

## “Empowering women is smart politics and smart economics”

–Interview with Mrs Estherine Fotabong (NEPAD Director of Programme Implementation & Coordination) on **Women in Agriculture**  
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*What does 2015, the African Union Year of Women's Empowerment & Development mean for women - especially women in agriculture?*

Heads of State are appreciative of NEPAD's work in the area of climate change and women in agriculture. Choosing the theme for 2015 to focus on women and their empowerment is important.

I believe that in order for Africa to achieve its full potential in agriculture and development, women have to be supported, encouraged and empowered through favourable policies, platforms and various mechanisms. Smallholder farmers' numbers show that at least 60 percent of them are women and 60 to 80 percent of the food in Africa produced is by them. Therefore it is only smart politics and smart economics to put women at the centre of development for the Continent.

*How best can women be helped to participate actively in farming and break away from cultural norms that inhibit their productivity?*

Two years ago NEPAD had an elaborate consultative exercise with women smallholder farmers in a number of African countries, in order to hear from women farmers in rural areas. We already know most of the challenges faced by women in agriculture, such as access to credit, inputs and markets.

However, the issue of climate change has been coming up more and more. We found that the impact that climate change is having on women in agriculture is not theoretical, it is not something that you just read about. It is real. For example, change in weather patterns impact on when and how women plant and harvest their crops. So the focus now is on how to support women with knowledge and information, as well as adaption techniques.

The issue of cultural practices and traditions and their impact on women in agriculture affects women all across the continent, it is not region specific. This was confirmed in the NEPAD consultations with women farmers. For example, most women stated that they could not take decisions concerning their farms without consulting their spouses.

As we celebrate the *Year of Women Empowerment and Development*, we recognise African families and culture. The message for 2015 is therefore about inclusiveness - men and women working together and supporting one another to move together as families and as communities on the Continent as a whole. Hence we need supportive policies across the board that support women, be it in terms of accessing credit, land, receiving inputs or training in using inputs effectively for agriculture and so on.

Furthermore, some statistics show that if women were to receive a third of inputs that men receive, agricultural production in Africa would triple. Obviously that gap needs to be filled.

*In some African countries, women are still denied ownership of land and this contributes to their being unable to fully engage in agriculture. How can women be rescued from this difficult situation?*

Good practices can be shared and adopted between countries. For instance in Ethiopia, it is becoming the norm for married couples to register land in both the wife's and husband's names. The joint registration of land means that should a woman's husband die, she still remains the title holder and her claim to the land is not questioned. Good practices such as this one can perhaps be looked into by other countries.

Land is definitely a key input for agriculture, since without land, one cannot farm. But we are also looking into empowering women along the whole agricultural value chain – in production, processing, distribution, marketing and so forth. The focus in 2015 is for us to see women in agriculture fully engaged in agribusiness for job and income creation. This year as we celebrate women's empowerment and development, the message is that it is not just about supporting women in farming, but the transformation of women's agricultural activities from a subsistence level into viable businesses.

With regards the issue of culture, traditional leaders have a critical role to play. This level of leadership also needs to be sensitised on the fact that giving women access to land will only contribute to achieving food security, poverty reduction and the transformation of economies. In the next ten years of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme, one area that needs more focus is engagement with traditional leaders, especially in the area of land ownership to empower women more.

Creating more platforms for dialogue at national level for women to participate in policy development is another key. NEPAD's consultation with women farmers two years ago in the Gender, Climate Change and Agriculture Support Programme, saw women coming together with public authorities to discuss issues that they felt were important to them. In 2015, NEPAD will continue to support the creation of these platforms for women to voice their concerns and provide input in decisions that affect them.

*Mechanising farming has been known to be one of the game changers in accelerating Africa's food production and yet most women do not have easy access to machinery and adequate technologies. Why is this so?*

If I could quote Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, "Hoes belong to the museum." We need to move in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and do things differently if we hope to see more young people getting interested in agriculture. Therefore mechanisation and technology play an indispensable role. For women, one of their major challenges in agriculture is their heavy workload – taking care of households, children and farming takes toll on their lives. When it comes to mechanisation for agriculture, we have to consider that the majority of farmers are smallholders. In this context we have to look at appropriate technologies to specifically support smallholder women farmers.

The NEPAD Agency has entered into an alliance with five other organisations that work on the Continent in the area of Climate Smart Agriculture which also looks at bringing technologies to smallholder women farmers. Technologies are thus critical in supporting production, as well as in value addition in the transformation of primary products from farms, as the need has been expressed by women themselves.

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