

WOMEN: LEADING UP THE DEVELOPMENT PATH

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An interesting special section in the Economist Magazine¹ examined the growing role of women in modern enterprises despite the constraints of the “glass ceiling”, the special new attributes they added to the processes, and the successes they have achieved. The section explained that successful women were able to build teams and networks among mixed groups, promote more cooperation among dissident factions, improve their efficiency, and address community issues beyond focusing on individual gains. One of the principal results of women in senior management positions was higher profits for the corporations. These findings, supported by other articles and studies, is that women bring additional management skills to runing entities and that increased diversity is quite productive.

These characteristics of women leaders are not confined to Western women in the corporate world, though they have managed to gain more opportunities there. In my experience in developing countries, there are a number of cases where women have played an increasingly important role in advancing development as they emerge from many traditional constraints, are able to obtain more training and education, and find channels to exercise their feminine leadership skills. The paper will describe several examples I have encountered in my work in mountains and highlands, and I am sure that many more such cases will emerge from this conference as it contributes to overcoming barriers to females taking leadership roles around the world.

The first case involves team building to assist an indigenous ethnic group in South Africa that returned to its native land after having been displaced under apartheid. Following decades of living as refugees, the people from Riemvasmaak were allowed to return to their native land in the arid highlands of the Western Cape Province. They lacked education, resources, and sources of income, but had to try to re-establish their livelihoods. A program was established to assist them, led by a group from Capetown. It made little progress, operating from a distance. IUCN South Africa was brought in to rescue the rehabilitation of the Riemvasmaak area. IUCN considered the challenges and selected a young woman on their staff, Suzette Dewet, who came from the Western Cape Province, to lead their effort. She understood the culture of the area and spoke the language.

Her first step was to go and visit the people in Riemvasmaak, taking care to wear the proper attire for the area, to speak their language, and to consult with as many people as possible. Suzette helped them establish a community council and encouraged the council to reach a common understanding on the community’s priorities to achieve

¹ The Economist, July 21, 2005

improvements in their livelihoods while protecting the land that was so important to their heritage. She also established a network of sound relations between the community council, the local provincial government, and the South Africa National Parks Service. This was needed because they all had authority over various aspects of the land under consideration. By establishing an effective working relation among these parties, Suzette was able to help them develop, agree upon, and begin executing a program to increase their incomes in a sustainable manner.

The communities priorities were to gain access to adequate water to meet home needs and support modest amounts of agriculture and livestock, generate adequate incomes, and improve their levels of education. They identified the potential for well managed eco-tourism that would provide employment for local people acting as guides, making handicrafts, and running local lodging. By supporting the local council (which included both women and men) in its efforts to define and execute it's program and by facilitating their cooperation with local authorities, Suzette was able to assure that the Riemvasmaak community could begin to make progress. With her help, they identified the major inputs they needed to achieve their goals, including public resources for water, basic training in launching and running their eco-tourism program, contacts with tourist companies, and enough resources to launch the efforts. They also needed a community building to provide a focal point for the community. She has helped obtain necessary resources from the government and donors to launch the programs and community center and assured that resources would be available in the coming years so the program will continue and is likely to be successful. She also promoted cooperation among the Riemvasmaak people and their neighbors to coordinate their efforts in agriculture and tourism.

Suzette's ability to relate to the Riemvasmaak people on their terms, encourage cooperation among different agencies that had not been getting along, and help them define and meet their own goals have been major factors in the substantial progress in this activity. It enjoys continued support from the people of Riemvasmaak, the government, and the donors.²

The second case involves promoting cooperation among conflicting groups to restore the livelihoods of Tibetan and Lian ethnic minorities in Yunnan Province in China after the government imposed a prohibition on logging and access to national forests in the Baimaxueshan National Reserve in 1998. This government action was based on the realization that excessive logging in that area had contributed to the serious flooding in the Yangtse River basin in 1997. As a result, the already poor ethnic people in the Baimaxueshan National Reserve area suffered further losses in income, faced food deprivation 5 months of the year, and were increasingly in conflict with the national park authorities who barred them from any activity in the forest areas. WWF decided to try to

² For more about this example and the following one, see Escaping Poverty's Grasp, by David Reed, WWF-MPO and Earthscan, June, 2006

help those people restore incomes through its China Office, which selected Wu Yusong, a Chinese woman based in Yunnan province, to lead the project.

Yusong decided to begin work in areas where there was the most serious conflicts, recognizing that such conflicts must be addressed in order to make progress on the social and economic issues. She was able to get leaders from the tribal villages, the national parks, and the provincial government in the Baimaxueshan National Reserve area to meet and agree to try to cooperate. She had them attend together a course in Appreciative Participatory Planning and Action to learn how to cooperate and solve problems by working together rather than through individual actions that could lead to conflicts. She also sponsored research to find possible sources of income in the Baimaxueshan National Reserve high forest areas that would not threaten the goals of restoring the clear-cut land to forests.

By working together, the villagers and the forest service determined that Matsutaki mushrooms could be grown in the forest areas and sold for a profit, as they are highly valued in Japan.³ In fact, helping restore the forest improves productivity of the mushrooms, and the villagers and the forest service agreed on a plan to grow the mushrooms in a sustainable manner and to restore the forest. Since the Baimaxueshan National Reserve forest area was a public commons, Yusong brought together over 40 Tibetan and Lian villages to work out a common plan for the production and export of the mushrooms while protecting the environment. The government helped by providing additional infrastructure and trade contacts to assist in marketing and assuring that the local villagers received adequate income from the trade. She also encouraged the government to assist the villagers increase their ability to grow more food. The Agricultural extension service provided the villagers with new techniques to extend their growing season and preserve their crops longer through the winter.

As a result of this effort and the cooperation Yusong stimulated, incomes in the villages increased 5 to 10 times over three years, and the self-esteem of the villagers was restored. Their village councils, which now include both men and women, are planning on bringing in teachers to resume education and increasing their connections the rest of the province. The Chinese government and the National Parks Service has recognized the benefits of this cooperative approach, and is seeking ways to extend it through the high priority program to improve conditions in rural Western China.

Yusong's capacity to understand how to identify sources of conflict, get people to move beyond them to work together, and build on that cooperation to achieve community benefits contributed to the success of this project. She got people to focus on solving problems in ways that met their common interests rather than fighting over their differences.

³ They were the first plant to grow in Hiroshima after the atomic bomb, and are considered a source of strength and resilience by the Japanese.

The third case concerns addressing community interests as a priority and led developing a reliable and sustainable water supply in rural areas in Ethiopian highlands. The African Development Bank reported on this case in its evaluation of water supplies in Member countries. The women in that part of Ethiopia were able to identify a critically important local need for more accessible water, organize external support for a local water reserve program, and then manage it effectively. The quotation below from an AfDB evaluation summarizes the experience:

“From Water Fetching towards Managing

When one thinks of water, what comes to mind is the role of women and children in meeting the family’s demand for water. In one rural area, in Ethiopia, women have gone beyond water fetching to managing a huge water project. This project is a large scheme consisting of reservoir systems (2 reservoirs with a capacity of 300m³ each and 5 small break pressure reservoir of 50m³ and 32 community water distribution points). The reservoirs are linked to a 70kms-pipeline network. This project is expected to operate on cost recovery basis. An NGO developed the water supply system. Water has been the most pressing need of the communities in that area for generations. Women, who are responsible for taking care of their families, had to endure the hardship of travelling for 6-7 hours to a river, the only source of water during the dry season. The amount of water collected daily was not sufficient enough to satisfy family needs. This intolerable situation caused the community at large and, particularly, women to put resolute demand to an international NGO, working with the poor, to facilitate the construction of a water supply scheme. The decision to have a water scheme constructed brought forth issues pertaining to management, ownership and sustainability. Intensive community consultations finally led to the decision of handing over the responsibility of managing and ownership to women. A Water Development Committee came into being in 1996 through an election process, which involved all community members. It consists of a general assembly with 178 women and an executive board comprising of 16 women drawn from the general assembly, representing 15 water committees, who are responsible for managing water sales units.

Capacity building became a priority task given the lack of experience in handling such a scheme in the past. This was carried out in parallel with the implementation of the scheme. Lessons learnt include:

- NGOs could have a role in water supply service development particularly in peri-urban and rural areas.
- Given the opportunities, women could manage complex project beyond their traditional tasks of fetching water from distant places.

- For sustainable development, the capacity building efforts needs to be long-term.”⁴

This is an excellent example of how women can recognize community needs and decide to address them. In particular in this case, the men were not so concerned because it was the women’s (and children’s) responsibility to fetch the water. The women’s burdens helped them recognize the community needs and the how better access to water would not only reduce water shortages, but also increase the time they would have available for other duties from family care to more attention to increased food production. And the community recognized that they would be best at managing the resource sustainably for the community’s benefit. Similar programs are now being considered elsewhere in Ethiopia.

There are many other examples of how women, using their special leadership skills, encouraging more networking and communication, shifting from conflict to cooperation, and addressing community issues, contribute to sustainable develop and create tools and networks that enhance opportunities for all concerned. In direct relation to this conference, the creation of the Mountain Forum by one of the keynote speakers, Dr. Jane Pratt, is another such case. From these experiences, we can draw important lessons about the special skills women leaders bring to promoting sustainable development in mountain and other areas and why those skills need to be supported. We can all take these lessons from this conference and seek to extend them more broadly.

⁴ EVALUATING BANK’S SUPPORT FOR CAPACITY STRENGTHENING OF URBAN WATER SUPPLY AND SANITATION ENTITIES IN REGIONAL MEMBER COUNTRIES, African Development Bank, July, 2003