

Women Farmers Feed the World

by Bernard Pollack and Danielle Nierenberg

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Nowhere is it more apparent that women feed the world than in the largest slum in Kenya. Packed full of people, Kibera slum in Nairobi is populated by anywhere from 700,000 to a million people. In an area of about 225 hectares, the equivalent of just over half the size of Central Park in Manhattan, the women we met are growing food not just to feed their families, but to also to generate income.

Some of the women we met earlier this month are raising vegetables on what they call “vertical farms.” Instead of skyscrapers, however, these farms are contained in tall sacks, filled with dirt. The women received training from the French NGO Soladarites to start their sack gardens and now grow a variety of vegetables, including greens like spinach and kale.

And more than 1,000 of their neighbors are doing the same thing. A skill that came in handy over the last few years as election violence spread through the slum in 2007 and 2008 when there was conflict in the slums of Nairobi. No food could come into these areas, but most residents didn’t go hungry because so many of them were growing crops—in sacks, vacant land, or elsewhere.

Just across from Kibera another group of farmers, most of them women, have been growing food more nearly two decades on a plot of vacant land. They don’t own the land where they grow spinach, kale, spider plant, squash, amarynth, and other vegetables. Instead the land is owned by the Kenyan Social Security Administration, which has allowed the farmers to farm the land through an informal arrangement. They’ve been forced to stop farming more than once over the years, and although they’re getting harassed less frequently, they still face a number of challenges.

The biggest challenge is a lack of water and fertilizer for their crops.

For many years, they’ve used wastewater (sewage from an underground pipe they tapped into) for both irrigation and a source of nutrients. Although this wastewater can carry a number of risks, including pathogens and contamination from heavy metals, it also provides a rich—and free—source of fertilizer to farmers who don’t have the money to buy expensive store-bought fertilizer and other inputs. And because of longer periods of drought (likely a result of climate change) in sub-Saharan Africa, the farmers didn’t have to depend on rainfall to water their crops.

But even with the loss of their main water supply and nutrient sources, these farmers are continuing to come up with innovative ways of raising food—and generate income.

With the help of the organization, Urban Harvest, the farmers are not only growing food to eat and sell, but, perhaps surprisingly, becoming a source of seed for rural farmers. Kibera's farmers have always grown fodder for livestock feed for both urban and rural farmers, but by establishing a continual source of seed for traditional African vegetables, they're helping dispel the myth that urban agriculture only benefits poor people living in cities.

Using very small plots of land, just a quarter of an acre, and double dug beds, the farmers can raise seeds very quickly. Fast-growing varieties like amaranth and spider plant take only about 3 months to produce seeds, with about 3000 Kenyan shillings in profit. And these seed plots—because they are small—take very little additional time to weed and manage.

The future for these farmers continues to be uncertain. Their land could be taken away, the drought could further jeopardize their crops, the loss of wastewater for fertilizer could reduce production, but they continue to persevere despite these challenges.

Bernard Pollack and Danielle Nierenberg are blogging about their travels at Border Jumpers [www.borderjumpers.org]. BorderJumpers.org began in October 2009 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia -- when Bernard Pollack and Danielle Nierenberg began a journey to visit nearly every country in Africa. At every stop they are meeting with farmers, community organizers, labor activists/leaders, non-governmental organization (NGOs), the funding and donor communities, and local, regional, and international press. With a Sony handycam, a 8-year old laptop, and sporadic internet connections -- their goal is to bring stories of hope from across the region to as large an audience as possible. They will tell the stories that aren't being told—from oil workers fighting to have a union in Nigeria to innovative ways farmers and pastoralists are coping with climate change.

They have regular columns on Huffington Post, Worldwatch's Nourishing the Planet, DailyKos, FireDogLake, MyDD, and WorkingLife.

Danielle Nierenberg, an expert on livestock and sustainability, currently serves as Project Director of State of World 2011 for the Worldwatch Institute, a Washington, DC-based environmental think tank. Her knowledge of factory farming and its global spread and sustainable agriculture has been cited widely in the New York Times Magazine, the International Herald Tribune, the Washington Post, and other publications. Danielle worked for two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic and currently volunteers at farmers markets, the Earth Sangha (an urban reforestation organization), and 1Well (an NGO focused on sustainable development projects all over the world) . She holds an M.S. in agriculture, food, and environment from Tufts University and a B.A. in environmental policy from Monmouth College.

Bernard Pollack, an expert on political campaigning and communications, currently is traveling across Africa with his partner Danielle Nierenberg [www.BorderJumpers.org]. His expertise in organizing state and national campaigns for the AFL-CIO has resulted in the election of major pro-worker candidates and laws in California, Kentucky, Minnesota, Oregon and Pennsylvania. He has developed communication programs for labor organizing all over the U.S. and has worked extensively with media reporting on workers' issues. He holds an M.A. in political management from The George Washington University School of Political Management and a B.A. from the Elliot School of International Affairs at the The George Washington University.