



The Two Worlds of Women in Africa

**Summary Notes of Danish Africa Commission Gender Conference,
Dr Greg Mills, 15 August 2008**

Let me describe the two worlds in which we exist in Africa, and how we can get from one to the more positive other.

The **first world is one of a vicious cycle** in which many women in Africa find themselves in.

- This is a world where women are in the main located in rural areas, cut off from key markets, notably those outside Africa where 99% of the global economy today is.
- They have too little time to work their fields or in their cities – ‘time poverty’ is cited as a major impediment to their prosperity. Time is taken up by simply finding the means to survive: fetching water, finding firewood, cooking, looking after children, growing food (rather than sales), and so on.
- They lack access to credit; and that relates to their lack of access to bank accounts and control of their own finances.
- The labour intensive industries they might be able to find employment in are beset by problems of global competitiveness – by a lack of appropriate skills and technology, by the cost of accessing markets, and by overvalued African currencies.
- Their lives are beset, too, by the absence of mechanisation, transport, roads and electricity.
- There are only limited means to consolidate their efforts, such as jointly negotiating with banks for credit, sharing the load of looking after children and the elderly, organising regular transport etc.
- The access to training for women and career advancement prospects are limited.
- In all of this, men and women are sometimes the greatest impediments to a more prosperous cycle – men controlling finances, allowing prejudices to get in the way of recruitment and of types of work; and of women themselves not believing that they can do it and getting out there and looking for jobs.

This is the vicious cycle of continued gender marginalisation and African under-development.

It follows that a positive cycle is one where:

- Women have access to credit and control of their own finances.
- Attention is focused on factors which bring greater competitiveness – those which can reduce costs, policies and practices which can encourage investment, and bring cheaper and reliable access to markets.
- Infrastructure is reliable and appropriate.
- Reproductive health and decision-making and women's security can be taken as granted.
- There is a tolerance of entrepreneurial risk and failure, and that this is not a death sentence socially or culturally.
- Access to potable water is improved to the point that it takes up a miniscule percentage of time, reducing substantially 'time poverty' and ensuring that energies are put in the main to productive activities. This would also have the consequence of ensuring that children, especially girls, spend more time in school.
- Far from being marginalised, the economic development potential of women is harnessed and unleashed.

So how do we get from the one world to the other – and shatter the 'unholy alliance' between poverty/inequality and marginalisation/unemployment.

Let me highlight six areas for action:

1. Focus on key areas of infrastructure which will help to open up markets and relieve time pressures: roads, water and electrification.
2. Improve access to banking and credit. Special consideration should be given the use of smart card technology in opening up previously unbanked areas of the economy, such as has been done in the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal in South Africa where 3.5 million people now transact in this way. Digitised money and transactions are safer and open up a world of possibilities especially for women, in the home and as entrepreneurs.
3. The focus should shift from simply increasing the quantity of those in education, to improving the quality. We must begin to think about the future – what sort of skills us Africans require to compete in the global economy, about necessary back-office and other service sector skills especially including tourism.
4. Action is needed to ensure that Africa has a green revolution will happen. We need to bring the private sector into these schemes from the outset. As has been shown with tobacco in Tete and coffee in Uganda, co-operative private sector-led schemes can quickly transform the lives of the rural poor. And we need to think of novel ways to move women to the centre of consumer activity: branding goods and services as 'Women First' where there might be a majority of women involved in production, management and ownership, might be a good place to start.

5. Policy must make jobs the priority. We need to instil a national and continental debate on growth and competitiveness. We should focus not on inputs but on outputs, and match execution strategies with vision.
6. Finally, we have to learn to celebrate success where this is happening. This will encourage men to change their attitudes and for women to increase their self-belief.

Of course, if everything is a priority, then nothing is. I would venture, in this spirit, that instead of a long list of what 'needs to be done', that the focus is changed positively to suggest what 'can be done'. I would advance three areas which could have a disproportionately powerful multiplier effect, and can be measured against delivery: ensuring potable water; expediting banking through new technologies; and creating a women-first branding strategy.

Ladies and gentlemen, investing in women is investing in the future of Africa.

Thank you very much.