

features

Water and Women in East Africa

by Annabelle Waititu



In Rough Times. Veronica Nzoki has been used to the dry spells in Mwingi but not those that they had in more recent times. They could hardly survive.

Photo by the author.

Rains have become erratic that the rivers are dry most of the time, resulting in higher chances for crop failure.

As she recounted the impact of the recent drought that lasted for three years, “Crops have failed for the last two seasons and our livestock have been starving to death. For the first time, Kiiya Dam which was constructed by the colonial government more than 50 years ago, has dried up completely in 2009. This has never happened here before.”

Women like her were certainly not spared especially as water collection has become a full-time job. This has prevented them from engaging in other activities and tapping other opportunities. As she described a typical day, “We leave at six o’clock in the morning to the nearest spring. We find a long queue. By the time we draw water and get back home, it is well past mid-day. This leaves us with no energy for other activities. For those of us with small businesses, we have to close them down or leave them unattended in order to

Veronica Nzoki has been a resident of Endui in the Mwingi District in Eastern Kenya for almost 50 years. She could still remember how the water flowed throughout the year, enabling them to grow food that will help them survive the dry spells. But this is no longer possible today.

fetch water for our households and businesses.”

Although mothers are delegating tasks, more and more children, especially girls are becoming involved. But they are also losing the opportunities to study. Income levels have also fallen that it has become difficult to send children to school. Although some animals have survived, they could not be sold as they have lost significant amount of body mass.

Indeed one of the most widespread and potentially devastating impacts of climate change in East Africa will be changes in the frequency, intensity and predictability of precipitation. It has been suggested that East Africa will experience warmer temperatures, with a five to 20 per cent increased rainfall from December to February and five to 10 per cent decrease rainfall from June to August by 2050 (Hulme et al., 2001; IPCC, 2001). Not only are these changes not uniform throughout the year,

they will likely compound other unpredictable events. It may be likely that such increased precipitation will happen through few but massive storms during the wet season. Thus, aggravating problems on erosion and water management issues. It is also expected that there will be less precipitation in East Africa during the already dry season, causing more frequent and severe droughts and hastening desertification in the region.

Withdrawing White.
Mt. Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest peak, has been one of the better indicators of the drastic changes in the environment and consequently, in the lives of people who have been dependent on the mountain. In seven years, from 1993 to 2000, its snow cap has reduced by 80 per cent.

Source: NASA. (18 December 2002). "Melting Snows of Kilimanjaro." URL: http://svs.gsfc.nasa.gov/stories/kilimanjaro_20021216/index.html

Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

East Africa has reportedly lost a good chunk of its water sources that come from well-known mountain ranges. Most perennial rivers have become dry at times but the seasonal ones have become completely dry. These rivers have depended on the glaciers of Mt. Kenya and Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Mt. Kenya is the main water catchment area for two large rivers in Kenya; the Tana, the Kenya's largest river and the Ewaso Ng'iro North. This ecosystem is responsible for the water needs of over two million people. Meanwhile the water from Tanzania's Mt. Kilimanjaro flows through the Panagani river.

These river systems in turn feed into the communities' agricultural activities, that constitute 40 per cent of the region's gross domestic product (GDP) and provides a living for 80 per cent of East Africans. Most local communities entirely depend on rains in farming and pastoralism.

Similarly the loss of wetlands has posed new challenges on food security. When I was growing up, my grandmother always asked me to accompany her to nearby springs where she used to plant arrow roots. She would send me back home with a basket full of arrowroots. Today, as I look at the place where my grandmother always sourced her water and arrowroots, I cannot help but feel the devastation. My grandmother is already gone, and so are the springs.

Is this sustainable development? From where will the future generations then draw much needed resources? How do we guarantee women's equality if all the resources that enable them to survive are totally depleted?

The level of risk in relation to climate change

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Life Around Water.
Batwa women carry traditional pots in the village of Kiganda in Muramvya in Burundi.

Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

is never entirely determined by nature but is also contingent on economic, cultural, and social relations.

When environmental stress and climate change happen, women and men are affected differently because of traditional, socially based roles and responsibilities. Their life skills



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are likewise different, resulting to the variation of self-rescue, adaptation and mitigation strategies and opportunities. Women and men are also different in terms of their vulnerabilities.

Women and men have their own roles in managing the environment. In East Africa, women remain predominantly responsible for food production, water and firewood collection. As the latter are areas that are immediately affected by climate change, women are deemed more sensitive to the changes in the seasons that affect water quantity and accessibility, among others.

In a climate change adaptation workshop held for the Endui Water Resources Users Association (Endui-WRUA) on October 2009, the participants acknowledged that women are bearing disproportionately the burden of the increased water stress. Being responsible for water collection for the household, they have to walk for at least six hours a day to fetch water from the only surviving water spring named Omwathi, a distance ranging between six to 10 kilometers, depending on which village one is coming from. In addition, they have to queue for about an hour before they can draw water.

But this is not the only responsibility that women have in the household. They have to find and prepare food and ensure good hygiene practices. With erratic rainfall and diminished surface water, growing food has become a nightmare while hygiene has been compromised.

Without guaranteed access to water, women are less likely to be able to cope with climate change impacts. Their situation is made worse by the fact that women are also poorer than men. For example, in the semi-arid district of Mwingi, drought is no longer new. What has changed though is its intensity that has diminished the capacity of people, especially women to adjust.

Too much or too little water undermines the efforts towards gender equality goals. Women and girls are hardest hit by poor water and sanitation conditions. Likewise, inadequate access to water has several implications on women's advancement.

A research being conducted by the Institute of Environment and Water in Kenya and Uganda, indicates that extreme weather conditions such as flooding has major implications on sustainability of sanitation facilities. In Karagita, a slum based in Naivasha, Kenya, residents noted that when there are floods, the latrines get clogged that some even collapse. This denies women the opportunity to use latrines and results in compromised dignity as privacy is very crucial for women's security and confidence.

Too much or too little water also breeds diseases. Even though they are not afflicted,

China: Quenching the Thirst to Learn and Lead



by Chen Shanshan

As the primary managers of households, women's active participation is critical in conserving and improving community resources such as water. In China's countryside, many women are increasingly exercising their stake in the management of water resources by learning not

only rural development and irrigation but also gender equality and citizenship rights. The Beijing Cultural Development Center for Rural Women (BCDRW) has been conducting leadership trainings across China that primarily target women.

One participant Li Yuping from Tanghai County, Hebei Province shared, "I don't have much schooling, nor have I left home to travel to any other town or village. But I was moved to tears during the training. I dared not think nor speak in the past. But I am bold in thinking and speaking. And I'm eager to participate in public affairs."

Some participants eventually vied for leadership positions in their own water collectives, where advocacies on water conservation are gaining ground, given the shortage of water in many agricultural areas. Some also managed the small water infrastructures. In Guozhuangzi village, for instance, more than 40 women repaired all the water ditches. Meanwhile, the women in Hongqi village set up a small credit facility for the community.

The changes in the participants can be illustrated by the comments of Wu Dong on his wife, who is from Guozhuangzi Village in Zunhua. "I was unable to feel at ease when working outside our home. I worried that my wife could not manage the house well. Now, she has become open-minded after taking part in the training and is eager to learn new things. Her personal capabilities have improved and she will seek help from other village women when facing difficulties".

In some communities, women have also led in helping their neighbours who needed to water the fields. These neighbours are also poor but had no male members, who could have worked more regularly on the fields.

women and girls usually tend to the sick, further squeezing medical bills within an already meagre budget. This also means non-attendance in school.

Too much or too little water denies women and girls the opportunities to advance themselves. It forces them to spend all their time to reproductive activities that have never been visible. It robs them of the chance to participate in decision-making where they could air their grievances and contribute their knowledge.

Because of their familiarity with the environment where they live and its seasons, women are in a better position to design and implement mitigation and adaptation efforts. They have already done coping mechanisms in their own small ways and these have worked.

Today, Veronica, who is chairperson of the Endui Water Resource Users Association (Endui-WRUA), along with other women demand the government to bring water closer to their homes and enhance water catchment areas in Endui in order to secure their water supply. "We should have boreholes sunk at strategic points in Endui to reduce the distance that women have to walk for water," she asserted. ■

Annabell Waititu is a founder member of the Institute of Environment and Water (IEW) that is based in Nairobi, Kenya. She is a mother of two boys, Tito, 17 and Bani, 13. She loves hiking and mountaineering and does so as often as she can with the boys. Her best moments are spent in the country side where life feels more natural—the water flows naturally, not from the tap this time; the land is real and not all tarmac and cement, so the water finds its way into the ground. She loves visiting the beautiful game parks, just to enjoy the wisdom of God demonstrated in the "animal kingdom," observing how they live and govern their kingdom, sometimes performing better than we the human beings.

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