

Through the Debris and Dryness in Liberia

By Rosemary Olive Mbone Enie

Adapting to climate change has already become a necessity for most women belonging to the most vulnerable countries. Worse, it has compounded already difficult challenges that often leave their marks on the bodies of women.



Strengthened by Struggles. Mama Jenneh Sambola is one of the most respected people in Matamo, organising women in advocating for and accessing safe drinking water for their households.

Photo by the author.

Access to clean and safe water and adequate sanitation are some of the critical challenges that face Mama Jenneh and other poor communities across Africa. Liberian women are among those first and worst hit by climate change, especially as the country has yet to fully recover from the long civil wars.

Mama Jenneh Sambola is a farmer from Than Mafa Village of the Matamo Community, Tewor District, Grand Cape Mount County, Liberia. At 65, she heads the Sambola household after the death of her husband over seven years ago. She has seven children most of which have left home but she has several grandchildren under her care. She is also the president of the community's women's group.

Mama Jenneh grows cassava, pepper, bitter balls, and rice from her farm. She is also a traditional midwife although she has never attended school. Like her, other people in the community also grow rice, cassava, eddos, yams and sweet potatoes. Both men and women are involved in farming but the bulk of the food is produced by the women.

The village has a population of over 2,000 people but it only has one hand pump. This forces women to walk some 12 to 15 miles just to fetch water for drinking, sanitation and other household chores. The two major rivers are the Matamo and the Mafa which run

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across the Tewor District area. Schools are also quite far. The Liberian civil wars affected the community school. Even as the Than Burphy Elementary School was set up in 1994, it remains closed due to the lack of resources. The children also need to walk for ten to 15 miles just to attend junior high school. Like many, Mama Jenneh has yet to recover from the civil wars.

When the wars were raging, people had to flee to and live as refugees in the capital city of Monrovia and other neighbouring countries in West Africa such as Ghana. Basic infrastructures like schools and services like water were destroyed, making it difficult for Mama Jenneh and the other members of her community to resettle.

Deadly diseases are still prevalent. Measles which killed Mama Jenneh's first two daughters in the late 1960s, remain common, along with malaria, cholera and typhoid fever, claiming the lives of thousands in Africa yearly. Liberia also has a shortage of doctors. From 250 in 1989, this number has dwindled to 50, serving 3.5 million people. Communities are still grappling with the need for markets, schools and clinics.

The Society for Women Empowerment Education and Training (SWEET) Africa Foundation is working closely with Mama Jenneh and the Matamo community in

ensuring their access to clean and safe water and adequate sanitation. In May 2009, it held the very first community dialogue in Than Mafa village with representatives from 26 towns and villages. This occasion allowed people to articulate their needs.

Later SWEET Africa Foundation set up a community-based development agency that it called Matamo Community Development Agency (MACODA). The aim of MACODA is to provide a platform for people-centered development, enabling their community to claim ownership for sustainable development of the area. MACODA is currently undertaking a Community Water Project, with the ultimate goal of enabling the community access water services.

Moreover, Maima Fahnbullah, Vice-President of MACODA and I are set to implement the Global Women Water Initiative (GGWI) of the Women Earth Alliance, an organisation based in the United States. GGWI is a series of trainings that will be held in Ghana in 2010, so that women can actively participate in the Community Water Project

This water project is envisioned to be a platform for women to be active, positive and powerful agents of change within the Matamo community. ■

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