



Rejuvenating Nigeria's Women Development Centers

Nigeria has enjoyed significant economic growth in recent years as Africa's largest petroleum producer. While women play an increasingly important role in the country's economic success, obstacles blocking their full participation in society still remain. JICA has been involved in several projects with the goal of empowering women at the local level, assisting them in becoming more active, productive participants in society.

GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS STRIVE FOR EMPOWERMENT

Rising from the verdant jungle, the capital of Abuja, with its beeline roads and shining high-rises, stands as a symbol of growth for both Nigeria and Africa.

Located in the central part of the country, the city was created with the help of Kenzo Tange, a renowned leader of the modern architecture movement in post-World War II Japan, and his team of urban planners.

Without question, petroleum has been the fuel for Nigeria's recent economic boom. Even as the economy grows, though, men have controlled the lion's share of economic activity; participation by women in society continues to be limited. This discrepancy is most noticeable in the Islamic northern region, where beliefs often constrain women to the home.

In the 1980s, Nigeria's eighth president, Ibrahim Babangida, led government efforts to raise the status of women in rural farming villages. These included the founding by Babangida's wife Maryam of the Better Life Program for Rural Women, which created over 700 Women Development Centers (WDCs) across the country to provide vocational training and education for women.

LACK OF RESOURCES AND INADEQUATE MANAGEMENT

The WDCs made strides at grassroots levels to raise



The striking golden dome of the Abuja National Mosque (left) and majestic Aso Rock, Abuja, Nigeria.

the standard of living of women, but the centers faced uncertainty after President Babangida stepped down from power in August 1993. Unable to secure appropriate funds under consecutive governments, WDCs around the country became moribund. By the end of the 1990s most had ceased to function adequately.

In 1995, the Nigerian government established the National Center for Women Development (NCWD) with the intention of researching gender issues and implementing vocational training programs. In the early 2000s, the NCWD, which oversees the WDCs, initiated a survey to gauge the level of work being done there. The survey found that centers had the potential to help women rise from poverty, but were unable to provide adequate services to meet the changing needs of users.

Since 2003, JICA has collaborated with the NCWD to revitalize Women Development Centers around the country. In January 2007, a project was started at WDCs in Nigeria's largest state of Kano. Located in the conservative Islamic north, Kano has a population of over 9 million and serves as an important commercial center for the country. The project aimed to make WDCs a viable model for the empowerment of disenfranchised women by providing education and vocational training to enable them to earn a living and raise their status in society.

SHARING SUCCESS WITH OTHER REGIONS

The project selected six WDCs in Kano as pilot centers and worked to define clear guidelines for running them. These efforts raised the quality of service and management at the centers, transforming them into self-sufficient and productive bodies and raising the acceptance of WDCs in the region.

When the project came to an end in January 2010, the Nigerian government asked JICA to initiate a second phase with the aim of extending the success achieved at the six pilot centers to other WDCs in Kano and throughout the country.

Phase two, which began in February 2011 and will run for four years to February 2015, will involve six states: Kano and Kaduna in the north, Niger and Kwara in central Nigeria, and Anambra and Cross River in the south.

WORKING TO MEET CHANGING NEEDS

Paikoro is a district located 30 minutes by car from the Niger state capital of Minna. According to women development officer Pauline Daniel, around 80 women attend daily four-hour sessions at the Paikoro WDC, which provides training in such skills as sewing, knitting, beading, and dying.

During a sewing course at the center, the sounds of pedal-powered machines fill the room. "All Nigerian women have their clothing handmade," says one of the center's instructors, Hamia Mohammed. "It's all made to order, so sewing is a skill much in demand."

Hafusar Bello, a 22-year-old weaving student at the center, attends classes while carrying her baby on her back. "It's difficult to balance my time between studying at the center and duties at home, but it always makes me happy when a piece of clothing I'm working on comes out as planned," she says. "I have the support of my husband, and learning a skill will help me provide for our family." Like Bello, most students are in their twenties or late teens and cite a shift in societal norms allowing women more opportunities to work as a motivating factor in coming to the center to study.

Classes on knitting are taught with the machines used in actual work. Kiyomi Kaida, a member of a team of experts from JICA visiting the WDC, watches the activity and provides help where needed. "The machine stand is wobbly," she points out. "We're going to need to fix that." Addressing each issue, no matter how minute, helps improve the center's quality of service.

According to Lahama Baroa, a director at the Ministry of Women Affairs in the state of Niger, "We would like to introduce new courses beyond



A mother carries her child on her back as she attends a knitting class. Women Development Centers make it possible for mothers to take courses while looking after their children.



One of the knitting machines used in classes at a Women Development Center.



The newly rebuilt Paikoro WDC in the state of Niger.

sewing and knitting to meet the growing needs of women at the center. Providing vital skills is a must to help ensure a bright future for these women and their families."

EXTENDING THE REACH OF THE WOMEN DEVELOPMENT CENTERS

"It is essential that women are involved in Nigeria's development," says Mallam Sadeeq Omar, director for planning, research, and statistics at the National Center for Women Development. "But in reality, few opportunities exist for women to put their abilities to work. This is where the government must step in to provide support."

As part of its overall efforts, the NCWD recently began airing a weekly program on regional radio stations, explaining what the WDCs do for communities. Radio still serves as the primary source of information for many households in rural areas, and the NCWD hopes these programs will introduce the centers and their valuable roles to a wider audience and, just as importantly, increase their acceptance among more conservative family members.

The Haske Women's Cooperative, located in the suburbs of Minna, creates products for sale using shea nuts, a major crop in Nigeria. At the cooperative, local women make shea butter by first pounding the nuts using a stick and a stone mortar, then



Sandals and accessories crafted by students at a WDC. Centers provide new skills to help women.



JICA expert Kiyomi Kaida talks with students and instructors about clothing made during a WDC class.



Members of the Haske Women's Cooperative work in tandem to pound shea nuts (left). The resulting oil is used to make assorted soaps and hand creams.



adding water to the mixture to separate the oil. Shea butter is known for its moisturizing quality and is used widely as an ingredient in soaps and hand creams.

"The word *haske* means light, which is why we chose it for the organization," says cooperative head Zainabu Abu Bakhar. "The work we do here at the cooperative contributes to a brighter future for Nigerian women."

The Ministry of Women Affairs has begun efforts in the state of Niger to act as a bridge between women's cooperatives and WDCs. According to Kaida, "Women are often unsure after finishing courses how best to take advantage of what they've learned. One option is to start out on their own, but

we also want them to consider working together with other women in the region."

Women gaily go about their tasks at the cooperative as the sun shines down on their smiling faces. When asked about the motto of the cooperative, Abu Bakhar replies, "Hard work is our pride."

Two weeks after the research took place for this article, news spread around the world of the shocking abduction of schoolgirls by a militant group in the north of the country. The road to empowerment for women in Nigeria, as well as in other developing nations, is still long and steep. But JICA is confident that the hard work of those on the ground will succeed in enacting positive change for women in these countries.