

Climate Justice Deferred: Rural Women Speak out at COP 17

Saturday 19 May 2012, by [ORDERSON Crystal](#) (Date first published: March 2012).

Small-scale farmers had little hope that leaders negotiating on their behalf would change their plight.

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Dressed in her white T-shirt and wide-rimmed hat, Dominica Shumba didn't expect her first visit to Durban to be so hot and humid, amidst thundering clouds. The Zimbabwean travelled more than 20 hours by road to attend the Southern African Rural Women's Assembly (RWA) taking place on the sidelines of the COP17 summit, the 17th conference of the United Nations Framework on Climate Change, in December.

The Southern Africa Rural Women's Assembly, part of the People's Space, was an inclusive and alternative parallel area to the main UN climate change talks. It was co-coordinated by the Rural Women's Caucus on behalf of 17 land and rural development organisations. Dominica knew there were thousands of people, including ministers of various countries that would discuss the impact of climate change, but she and other women farmers knew all too well how climate change is impacting on their lives.

'I am a rural woman with four children. We survive by farming. I used to be able to sell groundnuts and maize to the marketing board and with the money feed my family,' says Dominica. But things have changed since 2010. 'Because of climate change, we are now even failing to have enough food ourselves. The rain is coming late and has a ripple effect on production. When the rain comes, it floods and we are not able to plant.'

Fellow Limpopo-based small-scale farmer, Nora Mlodobozi, shares a similar story: 'I farm butternut, spinach and okra and have been doing it since 2004.' Business was good and we used to sell to locals and even the national market.' But like Dominica, Nora has felt her profit decreasing and climate change impacting on her crop and her livelihood. 'These days farming is challenging and it's getting worse by the day. Okra is becoming difficult to farm'.

Rural women speak out

Dominica and Nora were some of the 700 women from across the continent that attended the Southern Africa Rural Women's Assembly.

'We want to make rural African women's voices heard. There is no public space or discourse on

global warming and its impact on African women,' says Mercia Andrews, one of the organisers of the Rural Women's Assembly. 'Us rural women and the poor we don't pollute, this Assembly is about giving voice to African women and giving rural women a chance to share their stories, their struggles and the real alternatives that they are building on the ground for sustainable agriculture and livelihoods in the face of climate change.' The Assembly reviewed and discussed government policy on climate change, land reform and real demands for land distribution, and government subsidies for small-scale farmers.

Dire straits for rural women

FAO, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, estimates that farmers will have to produce 70% more food by 2050 to meet the world's expected 9 billion strong population. That amounts to 1 billion tons more wheat, rice and other cereals. But it is first and foremost African women like Dominica who will bear the brunt of the adverse effects of climate change.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change foresees yields from rain-fed agriculture being reduced by 50% by 2020. This will spell disaster for small-scale farmers like Dominica. The FAO found that climate change, coupled with poor farming practices, has contributed to a decrease in productivity of the world's farmland.

The Rural Women's Assembly Declaration, released at the end of the conference, proclaimed 'women demand proper recognition of our critical role in fighting climate change and protecting livelihoods and the environment despite widespread violation of their equal right to land. Equal rights to land and natural resources are critical to fight climate change. As the Rural Women's Assembly we demand that governments implement the principle of 50/50 land to women through a radical programme of land redistribution and agrarian reform.'

Striving for the recreation of equitable, vibrant, prosperous and healthy rural communities

Women produce 80% of the food consumed by households in Africa, and 70% of Africa's 600 million are rural. Financial support for women farmers must be commensurate with their numbers and their crucial role. Rural women stress that adaptation strategies and building resilience starts at the household level. 'As women, we demand that 50% of the funding for training and support to agriculture go to women farmers, secured by a special allocation within the Green Climate Fund and public budgets.'

Dominica and Nora had little illusion that leaders negotiating on their behalf would change their plight, but they remained hopeful until the end of COP. 'I'm so hopeful something will come out. When you live against hope, you will fail - we must keep on hoping that good things will come out.' Unfortunately, the outcome of COP was yet another dismal attempt to save the markets, not the climate, showing yet again the offensive of green capitalism, which intensifies the privatisation of nature and all aspects of life. The world's polluters have blocked any possibility of real action. The outcome of COP allows for an increase in global temperatures of 4 degrees Celsius, which is a death sentence for Africa, small island states and the poor and vulnerable worldwide. As some say, the summit has amplified climate apartheid, whereby the richest 1% of the world have decided that it is acceptable to sacrifice the 99%.

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* AMANDLA ISSUE 24 MARCH-APRIL 2012 :

<http://www.amandlapublishers.co.za/magazines/102/1098>

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