



# **Gender and management of mountain resources in Africa: a participatory research**

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## **Summary**

This paper describes a study that looked at the way in which participatory research methods could be used to elicit knowledge of the environment from women and men in two mountain communities: the Atharaka of Eastern Kenya on the slopes of Mount Kenya and the Vhavenda of the Soutpansberg branch of the Drakensburg Mountains in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Both of these are communities with rapid population increases and intense cultivation of steep slopes and hilltops.

The author has a number of definitions which have to be taken into consideration in the context of the work carried out. In this paper community was defined as a unique living entity and, like its people, continuously changing physically and psychologically. Communities have a continuous relationship with women and men as well as the environment and with other communities. In developing a community, participation of all the interested and affected parties is very important.

Community participation is a means of ensuring sustainable ways to meet people's needs and improve the quality of their lives. Community participation refers to people's active engagement in decisions and activities that affect their lives. It emphasises equity and paying special attention to the most vulnerable people in society. On the other hand, if people are prepared to participate, it can be a learning process and can empower communities to manage their own environments to meet their basic needs. In the context of this study, community development is essentially a process in which the community is assisted to help itself. It is, in a way, empowerment at its best as it deals with meeting the concrete needs of the community as a whole. Every

member of the community has to play a role in the development of the community, hence the need for empowerment and capacity building of all people at grass roots' level.

Sustainable development is seen as two concepts coming together: sustainability and development. Sustainability is seen to be frequently linked to development which, according to the literature, can be simply the achievement of a set of aspirations of a group or society. It is mainly based on seeking those attributes that the society thinks are worth pursuing, but such attributes differ from one society to another. Sustainability, on the other hand, is seen to mean the desire to maintain the achievement of such development aspirations over time. Commitment is seen to be an urgent requisite to this concept, as per the call of the Brundtland Report.

*"Sustainable development implies an end point, something we can or have achieved. In reality, it is problematic in the sense that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve sustainable development in our current world systems. It is a pathway or direction that we need to move along so as to achieve greater balance between social, economic, and ecological environments. Furthermore, it is about applying the goals and principles of sustainable development so that people can achieve a better quality of life while protecting the integrity of ecosystems. Generally it is about improving what people are doing while at the same time seeking to transform society so that the way we perform different daily activities in the world that is socially and ecologically just. Of course, this will require a radical transformation in the way we do things."*

It is within the framework of these definitions that the research looked at issues of natural resource management in the two communities. Methods used in the field work were participatory rural appraisal (PRA), using respondents as participant observers in a method that is already well known. In this way they were able to state the problem from their own point of view, possible causes and desirable solutions considering the costs, time benefits, and the future strategies needed to solve the problems. The entry point was the goal of food security and the issues of conservation are seen as leading to a goal of food security.

This paper is interesting in that it, to a certain extent, looks at aspects of indigenous knowledge. The author is at pains to discuss drought and to record the indigenous signs the Atharaka took to mean that drought was on its way: and these include the movement of bees from forest to grassland; the sounds and movements of birds; frogs croaking in dry ponds; trees that don't flower unless it is about to rain; and the direction of the sun's rays: all of these show an intense attunement to the environment of the Atharaka.



The paper examines in some detail the procurement and use of natural resources as it relates to both the Atharaka and the Vhavenda and gender distinctions are made in terms of both knowledge and usage.



In terms of the most precious natural resource – land – an overview of land tenure and the shortage of resources is given. The paper examines how colonialism and apartheid forced villages on to sloping land in mountain areas. At both sites traditional land-use rights were maintained, and these were under the informal control of the chieftains and their clans. As with the Oromiya in the paper by Flintan on page 12, the Atharaka trace their descent from a common ancestor, and land ownership is strictly through clan membership. It is interesting to note the use of common blood lines to maintain land ownership within the group, and it is usually men who control this. Such social solidarity leads to communal responsibility for others of the clan and for the natural resources collectively owned. The author believes that customary land tenure has maintained egalitarianism among the Atharaka and Vhavenda as no single person had too much control over the means of production. However, since it is usually men who control land ownership, it is a moot point how egalitarian it can be. It is discussed how privatisation of land has led to land scarcity because land-use patterns change from communal grazing to crop farming and land is fragmented into economically unviable parcels; and, of course, once more, as in most mountain areas, this has led to the farming of sloping, marginal land. It has led also to a change in indigenous patterns of cultivation.

Both areas studied, however, do not have homogeneous soil profiles, in that some soils are suitable for crops, others are sandy and permeable, and others are clayey and drainage is difficult. Soil erosion is exacerbated by sometimes intense and sometimes sparse precipitation and overgrazing. So we have a group of factors in natural resource management: those related to outside interventions caused by colonialism, those related to traditional land-use rights, those related to nature and human practices and yet others related to the nature of the soil (land itself).

Notwithstanding, since shifting cultivation is practised, there is quite a variety of crops; and these include varieties of tubers, fruit, cereals, pulses, and cash crops such as cotton, sunflowers, tobacco, and sisal (hemp). Cropping patterns depend upon the individual farmer and are determined according to the resources available. Indigenous knowledge concerning crop mixes was found to be strong and a wide range of crops ripening at different times is planted by the Atharaka in particular – thus spreading the food availability period over as long a range of time as possible.

## Conclusion

Natural resource management must be a model delivery system not a mere field for eliciting information from respondents. The communities studied are frustrated by researchers who leave them empty-handed after extracting information from them. Another cause for frustration is conservationists who insist on environmental integrity without taking into consideration the needs of the people.

