

# Women in Senegalese Periurban Agriculture: the case of Touba Peycouck

In Senegal, urban agriculture has grown rapidly in response to the fragile nature of urban food security and to meet the market needs of the growing urban populace. Inadequate access to land, precarious land tenure, and insufficient water and manure make urban farming increasingly difficult, particularly for women whose access to land and capital is limited by a host of socio-economic factors.

Soon after its creation in 1990, this Bokk Jom opened a small grocery shop, supported the village elementary school, and later opened a public phone booth and a small library. They also built a wood-fired oven for bread baking. In the mid-1990s they raised 500,000 francs CFA (2) and received a 5.7 million F CFA grant from the UNDP to embark on an ambitious development project integrating animal husbandry, agroforestry, and gardening. The Rodale Institute assists in training in gardening, agroforestry, and composting techniques. The Bokk Jom started a tree nursery and launched a large-scale reforestation campaign. The group purchased four local milk cows and had them artificially inseminated in order to produce offspring with higher milk production. They followed with the construction of a chicken coop and undertook a poultry production project that earned them more than half a million F CFA in profit. With additional technical training from Rodale, the Bokk Jom constructed several large composting pits to transform the cow manure and poultry litter into quality fertiliser. The compost is used for tree, garden, and field crop production.

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Senegal's second largest city, Thiès, lies seventy kilometres east of central Dakar, but only thirty-five kilometres from the urban fringes. The Thiès region is home to 1.3 million people, which means that 14% of the national population is living on less than 4% of the country's land (6,601 km<sup>2</sup>).

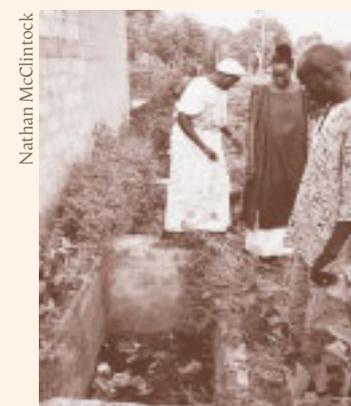
In Thiès, the urban-rural interface is much more pronounced than in Dakar. Periurban villages remain largely agrarian but are deeply entrenched in the urban economy. Between 1985 and 1995, annual production averaged 40,000 to 60,000 metric tons, which together with that of the Dakar region, accounted for two-thirds of national vegetable production. Much of this production is periurban, and most of it is destined for consumption in Dakar.

One of the greatest problems facing agriculture in and around Thiès is insufficient recycling of organic material. In urban and periurban agriculture, the flow of food into the city centres increases as urban populations grow. However, these nutrients are generally lost to garbage dumps or sewage and are rarely returned to the zones of production, thus raising the nutrient deficit. Even though periurban farmers are aware of declining soil fertility, the tenuous nature of land tenure on the

urban fringes keeps them from expending labour or money on sufficient applications of manure or composted waste. This so-called "hit and run" farming, in which a farmer farms a plot intensively before he or she loses it to urban expansion, is common in Senegalese urban agriculture.

These constraints are often felt more acutely by women farmers whose access to land, manure and water is even more limited. In rural and periurban systems, where stabling or tethering of small livestock is common, women are deeply involved in the management of manure, gathering it and other household waste for disposal in the family *sëntaare*, or manure pile. However, the distribution of manure ultimately resides in the hands of the male head of household. While this rarely leads to conflict, the communal family fields take priority over a woman's personal plots. However, by actively managing a compost pile or pit, a woman may gain proprietorship over the final product as family members recognise the amount of labour she has invested in its production. More and more Senegalese women are joining cooperative women's groups, improving their access to knowledge of composting and other techniques to improve soil fertility.

Over the last few decades, the creation of *groupements d'intérêt économique* (GIEs), or village and



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Touba Peycouck's Bokk Jom group members with their composting pits

neighbourhood cooperatives, as well as the creation of *groupements féminins*, women's groups, has been a vital source of empowerment for women farmers in Senegal, providing them with access to capital and training. In the past several years, many women's groups, urban and rural, official and unofficial alike, have embarked on successful agricultural endeavours, providing participants with income and incentives to stay in their communities of origin.

## THE CASE OF TOUBA PEYCOUCK

Two kilometres south of Thiès lies Touba Peycouck (1), a village of 2,000 people. The activities of the GIE Bokk Jom of this village provide an inspiring example of grassroots community development. In the integrated system of animal husbandry, agroforestry, gardening, and field crops, women play the major role in maintaining the soil's fertility through their composting activities. However, women's limited access to resources continues to prevent equal participation in the periurban farming of Thiès.

Of the Bokk Jom's 72 members, 42 are women. Several administrative positions are held by women, including Assistant Secretary General and Treasurer. A revolving micro-credit programme provides women members with 6-month, 25,000 F

CFA loans at 7.5% interest. Recipients have used these loans for various business ventures and none have defaulted on payment since the programme began. The incomes of members are higher than those in the rest of the village, and their access to training and status in the community have improved. When asked what women contributed to the Bokk Jom (3), several male members said the success of the ongoing composting and agroforestry projects is due to the high level of participation of the women.

After the fertilisation needs of the group's tree nursery are met, members have the right to use compost produced in the group pits on their personal plots. In addition to this compost, many women have started their own compost pits within their family compounds, which they fill with kitchen scraps, cooking ashes and manure from tethered livestock. Most women in the group own their own animals, on average three to five goats or sheep per person. The use of compost has spread rapidly throughout the village and into neighbouring villages. Ninety percent of produce is sold, usually to other village women who buy in bulk to sell at the markets in Thiès and nearby Rufisque and Bambey. Two-thirds of the remaining 10% is given away as gifts, and only a third kept for family consumption. While whatever revenue a woman earns from her gardening is her own, a large portion of it goes to purchasing food for the family. Indeed, her contribution may often be greater than that of her husband. Mamadou Gueye, the Bokk Jom president, underscored the difficulty in quantifying this contribution to family income: "*La plupart de ses revenus va*

*directement dans la marmite*" (The majority of her income goes straight into the cooking pot!)

### LESSONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The shortage of land in Touba Peycouck is a primary constraint. *The périmètre communale*, or village garden area, is divided into a hundred 20-by-20 metre (400 m<sup>2</sup>) plots. Based on selection criteria that included salary and available labour, village officials divvied plots out to the chefs de carrés, male heads of household. Women have access to garden plots only through their husbands or by renting plots for 25,000 F CFA for the October to June gardening season. Currently only a third of the Bokk Jom's women maintain their own plots, whereas all of the group's men are active in gardening. Women in one focus group complained that they had plenty of compost but no plot on which to use it. In addition, gardeners must pay 4,000 F CFA per month for water. These overhead expenses, as well as start-up costs of seed and equipment, discourage many women from gardening. Others abandon their plots during the gardening season if they are unable to make a profit, and turn to *petite commerce* in order to earn enough to cover expenses the following year.

As elsewhere in West Africa, women's role as urban agriculturalists is limited by these constraints, leaving the majority of production in the hands of male farmers. Nevertheless, cooperatives such as the Bokk Jom improve women's access to land and infrastructure by offering credit at reasonable interest rates, as well as by providing them with opportunities to pool resources. Most important, perhaps, and most difficult to quantify is the sense of empowerment and pride that membership elicits from female members. While the Bokk Jom's primary goal is not to improve the livelihood of Touba Peycouck's women, its success has directly benefited its female members by providing them with a solid organisational foundation and forum for cooperation. Nevertheless, patriarchal traditions within the community on the whole ultimately define the extent of women's participation in urban agriculture. Gender-specific initiatives providing assistance to cooperatives such as the Bokk Jom may ultimately be necessary to overcome these obstacles.

In a final brainstorming session (3) Touba Peycouck's Bokk Jom members came up with the following policy recommendations:

- Guarantee women equal access to land
- Provide incentives for sustainable agricultural production
- Promote women's groups and facilitate access to funding and credit
- Expand technical training opportunities for women
- Improve public health awareness and infrastructure

A recently passed law, *La loi d'orientation agricole*, addresses the first concern by guaranteeing equal access to land. The true challenge will be to enforce it. Some of the remaining recommendations may seem impossible to instate on a government level due to SAP-mandated cuts to public programmes and "free trade" regulations prohibiting agricultural subsidies. However, they provide a useful and relevant framework for NGOs and aid agencies working both with policy makers and directly with local populations. Groups like the Bokk Jom have been successful in addressing some of the very real constraints facing the farmers of Touba Peycouck and women engaged in urban agriculture throughout the developing world.

### NOTES

- 1 Several villagers, exhausted by their financial burden, formed the village GIE, or Bokk Jom, in 1990 in an effort to improve their opportunities. In Wolof, bokk jom means to unite for a common cause.
- 2 The franc CFA, or West African franc, is fixed at an exchange rate of 656 F CFA to 1 euro.
- 3 Five focus groups consisting of four to eight people each held meetings in September and October 2003 in Touba Peycouck during the author's three-month internship at the Rodale Institute in Thiès. Further data come from Akakpo and Ki (2000) who surveyed 100 villagers to evaluate the impact of the Bokk Jom.

Peri-urban gardens of Touba Peycouck, 2 km south of Thiès, Senegal



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