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Despite Many Voices, African Women Unite

Harare, Zimbabwe

13 February 1989

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Dear Peter,

The first African Women's Assembly for Sustainable Development took place in Harare, Zimbabwe from 6 to 9 February 1989. This was the first such regional meeting of women to discuss development and environment issues. The meeting was attended by delegates from twenty African countries (one to three delegates each). With the conference staff and observers, at least 200 people participated. Of these, over 100 were Zimbabweans, many rural women. Several staff members, and some observers and members of the press were men.

The Assembly was convened by the Senior Women's Advisory Group (SWAG) to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). SWAG was created in 1985, at the time of the UN Conference to Appraise the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985). SWAG is an international group of 15-20 prominent women. Aside from its periodic meetings to advise UNEP on programs and policy, this African Women's Assembly was SWAG's first concrete activity.

The Assembly of African Women on Sustainable Development was organized in support of the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN)'s Cairo Plan of Action. The Cairo Plan had established commissions on four major ecosystem types in Africa: (1) Forests and Woodlands, (2) Arid Lands and Deserts, (3) Rivers and Lake Basins, and (4) Seas. The Cairo Plan had also called on African countries to each establish three pilot villages, where development activities to promote self-sufficiency in food and energy would be implemented. In addition, 30 countries with semi-arid grazing regions were each to establish one model rehabilitation unit. The Women's Assembly was organized to offer women's ideas on how the Cairo Plan could be implemented, to identify environment-development issues of particular concern to women, and to share ideas on workable development and environmental strategies.

The original idea was to invite primarily rural women from "pilot villages" in different countries to represent grassroots perspectives. While a few delegates did represent such pilot villages and other grassroots-level development efforts, many delegates were from national-level non-governmental organizations, international organizations, or government officials. Most of the grassroots-level women were Zimbabweans.

It had also been hoped that the participating countries could hold national-level meetings of women on environmental issues prior to sending delegates to the Assembly, so that the delegates could represent a broader consensus. Zimbabwe did hold a two-day national-level meeting in August 1988, but it was unclear whether any other country had done so. The major reason

seemed to be that information concerning the Assembly and invitations to participate had not been issued far enough in advance.

Victoria F. Chitepo, the Minister of the Environment and Tourism in Zimbabwe and the chair of SWAG, hosted the Assembly. While the Assembly was organized by SWAG, much preparatory work was done by the Ministry of the Environment and Tourism, with the assistance of the local International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) office and some support from UNEP. Other SWAG members included: Shafika Nasser, a medical physician and Senator in the Egyptian legislature, Hedia Baccar, Director of the Tunisian Environment and Agriculture Ministry, and Lieutenant Colonel Christine Debrah, who chairs Ghana's Environmental Protection Council.

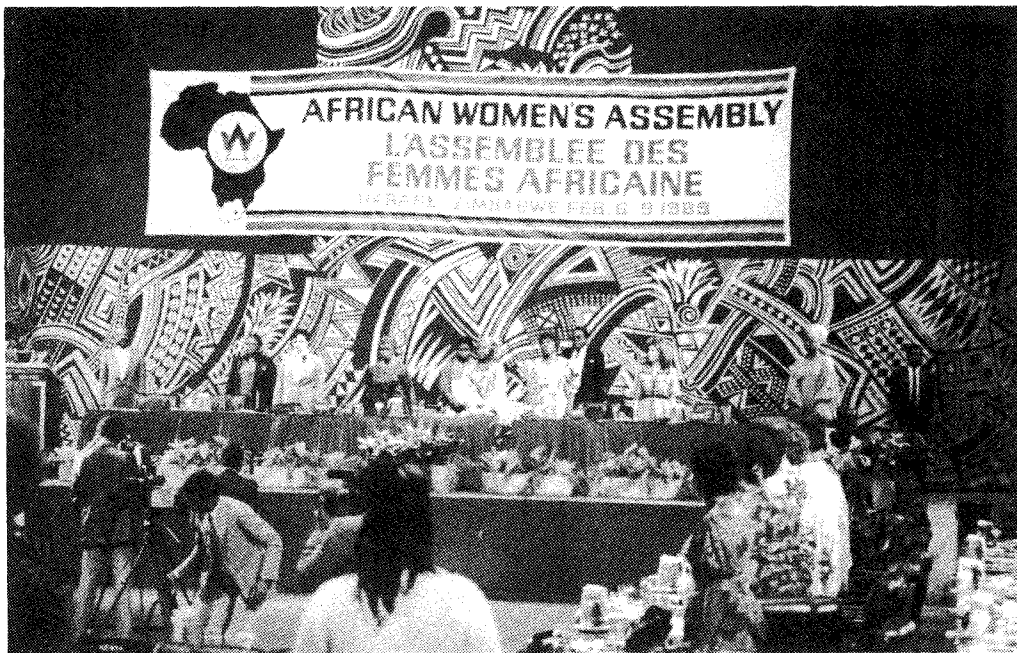
The Assembly opened with a business meeting and several invited papers. Victoria Chitepo summarized how the Women's Assembly had developed. She reviewed the Cairo Plan of Action, noting that the Plan has no gender.

Shimwaayi Muntemba, Director of the Environment Liaison Centre, International, then spoke about sustainable development issues. She challenged the Assembly to focus on strategies to get governments to change, to more fully integrate environmental issues with economic issues. She also noted that policy makers already know that women are the major actors in this realm. The central issue, then, is getting governments to empower women.

Colette Dehlôt, a Congolese who is the new Advisor on Women and Development for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). She reviewed some environmental problems that African women face. She noted how deforestation in the Sahel has led to a loss of medicinal species. In both Senegal and Mali, however, campaigns have been launched, to persuade people to preserve such species. More such strategies need to be shared.

After these initial papers, some delegates gave country reports. Some participants discussed the general situation for women in their country. An Ethiopian, for example, explained how the revolutionary government has permitted formation of peasants' associations and promotion of women's participation in development. Others mentioned specific development activities, such as improved (fuel-efficient) cookstove programs in Chad, village and women's development groups in Mali, Liberia, Cameroun, and the Central African Republic, efforts to reintroduce traditional foods in Madagascar, and integrated development activities in Zambia.

One Ghanaian delegate, Beatrice Adela, presented the pilot village project of Dawa. The Dawa project covers 6 villages in the coastal region, 42 kilometers east of Accra. With help from Ghana's Environment Protection Council, the villagers started a project in June 1988. The project involves improved agriculture, intercropping vegetables with new vegetables, such as beans, and with nitrogen-fixing tree species, such as Leucaena and Cassia. In two years, they will harvest the trees for fuel. More activities are planned, including improved latrines, dams for irrigation, borehole wells, and improved storage and marketing of agricultural produce. The villagers are pleased that the rural people are no longer being neglected, and that the promised assistance -- unlike other projects in the past -- has arrived. As a result, the people now have a new sense of community unity and self-help that did not previously exist. They also better understand the need to plant trees and not to destroy the environment by overcutting trees in their villages.



The Official Opening of the Assembly in the Harare Conference Center

The Assembly was officially opened by the First Lady of Zimbabwe, Sally Mugabe. She presented a very provocative speech to a large audience, which included members of Parliament and students from two girls' schools. Papers were also presented by Mrs. J. T. Mujuru, the Minister of Community and Cooperative Development and Women's Affairs. Papers were read on behalf of Dr. Tolba, the Director of UNEP, and Dr. Martin Holgate, the Director of IUCN.

Two receptions were held for the Assembly participants. Joshua Nkomo, formerly leader of the political opposition, but now the Senior Minister under President Robert Mugabe, spoke at a cocktail party. He noted how women's contributions to national development are increasingly recognized in Zimbabwe.

The following afternoon, the Assembly participants went to the official residence, State House, to have afternoon tea with the First Lady. This invitation was quite an honor. Chitepo mentioned how much the First Lady had done to advance the cause of African women in general, and Zimbabwean women in particular. (Although Sally Mugabe is Ghanian, she was very active in fighting, along with her husband Robert Mugabe, for Zimbabwe's independence.)

The first afternoon the substantive working sessions began their deliberations. Chitepo urged the delegates not to focus on technical issues, like which species to grow, but to focus on major issues of concern to women and strategies. Chitepo noted that in her own constituency, for example, the land was totally denuded and deforested. How, then, does a woman prepare a meal? Women's strategies and responses should be the focus of our discussion. She also noted that if the Assembly did not accomplish its objectives, perhaps another meeting of women on environment and sustainable development issues would be held in a few years in another country.



Afternoon tea at State House: Victoria Chitepo addressing Sally Mugabe

The Assembly participants met in discussion groups, organized on four major ecosystem types. I attended the meetings held on Forests and Woodlands, and on Arid Lands and Deserts. Both these commissions were well attended, with approximately 100 participants. Forestry was discussed in both sessions, as the loss of tree cover and other vegetation has been a serious problem in arid savanna lands, as well as in dense forest and woodland areas.

Several forestry issues were discussed. Of particular concern to women is that most forestry initiatives in Africa have been very top-down, primarily planned and executed by governments or outside non-governmental organizations. Consequently, local people -- especially women -- have little chance to participate in planning and decision-making concerning such programs. Sometimes outsiders arrive with reforestation projects, when the local women feel that other development needs, such as water, are more pressing.

Governments often set up large, centralized tree nurseries. Many women advocated local women operating their own nurseries. Then women would have tree seedlings available locally at convenient times -- instead of having to travel long distances, risk the tree seedlings dying en route home, and only be able to get these seedlings at prescribed times, such as on a country's National Tree Planting Day. In some countries, furthermore, if trees are grown in government nurseries, the trees are perceived to belong to the government, not to the people who plant them. They also stressed that women should acquire the knowledge and skills to operate such nurseries -- that disseminating such knowledge should be a development goal in its own right.

Despite Chitepo's request that Assembly participants not focus on technical issues such as particular species, a heated discussion developed over tree species. Some participants favored only local, or indigenous, tree species, while others thought that both introduced, or exotic, and indigenous species should be available. Many delegates cited examples of unsuccessful forestry programs. Often women were not consulted by foresters. If women were offered exotic species, of which they had no knowledge and experience, often they had no interest in planting and managing such trees. In Mali, for example, foresters advocated planting of neem trees, despite local taboos.

Elsewhere, however, local people may be familiar with some introduced species, such as Eucalyptus spp., and may prefer such trees. One Tanzanian delegate argued that indigenous species in her region take 10-20 years to grow, whereas exotic species can be cut for wood after only 2-3 years. Other delegates pointed out, however, that little research has yet been done on optimal management practices for indigenous species. Zimbabwean researchers have discovered that by pruning the secondary stems, the growth of the main trunk of a local tree species could be greatly accelerated. Indigenous species also may be more drought- and fire-resistant than exotic species.

The Assembly delegates finally recommended that both types of tree species should be considered for forestry activities, but that indigenous species should be favored. The major need is to consult first with the local women, to find out what they want. One participant argued that more attention needs to be focused on breeding a new kind of forester -- one who knows how to consult with, and listen to, local women.

Information and training should be more widely disseminated to the people who need it, such as grassroots-level women and men. Local people, it was argued, need information on the pros and cons of various tree species, to make informed choices, not just pick whatever is in the tree nursery. Similarly, women should not just be provided with fuel-efficient cookstoves, but also information how to use such stoves.

Interactions between agricultural, forestry, and energy policies were considered. To promote food self-sufficiency, governments may adopt policies that adversely affect environmental management and fuelwood self-sufficiency. For example, the Botswanan government promotes cattle-raising and agriculture, to the detriment of indigenous woodlands. Financial incentives to raise cattle are very strong, as Botswana has a preferential trade agreement with the European Economic Community and receives three times the world market price for its beef. The government pays farmers 50-100 Pula (US\$ 25-50) per hectare to prepare land for agricultural cultivation by removing trees and stumps. Both these programs have reduced the abundance of natural tree cover, thereby increasing erosion, desertification, and fuelwood shortages.

In Chad, a campaign has been launched, advocating "One Woman One Tree Each Year". Other participants advocated that this approach be adopted elsewhere. A Zimbabwean researcher, Mrs. Gata, noted, however, the massive extent of deforestation in Africa, and how current consumption levels of wood are greater than reforestation rates. She argued that the response must be accelerated: for each woman to plant merely one tree per year is too slow.

In the arid land session a lively debate emerged over the issue of goats. Raising goats is an income-generating activity often pursued by women,

as it requires less capital investment to get started than does raising cattle. The animals, being less expensive, can be more easily sold. Many women rely upon their goats to raise money for their children's school fees or other household expenses, and use the goats' milk. Nonetheless, many Assembly participants recognize that goats can have an extremely destructive impact on the African environment and can destroy trees.

The answer is not to prevent women from raising goats, but to help women find solutions -- such as paddocking and raising goat fodder -- to control the environmental damage. Participants agreed that much could be learned from other regions, from Northern countries as well as those in the South. The Swiss, it was suggested, have learned how to raise goats without destroying the environment of Switzerland. In Zimbabwe some research has already been undertaken on "zero-grazing" approaches to raising goats and goat fodder.

Participants cited the need for not just national laws to prevent environmentally-harmful practices, but for development assistance to offer people alternatives. In Zimbabwe, for example, stream-bank cultivation is prohibited: gardens must be located at least 30 meters (100 feet) from the edge of a stream or river, to prevent erosion. The problem, however, is that women usually have no way to get water from the streams to their gardens, other than to carry it. Such onerous work is too much for many women, so they break the law and cultivate on the stream banks. If, however, assistance could be made available to provide pumps to irrigate the gardens -- such as is done in Sudan -- then the women could comply with the law.

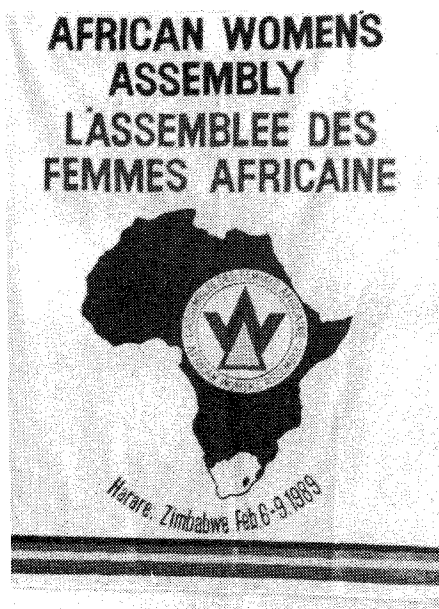
In plenary sessions, the other two commissions reported on their deliberations. Technologies, such as improved fish-drying ovens, which consume less firewood, could help women fish processors and reduce environmental impacts. Recommendations were made on management of the Nile River and other African rivers and seas, such as the Mediterranean. A strong recommendation was voiced that dumping of toxic wastes should be prohibited in all African countries, and that marine pollution be controlled.

Because the working groups were organized around four major ecosystem types, the Assembly was not structured to consider more general issues of women-environment-development interactions. Women and energy, for example, was not explicitly discussed, although women's use of fuelwood and fuel-efficient cookstoves did come up under discussion of forestry issues. The general topic of women and water was debated in the commissions dealing with rivers, lake basins, and seas. Nonetheless, some major addresses and recommendations of the Assembly did broach some broader issues.

The interrelationships of population issues with environment-development issues was highlighted by several speakers, including Sally Mugabe. Participants stressed that African people had to come to grips with what levels of both human and animal populations could be sustained by available natural resources. Many delegates emphasized that this issue was one on which African men in particular needed education and enlightenment.

Nasser noted that neither the Bible or the Koran says that people must have large families. Social pressures, especially from men, have contributed to having many children. In a male-dominated world, women find it advantageous to have large families, as they can gain access to resources through their children, especially their sons.

Debrah reminded the Assembly participants that it takes two people to produce a child. Therefore, she argued, it is time that women take some responsibility for limiting the number of children, irregardless of what men want. Men could not force women to have ten to twenty children. If this causes a revolution between women and men, she argued, it doesn't matter.



Assembly Symbol  
(omits South Africa)

Several speakers also noted the disastrous social and environmental consequences inflicted upon African women and their families by the system of apartheid in South Africa. Because of the destabilization in southern African countries, many women and children had become refugees. These dislocated populations had placed severe strains on the environments and resources where they were resettled, with resulting hardships for both refugees and local residents. Elsewhere in Africa, other people are also refugees, from environmental disasters or political situations.

While the Assembly was in progress, another meeting was also being held in the same Conference Center in Harare -- the conference of Commonwealth Committee of Foreign Ministers on Southern Africa, which was considering the situation of the Frontline States and the upcoming elections in Namibia. This meeting expressed concern about the United Nations Security Council decision to reduce UN Forces to supervise the upcoming Namibian elections,

from the original level of 7500 to 4650 troops. The overlapping of the two conferences underscored the interdependency of African women, environment, development, and regional security concerns. Some of those attending the Commonwealth meeting had a chance to mingle in the halls and chat over tea breaks with participants in the Women's Assembly.

The general topic of development aid was discussed. While some delegates urged that all aid be funneled through national governments, others believed NGOs should be able to receive aid directly. Some Zimbabwean rural women expressed concern over outside non-denominational aid being channeled to rural areas through local churches, who sometimes make such assistance available only to their members, not to the community at large. Others stressed needs for local participation at all stages in development -- not just in implementation, but also in planning, decision-making, and controlling aid funds. The Assembly recommended that environmental impact assessments should be done prior to all development activities.

Towards the end of the Assembly, the First Lady presented environmental awards to eight high school students. Many Assembly participants watched in amazement as all eight awards went to young Zimbabwean men. When the vote of thanks were expressed at the closing of the meeting, a Tanzanian delegate praised the women who had encouraged their sons to study hard and work towards improving the environment, and the girls who had stayed behind in the rural areas planting trees while their brothers were in school.

The Assembly made quite clear that African women do not speak with one voice. Not only were the official sessions conducted in English and French, but rural Zimbabwean women spoke in Shona and Ndebele. The delegates expressed different opinions on a wide range of issues, such as government vs. non-governmental control of aid monies, or the choice of indigenous vs. exotic tree species. Delegates had different perceptions of the role of non-Africans in the development of Africa and the Assembly of African Women itself.

Nonetheless, the African women at the Assembly were united in many respects. They believe that development in Africa will only be sustainable when it involves thorough participation of local populations, particularly women. The delegates urged SWAG to find some means to become more prominent throughout Africa, to help women in their own countries exert pressure on their governments to consider women's concerns and to more fully involve women in sustainable development, particularly in francophone West Africa. Women strongly agree that population issues are intertwined with environment-development issues, and that African countries must address population growth.

Time for the Assembly was too limited to permit as full a discussion of issues as many would have liked. While many of women's priorities were identified, these were not explicitly compared with those of men. The larger questions of how gender interacts with development and social change were not addressed. Many participants felt that the Assembly had just begun to identify some of the issues, and had not really tackled the challenge of agreeing upon strategies, when the meeting ended.

Each working commission did come up with a report, summarizing some of the issues discussed and proposing recommendations. Although several speakers suggested that the recommendations must be adopted by the Assembly participants themselves, many recommendations were addressed to governments, donors, or other development actors and partners. No clear strategy was articulated for putting these recommendations into action.

One delegate remarked that when she had been invited to the meeting, she had thought that surely there must be some mistake. Why would she, a rural woman in a remote corner of her country, be invited to an international meeting on the other side of the continent? She expressed her delight that in fact, she had been able to come, and to meet so many other women who shared many similar concerns. The Assembly gave many African women their first chance to compare their experiences with those of women from other regions, to learn of similarities and differences. In those terms, the first African Women's Assembly was indeed a success -- and laid the groundwork for more active participation of women in the future of Africa's development.

Sincerely,

*Paula J. Williams*

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Received in Hanover 3/13/89