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Environmental Implications of Fuelwood Extraction and Gender Roles — Farmers’ Perception of Sustainable Forest Management in West Africa

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Abstract

The demand for non-timber forest resources is at a scale that exceeds the sustainable yield of local forests. Consequently, alternatives such as crop residues and manure are increasingly used for fuel and thus depriving the land of the nutrients and the organic matter needed to maintain a good fertility status and regeneration in the soil. The dynamics of fuel wood extraction and the attendant environmental implications of gender roles are revisited using case studies from West African countries. Using participatory tools, farmers displayed an outstanding knowledge of natural environment and recognise the way forward in community empowerment through active involvement in management of forests. Reduced crop yields, lower rainfall, changes in cropping and grazing patterns and local spatial parameters were used as indicators of environmental degradation. Considerable attention is placed on the woman’s paradoxical roles as traditional custodian of the environment, hewers of fuel-wood and drawers of water juxtaposed with strong calls for environmental management and conservation. Irrespective of the merits of natural resource conservation, the overwhelming compulsion to rely on fuel-wood consumption especially in the third world nations remains a cause for concern.

Results show that farmers are aware of environmental degradation and the need to protect the environment, but this awareness could not be translated to positive actions due to lack of motivation, low capacity, weak resource base, intervention by government in traditional roles of communities through acquisition of traditional lands as forest reserves and lack of adequate information on coping strategies for increasing alternative energy needs. By far the greater threat to forest cover, the communities concluded, is human activity through exploitation for fuel wood, farming, roofing and building materials. The main thrust of this paper is the evaluation of the global concerns on natural resource conservation and management. It also dilates on an ex-ante assessment of the natural resource conservation including the conflicting and complementary roles of women in general. The gender contributions as roles attributed to the sexes by culture and nature in environmental management are reviewed with suggested ameliorative strategies.

Keywords: Environment, exploitation, gender, environmental conservation, deforestation, bio-diversity