



From Beekeeping to Owning Land

AFRICAN WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT FUND IS HELPING WOMEN IN RWANDA
CHALLENGE CULTURAL NORMS

In Kabarondo, Rwanda, beekeepers are traditionally men. When a group of women saw an economic opportunity and decided they wanted to become beekeepers, the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) immediately moved to support them. As the first pan-African women's grantmaker located on the continent, AWDF has often challenged cultural norms and blazed a trail for women's rights and philanthropy. In Kabarondo, AWDF took what started as a livelihoods project one step further by assisting a group of women to become not only beekeepers, but also landowners.

The predominant economic activity in Rwanda is agriculture. Customary law placed women in Rwanda at a disadvantage for generations, most significantly in the area of access to and control over land. According to Rwandan tradition, the man is the head of the household. He controls all family assets, including land, which are passed on from father to son. Wives do not inherit from their husbands and daughters do not inherit from their fathers.

After the 1994 war and genocide, customary rules were not adequate to address the complex land situation. With many men in exile, deceased, or in prison, a significant number of women—many of them widows—were left in positions of authority and responsibility over family property and land.



Key Info



COUNTRY
Rwanda



TARGET POPULATION
Women



APPROACH
Agricultural technology; Land and property rights; Vocational training

The newly written Constitution, Civil Code, and 1999 Law contain key articles for the protection of women's rights. However, despite changes in laws, economic, social, and cultural factors have still limited women's access to and control of land. "The fact remains that in many communities, women do not own or inherit property," explains AWDF grants manager Beatrice Boakye-Yiadom.

Over 60 percent of AWDF's grantees are small to medium-sized women's organizations that have not received prior external funding. In Kabarondo, a local organization called Ejo Nzamera Nte ASBL had been working with women living with HIV/AIDS. This group of women—often discriminated against and marginalized—wanted a sustainable way to generate income, and saw selling honey in the local market as an opportunity, especially since they could also then have honey for use in their homes and for their children.

Ejo Nzamera Nte ASBL responded to this group idea by offering the women training in beekeeping techniques, as well as accounting and other basic business and finance-related topics. The bees required to make honey are kept in beehives, meaning that the women needed land on which to construct and keep the hives. The women, with support from Ejo Nzamera Nte ASBL and AWDF, decided to leverage this opportunity to acquire land. AWDF built off of its existing relationship with Ejo Nzamera Nte ASBL, to assist the leaders of the women's group to develop their negotiation and advocacy skills, and in turn approach the community chief.

Meet Patricia

In Rwanda, primary education is free. Families, in both rural and urban areas, are able to send their children to primary school. The challenge arises in secondary school, when families have to pay fees, and most opt to send the boy.

Patricia Nyirahabimana is a farmer from Rutaga in Kabarondo Sector in Rwanda. She is a mother of 7 children and one of the leaders of the women beekeeping group. "I feel empowered in my community. I am hoping that our beekeeping project continues to yield positive results, and that we will be able to sell the honey produced, make income, and send our children to school. I am definitely sending my daughter to secondary school and even to university."



The chief was supportive of expanding opportunity and income, so he donated the land to the group of women including documentation to prove their ownership. "We always believed that if women have the resources, skills, and knowledge, they are capable of crafting an agenda that responds to their needs. What we have come to recognize is that when women get organized, access resources, and see a return from these resources, the local community sees those women as assets and responds to them very differently," recalls AWDF director of programs Sarah Mukasa. With the support of AWDF, the women got a modern apiary housing 30 hives. The group also



received modern beekeeping and honey harvesting equipment including harvesting suits, smokers, and honey extractors.

In the beginning, these women were relatively anonymous in the community. But now, other people, including men from surrounding villages, approach them for technical advice on beekeeping.

Since its inception in 2001, AWDF has supported Ejo Nzamera Nte ASBLs with more than just funding. “A key component of the work we do alongside grantmaking is capacity building,” explains Sarah. AWDF worked with the small women’s group to negotiate with local leadership for land. “We were not directly involved in any of the negotiations, and in most instances, it’s best for AWDF to not be at the front end of those processes. But we were helping with skills and strategy behind the scenes. It is

critical for AWDF to support local actors to drive the intention, direction, and conversation, especially when engaging with any level of leadership, because we are, to them, an outsider.” The initiative generated a lot of attention from the community.

It was really innovative to witness a group of women living with HIV/AIDS becoming beekeepers. They garnered a lot of admiration from men within their community and from surrounding ones,” shares Rissi Assani-Alabi, AWDF program officer for francophone Africa. AWDF attributes the success of this project to the groundwork laid by Ejo Nzamera Nte ASBL to get community and leadership buy-in on the viability of the initiative. Sarah explains, “Once the community and leaders are on board, the project has the space to be successful. Now it is up to the women to prove their worth as economic actors.” Given that space, this group of women demonstrated their ability to challenge cultural norms to become income-generators for their families, and advocate for their needs and rights to become decision-makers and land-owners in their community.

The Economic Value of Honey



Honey is one of the few commodities where the value chain is often built upon the success of small micro-enterprises and family producers.



Since honey is a pure and natural product that cannot be mass manufactured, mass produced, replicated, or “farmed”, its production often depends on small-scale beekeepers spread out over large areas of land.



Beekeeping is an important sustainable and alternative source of income in rural areas, benefiting local communities and their local environment.



Global demand for pure honey constantly exceeds supply, and honey is becoming an increasingly valuable—and expensive—commodity. The market globally is expected to hit \$12 billion by 2015.

With community and leadership buy-in,
a group of women turn an opportunity to generate income
into a sustainable future for generations to come.

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This case study was written by Virginia Zuco and developed for Foundation Center's Equal Footing project.

Photographs provided courtesy of the African Women's Development Fund.

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