plays a critical role in the movement of goods and services for production and consumption in society. Specifically as it relates to women and their agricultural activities, transportation greatly facilitates the running of their daily chores such as the fetching of firewood, water and the movement of crops and other agricultural goods. However, transportation often remains denied to women and this is mainly because of the ways in which policies are designed and planned. As a consequence, women are forced to use their own bodies as basic forms of transport to meet their productive needs.

Fernando and Potter report that even when transportation programmes such as Intermediate Means of Transport (IMT) have been designed, and implemented to assist men and women, women have often found themselves benefitting less than men. This is because beyond the mere provisions of transport, norms that sanction gender roles also play a part in the manner in which intervention programmes are received and implemented.

For female farmers in the Capricorn district, the availability of transport is important as it represents an opportunity to increase their income. Their belief is that, 'If you have a bakkie, you can fill it up with vegetables and then go and sell at the pension pay points, you will come back with good money, but if you don't have transport then you will never make more than what you are making'.

This shows that transport gives women the opportunity to expand their markets to where 'good money' can be made. Transport is thus significant to incorporating women into sustainable people-centred development. More so, the need to transport goods to and from the farm is a necessary task often connected to agricultural activities of rural households. In 2009 Mac Mashiri reported that transportation alone is not the only factor but that road networks in agricultural production and marketing reflect the strength of the households' agricultural connections with the wider economy. Therefore, agricultural systems are dependent on the quality of road access for the delivery of farm inputs to local communities and for relocation of produce from the local area to market places.

A woman from a different project (Lahlapapadi Goat Project), added that, when there's no transport, they are unable to visit other cooperatives to gain knowledge, because when they go outside their community they learn new things such as how to deal with their own problems by looking at what others were doing. But if they don't go anywhere, they will never learn anything. So sometimes they have to take out their own money, and visit projects in Venda where big improvements have been made. From there they would take new knowledge to implement in their own projects. Again for these women, empowerment, takes

a different form: empowerment is equaled to the amount of knowledge and ideas they have on the type of farming they practise and transport is a necessary tool for the acquisition of this knowledge.

Furthermore, transportation is an important factor in ensuring that agricultural production is efficient and effective. It serves as a link between farmers and the market place as well as other social institutions that are essential to the lives of people. As such, the calls for serious intervention by the appropriate institutions and organisations involved in transport provision and agricultural development have a firm basis.

Additionally, since agricultural production is a large source of employment in rural South Africa, it is imperative that more considerations be made in the processes of planning and policy formulation practices. This would ensure that planning issues are addressed in such a manner as to benefit those they are meant to benefit. In this case, the beneficiaries will be people experiencing difficulties in rural areas as a result of the lack of reliable transport systems and infrastructure.

In agricultural development, the provision of transport is vital to improving access to markets and the subsequent improvement of socio-economic indicators required for better living conditions in rural areas. However, the failure to recognise the differences in gender usages of transport and specific gender needs in agricultural production may lead to an imbalance in service provision and insensitivity to women in that sector. As such, gender equality is necessary in fulfilling the needs of both men and women involved in farming by facilitating the provision of need-specific facilities to move their products from the village to the market. Moreover, such outcomes are dependent upon the

incorporation of women into policy formulation and implementation practices in both agriculture and transport sectors. All this can be more prudently achieved by recognising women's overall contribution to the economy and then seeking to minimise the challenges that they face whilst making those contributions.

The provision of transport does not only reduce the distance between the farmer and her market but also the distance between the farmer and information access. In any sphere of development, information is cited as crucial because of its ability to enlighten, liberate and emancipate persons from exploitation, oppression and other cultural factors that serve as a hindrance to social mobility. In situations where participants gained an opportunity to travel to other communities, they were able to come up with new ideas to improve their own projects. Thus the significance of transport to information access.

Information sharing ought to be seen as an important tool for women's empowerment and project development. Gaining such knowledge from other female farmers gives farmers comfort and good breeding grounds for success and improvements in their lives and that of their communities. It is clear that these women have a hunger for growth and for a better life. In this regard, they ought to be taken seriously by the relevant departments in ensuring that transport is provided for their development as farmers. ¹⁸

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