

Women in South African rural areas are the backbone of their communities. They walk miles to fetch water and firewood, work the land, bear and look after children and run the households. Trees play an important part in their struggle for survival. But trees are getting more scarce and this is making the lives of rural women tougher.

By Rosalee Telela



Trees for life

"For women in rural areas, trees are a source of life. They use wood for cooking and building. Other trees provide shade, fruit and medicine," said Zukiswa Shibane, a finalist for M-Net's 1994 Green Trust Awards and a social forestry worker at the Herschel Development Trust in the Transkei.

Millions of South African women collect wood to meet the daily needs of their families and communities.

"More than a third of South Africa's population still depends on traditional energy sources such as wood and dung.

Electricity supplies to rural areas is 20 years behind, and even then people will continue to use wood, at least for cooking," Michelle Nel, an environmental journalist told SPEAK.

In South Africa, most fertile land with healthy trees is owned by the government, big business and rich farmers.

"As a result of apartheid, people were removed from areas which were rich in natural resources, and forced to move to small pieces of poor land where they were crowded like cattle," explained Tsepo Khumbane, winner of M-Net's 1994 Green Trust Award and a field worker for the Environmental and

Development Agency (EDA).

Overcrowding has resulted in a serious shortage of natural resources, like wood and water.

To make things worse, the demand for wood is growing. More and more trees are being cut down and sold to factories to make things like furniture, window frames, pot and tool handles.

Research on the use of wood in rural areas shows that three million households in South Africa collect firewood daily. As the population increases, so will the demand for building houses and firewood. This is having a serious effect on the environment — and on people's lives.

Shibane explained the extent of the damage:

"When the soil is no longer held in place by tree roots, large

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Trees for Africa
Box 2035
Gallo Manor 2025
Telephone: (011) 803 9750

Environmental and Development Agency (EDA)
Box 62054
Marshalltown 2107
Telephone: (011) 834 1905

Africa Tree Centre
Box 90
Plessislaer 4500
Telephone: (0331) 984 220

ECO-LINK
Box 727
White River 1240
Telephone: (01311) 32120

Ministry of Water Affairs and Forestry
Private Bag X313
Pretoria 0001
Telephone: (012) 299 2535

Zamani Agroforestry Project
Box 108
Estcourt 3310
Telephone: (0363) 24752

School of Rural Community Development
University of Natal
Telephone: (0331) 955 495

Abalimi Bezekhaya
37A Somerset Road
Cape Town 8001
Telephone: (021) 212 578

For many rural people, wood is crucial to their daily lives



Photos: Paul Weinberg



The demand for wood is increasing. To avoid soil erosion, trees should be replanted

amounts of it are washed away by rain. The soil runs into the rivers, blocking them and causing them to flood. Whole villages can be flooded. Very few plants can grow in place of the trees because the rain washes away nutrients from the soil."

Khumbane believes that action must be taken.

"Rural people know no other way of living except living on the land. If we are going to leave the land to be destroyed by burning and cutting trees without any thought for the future, we are heading for a period where there will be no food," she said.

Shibane said replanting is a must if rural people are to survive. "We are not saying people should not use trees. But if trees are not replanted, the soil will be so eroded it will not produce

food."

This is why organisations like the Herschel Development Trust, EDA, Plant for Life, Eco-Link and others have social forestry projects to help raise awareness and encourage tree planting.

"Social forestry is accepted by many as a way to meet people's energy demands, fight erosion, increase agricultural production and provide employment opportunities. It is a way of involving local people in growing trees and food for their own use," said Nel.

When social forestry projects are established in rural communities, women will spend less time collecting wood and suffer less health problems from carrying heavy loads for long distances," she added.

Shibane has planted 12 000 young trees in her nursery. Involving children is very important, she believes. "Our programme teaches school children how to plant trees from seeds and cuttings. They are learning from an early age to respect life," she said.

Khumbane is also involved in tree planting projects. "We encourage individuals and communities to start home gardens. They decide what kind of plants and trees would best suit their needs."

But it not enough just to plant trees. "You have to take care of them so they can grow and bring the many benefits that tree planting can give. Trees need water, plenty of light, nourishing soil and protection while they are small," said Nel. ☀