

THE USE OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE (IK) BY RURAL WOMEN IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOOLDRIDGE

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Abstract

The research is part of ongoing research on development of women and a doctoral study. The paper is based on a study that investigated the survival strategies of unemployed rural women in Wooldridge. Amongst others, the aim was to contribute to the understanding and possibly to reducing poverty that is rife among rural unemployed by identifying survival strategies of unemployed rural women. According to Olatokun and Ayanbonde (2009:49), "rural women use indigenous knowledge to develop survival strategies". The paper identifies the nature and types of indigenous knowledge used by rural women and the extent of use. It is equally aimed at finding out how the use of IK has contributed positively to development in Wooldridge.

The paper argues that the majority of rural women is illiterate and has vast knowledge of traditional medicine and childcare. They use indigenous knowledge in various domains such as food production and preservation of culture. The efforts by women have to be supported because they allow women to take advantage of opportunities generated. In fact, indigenous knowledge activities are critical to the development of households in rural areas. These activities are also an important route through which they are able to reduce poverty. This is critical to the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) of reducing poverty (Kabeer 2003:14).

Key words

Development Indigenous knowledge Poverty Rural areas Women

JEL code: D31

1 Background

Rural communities have been endowed with IK with which activities were carried out and progress has been made. Yet, poverty in rural areas such as Wooldridge is more visible and increasing. Although women experience poverty throughout the world, it is mostly African women living in rural areas that bear the greatest burden of poverty. This is mainly because IK has not been used in development initiatives. The third world countries, including South Africa, have been depended on the developed world for aid assistance. This has made it difficult to achieve viable approaches to development. Alternative development projects such as NEPAD are making noticeable contribution to development. However, the success of the development projects depends upon grass root participation of local people which is a function of understanding their indigenous knowledge. It is important that rural women, who are custodians of indigenous knowledge, be encouraged and supported to use it to enhance development.

Rural women have a significant role to play in development of their communities. As mothers and wives, they contribute to the survival of society and their families. They contribute to the marketing and distribution of food; engage in household and income generating activities. Their household activities contribute to the maintenance of the local economy to enhance development.

Wooldridge is a small village located 25km from Empekweni Resort and 22km from Ngqushwa town. It is situated far inland between the Hoyi and Crossroads locations. The municipal seat of Wooldridge is in Ngqushwa town. Many families survived on selling fruit, such as prickly pears, known as "itolofiya" and pineapples. The festive season cannot be forgotten in Wooldridge. Women prepare traditional beer, "umqombothi" to be served at occasions such as the good of family, the birth rite, "imbeleko", which affiliates a child with his or her family group and "ukwaluka", the initiation ceremony that all boys go through at the age of 18 years.

2 Methodology

Ethical clearance for the project, which included scrutiny and acceptance of an informed consent form, was obtained beforehand from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

The questionnaire was designed in conjunction with the supervisor at the University of Johannesburg. The household was selected as the basic unit to interview. Preference was given to the household rather than the family unit, because it includes both family and non-family members living together. Households were defined in an economic sense as people pooling their income to buy food, and who live, eat and sleep together in one or more houses, huts or living units on the same site and depended financially on one another. In most cases, especially in rural areas where land is in ample supply, households comprise of natural families. However, the definition was designed primarily to reflect information on socio-economic relationships and not on family size.

At each of the study households the household matriarch was requested to respond after obtaining permission from the head of the household. It was reasoned that the senior matriarch would be the most knowledgeable in terms of the household activities and characteristics. If such a person was not available, the next senior woman or man was asked to participate on behalf of the household. In this way, 80 household members were represented in the survey, with an average of 5.6 members per household.

Post-graduate and undergraduate students from the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University were used as IsiXhosa-speaking fieldworkers and were trained before and during the survey. The questionnaire, informed consent form as well as a field guide for the fieldworkers was translated into the local

language, IsiXhosa, and back-translated to ensure accurate and reliable translation.

Two questionnaires were employed for data collection from all 80 households in Wooldridge. The first phase began with a broad socioeconomic survey in order to generalize data pertaining to the population. The study focused on the views and perceptions collected from the participants using structured interviews with questionnaires. The second phase was an attempt to understand the views and perceptions of unemployed women in rural areas. Door to door semi-structured interviews using questionnaires were used to collect data.

3 The use of IK in the development of Wooldridge

The distinguishing characteristic of Wooldridge is the underdevelopment of the area. Underdevelopment is an economic situation in which there are persistent low levels of income and employment, high illiteracy levels, low consumption, high dependence, weak community structures, little or no access to resources and inadequate services (Coetzee, Graaff, Hendricks and Wood 2001:332-333; Todaro and Smith 2009:830). Data gathered shows that women in Wooldridge have limited access to education, health and basic services. These are the key factors in improving the quality of life as well as the ability to earn income (De Beer and Swanepoel 2000:15-28). Of the 45 female-headed households in Wooldridge, 49 percent of the women have never attended school. The percentage of women who have passed Grade 5 or lower was 17.8 percent (Dyubhele 2011:106). This means that many women in Wooldridge are functionally illiterate. They cannot accomplish their goals without assistance from government and development practitioners due to their lack of education and experience.

Women in Wooldridge have low income levels. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (2009:11-12), women spend more of their low income to acquire food. These levels of income and employment are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Total monthly income of the 45 female-headed households in 2008

Category of income	Response number	Percentage	Amount R
Pension	24	47.4	20 880
Grants	13	26.6	11 764
Child grants	5	2.3	1 000
Domestic employment	3	4.9	1 950
Civil servant employment	2	11.0	4 940
Remittance	2	1.4	600
Informal activity	8	6.4	2 850
Total	57	100	43 984

Source: Dyubhele 2011:111

The income of female-headed households in Wooldridge in 2008 amounted to R43 984 or R977.42 on average for the 45 household. This is an average income of R184 per person for 239 members. These households use many sources of income. The largest contributor total income was welfare benefits with R33 644 or R748 on average per household per month. State transfers help to reduce poverty in many poor households (Van der Berg 2006:100). While social grants have played an important role in reducing poverty, few participants receive child allowances in Wooldridge. Many children experience hunger, that is, they do not have to eat enough (Altman et al. 2009:351). Hence, their development can be affected. For example, education performance at school may be weak because of hunger. This situation shows that deprivation is a challenge in female-headed households in Wooldridge. Social development has to ensure that these children receive child allowances to reduce poverty; however, to obtain these allowances, the households must apply for such grants.

Women in Wooldridge have low levels of education and literacy. This indicates that the socio-economic economic conditions of this community dictated their choice of occupation. The largest element of expenditure was on non-durable

goods such as food. According to Altman, Hart and Jacobs 2009:352, women spend a significantly higher proportion of their income on food. The lowest expenditure on school items is R20.00 and the highest expenditure on food is R600.00. Rural women in Wooldridge spend money on their children's education with the income they receive from the state. This still far below what is needed for good education.

3.1 Food security

The income and expenditure patterns in Wooldridge are further evidence of the level of poverty in the area. They do not have enough resources to engage in more food production. In Wooldridge, women engage in crop production using cropping practices developed through IK. They cultivate crops in food plots in order to provide food for the household, but do not attach monetary value to it. Subsistence food production occurs in rural provinces such as Limpopo (Aliber and Hart 2009:447-448). Women in Wooldridge use indigenous vegetables to ensure food security. They pick plants such as "tyutu", "msobosobo" and "irhabe" and "mix" them with maize meal to make food called "umfino". This is the staple diet used twice a day.

In addition to welfare benefits, they are dependent on agricultural and non-agricultural activities. Few households in Wooldridge have vegetable gardens. The vegetable gardens are cultivated for household consumption on small plots or vacant land next to the houses. Household vegetable gardening is an important means of earning an income in Nigeria (Rubaihayo 2002:3).

Women in Wooldridge do not have resources to farm large plots of land and cannot afford inputs such as fertilizers without assistance from development stakeholders. Lack of assistance may result in increasing poverty. The provision of appropriate support may improve the quality and quantity of outputs and allow

women to move from subsistence production to income-oriented production (Aliber and Hart 2009:456).

Lessons from developing countries, especially Africa, suggest that 61 percent of women are subsistence producers (Altman et al. 2009:357; Food and Agriculture Organization 2009:1). They have indigenous knowledge of food production and their key role as food producers and providers ensures the survival of their households and society. While women are the main food producers, they have limited access to productive resources and little purchasing power.

3.2 Health care

The health care services are not located within easy reach. This situation resulted in women in Wooldridge using their vast knowledge of traditional medicine. They use IK inherited by word of mouth in family health care. Women are the first to diagnose symptoms of illness in children. For example, women bottle “inongwe” or African potatoe and roots of certain edible green plants for people to drink to assist with resistance in their bodies. Children who do not have an appetite can also be cured by drinking the mixture. Furthermore, women boil a herb called “umhlonyane” to heal those who are sick with cold or influenza. They save on buying unaffordable cough mixtures, while solving their own problems by and for themselves. This traditional knowledge has not been properly mainstreamed into development projects in Wooldridge. In the meantime, poverty continues to perpetuate in Wooldridge. Women in Wooldridge have to be encouraged to use indigenous knowledge to enhance their development. They must plan and use their IK if they want to succeed.

3.3 Culture and craft

Traditional festivals are celebrated frequently in many rural areas. Women in Wooldridge use their IK of traditional songs and dances and the preparation of different traditional dishes used during traditional festivals to transfer and preserve the Xhosa culture. One woman said: "We enjoy the traditional festivals because they promote culture and social stability".

Women in Wooldridge use indigenous knowledge to produce craft. This knowledge has been passed on by word of mouth from generation to generations. Firstly, beadwork, grassmats and bag production secure employment during long breaks between harvesting seasons. Secondly, handmade production preserves the cultural heritage, as young people learn the art of beadwork, grass mats and bag production. Lastly, the sale of handmade products outside Wooldridge can bring additional income for the poor households, although marketing is a significant problem.

3.4 Survival strategies

Rural women in Wooldridge use their IK to develop survival strategies. Table 2 shows that unemployed rural women depend on state benefits and informal activities for their survival. Besides these activities, rural women continue to face economic disadvantages and hardship to survive. This is mainly because development practitioners have not address the economic context of unemployment and inadequate economic assets. Informal economic activities became an attractive alternative for rural women, notwithstanding the low income provided by these activities. Informal activities have not generated sufficient income for women in Wooldridge, because the purchasing power of Wooldridge and the surrounding areas is very low (Pratt 1999:42).

Table 2: Survival strategies of female-headed households in 2008

Category of income	Response Number	Percentage	Amount R
<u>Safety net or government transfers:</u>			

Pensions	24	42.1	20 880
Grants	13	22.8	11 764
Child allowances	5	8.8	1 000
Total	42	73.7	33 644
<u>Formal employment:</u>			
Domestic	3	5.3	1 950
Civil servant	2	3.5	4 940
Remittance/Maintenance	2	3.5	600
Total		12.3	7 490
<u>Informal activity:</u>			
Selling livestock	1	1.8	500
Selling assets	2	3.5	800
Producing beadwork	2	3.5	600
Producing grass mats and brooms	2	3.5	550
Donations	1	1.8	400
Total	8	14.1	2 850

Source: Dyubhele 2011:121

4 Findings and discussions

The findings suggest that a decade after achieving democracy, female-headed households in rural areas still have high unemployment, limited access to resources and lower incomes. However, rural women are resourceful in choosing and developing strategies in order to generate income to provide for basic needs. Sustainable local economic development (SLED) policies and cooperatives allow women to be empowered by collective action as they become “more than the sum of their parts” (Pratt 1999:26). This means that they are forced to use their own initiative, indigenous knowledge and efforts to generate income to improve the quality of life of their households. The SLED strategy is a strategy in which current consumption patterns do not negatively affect the consumption of future generations (Jackson 2007:13). Wooldridge can focus on utilising resources such as social and human assets, because the community places value on these

assets, which include knowledge, education and skills (Williams 2006:212). The community places value on human assets, as many women are illiterate and know what it means to be poor (Dyubhele 2011:111).

Rural women can adopt the empowerment approach, which involves grassroots organisation and cooperation and is rooted in the experiences of women. Women must emphasize the importance of self-reliance and using indigenous knowledge to develop survival strategies. They have to help themselves if they want to be helped. Self-empowerment has to focus on concerns and constraints of rural women. These concerns include providing for basic needs and focusing on income-generating activities. This ensures that women become participants in the development process rather than recipients of such process (De Beer and Swanepoel 2000:34). They must also find someone to champion their local development plan and must lobby at the local government for more support, given their poor situation.

The tables show that African women in Wooldridge play a role in both agricultural and non-agricultural activities, although production has decreased over time. These activities cannot contribute to the reduction of poverty in Wooldridge without assistance from institutions and development practitioners. The community must plan and sell their plans to developers or government to help them. African women have performed tasks associated with subsistence, food production and activities such as cultivating vegetable gardens, harvesting and preparing the crop for immediate consumption or storage with primitive tools. This situation compares well with countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where women contribute 73 percent towards food production (Kabeer 2003:103).

5 Conclusion

The ability of women to sustain livelihoods is not a new phenomenon, but plays a vital role in economic development. The demographic, social and economic trends of rural economies have generated the need for rural women to increase their participation in household livelihoods. Many rural women are poor and are engaged in subsistence agriculture to improve the quality of life in their households and communities. The participation of women in the economy improves the standard of living and reduces poverty in households. This is mainly because with an increase in income, better methods and more cultivation can take place, resulting in economic growth and development.

Lessons from developing countries show that rural areas are not hopeless. They have people with indigenous knowledge that can be used to develop the declining economies. This involves a collective effort. It is important that community stakeholders participate in the development of the economy. Development takes place with the people and not for people. The importance of public–private sector partnerships using local resources and skills cannot be overemphasized in the development of rural areas. These partnerships can be used to develop the economy of Wooldridge.

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