

# REPORTS

## KNOWLEDGE AND DEVELOPMENT



Shimwaayi Muntemba recounts the development of the "Citimene" system of soil conservation in Zambia with pride and anger. She is proud because it symbolized the effective, indigenous use of tropical soil by the African people. Her anger stems from the subversion of this agricultural technique by colonial interests and the resultant unproductive and acidified soil in South Central Zambia.

For many years, the farmers of Zambia logged trees, burned the branches, and used ash as a fertilizer for the soil. "Due to the nature of the soil, the Citimene method worked well and land could be used for 5 years before being left to rest," Muntemba, the executive director of the Nairobi-based Environment Liaison Centre (ELC) enthusiastically explains. "Crops rarely failed in this part of the country."

Muntemba's enthusiasm wanes as she points to the acidification of soil in large-scale farms in the Kabwe region of Zambia. Farms have been abandoned and workers have migrated to urban centres where they can barely survive. Muntemba's country has now joined a long list of African food aid recipients. Food riots are common.

What happened? "Without bothering to find out why the farmers used the Citimene system," she says "the colonialists dismissed it as backwards and destructive. They promoted chemical fertilizers which acidified the soil. Now that they have left we must try and regenerate the soil."

Muntemba points out that tropical soils are very fragile and require a variety of agricultural techniques. Indigenous methods must be studied, not dismissed, she says emphatically. Only then can new techniques be introduced to ensure sustained agriculture. "People" Muntemba emphasizes "must be part of this strategy of agricultural development."

This is a powerful message by a woman whose rich experience in rural agriculture is matched only by her commitment to improving the role of women in international development.

Muntemba has a wealth of knowledge in dealing with rural agriculture and people. Whether it be at the University of Zambia's Rural Development Studies bureau or as an expert in rural employment with the Independent Labour Organization in Geneva, Muntemba has always seen the "process of development through the eyes of the small-scale farmers." Muntemba's PHD thesis concentrated on rural underdevelopment. She realized that "whenever there was a struggle, the peasants lost out. Land was taken away and they became labourers on large-scale farms or worse were dragged into the South African economic system."

One of the highlights of Muntemba's career was her work on the Brundtland Commission. She coordinated much of the research on food security, agriculture, environment, and women. "When I began to work at the commission things fell into place — the direct link between environmental degradation and rural underdevelopment."

After her work on the commission she went south to Kenya, accepting a position as the director of the Environment Liaison Centre in 1987. Her appointment reflected the importance the organization has attached to the involvement of women in development.



*Shimwaayi Muntemba, executive director of the Nairobi-based Environment Liaison Centre.*

At the ELC, Muntemba drew up a 3-year program for women and environmental work. She says the program emphasizes putting people's knowledge first. To bring this knowledge of women into the core of development, ELC started WEDNET, a multinational and multidisciplinary research project on women and natural resource management in Africa. The project is funded by the Gender and Development (GAD) unit of IDRC.

Muntemba stresses that the growing and widespread recognition of women as key players in the management of natural resources has been undermined and trivialized by power and policy structures at all levels. "The search for strategies to halt environmental degradation and introduce sustainable development to Africa must begin by recognizing and legitimizing women's knowledge," she says.

WEDNET's main purpose is to strengthen the role of indigenous knowledge in international development. Women researchers, beginning in May 1989, have done research in Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mali, Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Zambia. Muntemba is encouraged by the project.

The bulk of WEDNET's research is concentrated on day-to-day activities such as management and conservation of livestock, water, harvest, soil, food security, nutrition, health, and technology.

A computerized information-sharing network is being established with ELC and the Canadian counterpart in the project, York University. Muntemba hopes that the information system will allow African researchers to share their knowledge with new techniques and developments in Canada. This cooperative kind of development strategy is light years ahead of the destructive and insensitive policies of industrialized countries in the past. Muntemba points out that if the colonial farmers in her homeland of Zambia had followed this path the story of Zambia's agricultural development would have been different today.

Muntemba is committed to using WEDNET and her position at the ELC to heighten the awareness and legitimation of women's indigenous knowledge in Africa. "We have come a long way since the 1970s when women began to be discussed as central to agriculture," she says confidently. "Now there is an actual appreciation of the fact that women's economic and agricultural activities are located within the context of environmental sustainability."

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