

## Burkina's Women Shape Progress

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by Brenda Gael McSweeney and Scholastique Kompaoré

Something positive is afoot in villages of West Africa that the rest of the world should know about. The timing is perfect, coming just as UNESCO has chosen 'gender equality' and 'Africa' as its two global priorities. Burkina Faso's development actors are investing strongly in women and girls, building on the path-breaking work begun years ago by UNESCO and the Burkina Government, with the support of the UN Development Programme.

"The Platform saved us," exclaims Marie Nikièma, from Poa in the Center-West of the Sahelian country of Burkina Faso. "Before, we spent a crazy amount of time hulling then grinding grain, both exhausting tasks, and crushing shea butter nuts which took two days with all the interruptions."

That was before the arrival in early 2007 of the Multi Functional Platform in her village - a simple diesel engine made in India with units the villagers selected, like a shea and peanut butter press, grain huller or flour mill. The Platform is only the physical part of a development package. Essential components are a system of pre-project village



consultations, the naming of a women's management committee by the women themselves, and follow-up visits by non-governmental technicians.

Far away from Burkina in North America and Europe, development policy debates are dotted with important yet abstract concepts such as poverty eradication, sustainable development and democratic governance. "Afro-optimism" has recently been added to the international development vocabulary to reflect the continent's robust growth rate and dwindling number of conflicts. The last few months we witnessed these concepts being translated into action at the grassroots level throughout Burkina.

“Since the Platform came, we can leave off our grain at dawn for processing, then tend to other tasks, like making soumbala (a spice cake for cooking) or growing and marketing vegetables,” the women declare. “We now have money to send our girls to school – and our husbands prefer millet pancakes from flour finely ground by the Platform’s mill.”



We watched the Women’s Management Committee members measure grain, negotiate prices, mill the flour and collect and record cash earnings. Their bank account serves as collateral for loans, permitting expansion of their rural enterprises.

In Poa’s neighboring village of Songpelcé, we were asked to photograph the villagers crowding alongside a small indigenous plant called *Jatropha*, growing right at the door of the Platform’s shelter. Soon the countryside will be covered with acres of this plant, to serve as bio-fuel. With the sky-rocketing price of gasoline, it is fortuitous that this bio-

fuel can go straight into the Multi Functional Platforms without any engine modification.

“We take turns doing everything” explained a woman from Gomoré village near the town of Fada N’Gourma in the east of Burkina. The Platforms’ motors in 119 of 120 installations countrywide are humming. They start typically early in the morning or in the evening at the choice of the women. Disputes have only stopped down activities in one village. Other cases of conflict have been resolved. Most women’s committees volunteer their time to manage the Platform. However, in one case the women were paying themselves too much to balance the books. Heated negotiations ended that, and led to broadened participation and involvement of more neighborhoods – “democracy” and “transparency” in action at the local level.



Time and again, we witnessed the ingenuity of these women. In one village we watched as a Platform support piece fell clanging onto the cement floor

from a running engine. Yet minutes later, the female millers had solved the immediate problem with a rope.

The rural women – and men – are highly enthusiastic about advances the Platform brings to their communities. They give it a strong approval rating in independent evaluations. “This is the work of the UNESCO pilot project



for women and girls that we’re pursuing,” declared a beaming Benoit Ouba, President of Tin Tua, the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in charge of the Platform initiative in the eastern part of the country. Other Non-Governmental activists also plan to stay the course. “No more project cemeteries,” says Louis Ouédraogo who heads the NGO catalyzing the Multi Functional Platform action in the centre-west of the country.

The Government of Burkina Faso and several others in West Africa intend to scale up the Platform approach in partnership with their main donor the United Nations Development Programme. Presently a regional project is carrying the idea across Africa, for which UNDP’s Regional Bureau for Africa just mobilized 19 million dollars from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

From village to village around Burkina the bright eyes and deep laughter of the women vividly personify the benefits of investing in women and girls. We too are placing our bets on success.

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*Brenda Gael McSweeney began a decades-long international development career in Ouagadougou. She is Visiting Faculty at Boston University’s Women’s Studies Program, and at Brandeis University is Resident Scholar of the Women’s Studies Research Center and teaches at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management. Scholastique Kompaoré was National Coordinator of the Burkina Faso (then Upper Volta) pilot project for Equal Access of Women and Girls to Education. She is the President of the Burkina arm of the World March of Women.*