



WECF | Women in Europe for a Common Future

“If we commit ourselves we can reverse climate change”

Interview with Gertrude Kabusimbi Kenyangi of Support for Women in Agriculture and Environment

Gertrude Kabusimbi Kenyangi is from Uganda and works for the organisation Support for Women in Agriculture and Environment. She attended the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference Of the Parties (COP) 19 in Warsaw. Claire Greensfelder, senior Advisor on Climate and Energy for WECF, interviewed her on working with WECF and the lessons learned in the leadership training.

What does Support for Women in Agriculture and Environment do?

“Support for Women In Agriculture and Environment concentrates on working with “forest-edge and other vulnerable communities”. We promote ecological agriculture, we recycle nutrients on farms and we empower local communities to adapt to climate change by using appropriate technologies as for example solar water heaters and bio gas. We started in 1998 and now, in 2013, we have 3000 people involved. Even though we don’t call ourselves a “national” organisation, we do have a national focus. We have chosen not to call ourselves “national” since we are not present in every district in Uganda. We applied to various donors to support our work, but we do not yet have one that has taken us under their wing.

We started off organising for women as the men migrate to towns during disasters. Sometimes the men don’t come back which creates certain problems and sometimes they do come back which also creates problems.

We are now looking to do things in Kampala as it is the International Year of Family Farming next year. People have asked us: “Why do you celebrate it in Kampala? No one in Kampala is a farmer!” But we are bringing the celebration to Kampala to attract the attention of policy and decision maker’s to rural farming issues. Legislation concerning farming is made in the parliament which is situated in the Kampala!”

How did you become involved within the organisation?

“I got started in this work out of a feeling of need. I hold a Bachelor degree in Agriculture and a Master degree in Integrated Rural Development Planning. I used to work for a bank, but I saw that the rural communities were being evicted from the forest. All the communities that were dependent on forests lost having access to the forest, after the first Sustainable Development conference.

When I saw that the communities were very vulnerable, for instance they did not have the capacity to be resilient, they were becoming destitute, they lacked food since they had been dependent on hunting and gathering and they did not have resources, I went back to the rural area. I wanted to mobilize the community, put together short-term solutions to ameliorate the situation and put in place stop-gap measures to provide food. We then decided, since we knew what we were doing wasn't sustainable, to put in place a programme focused on long-term solutions.”

Since when are you cooperating with WECF?

“When I was at Rio + 20 I saw a WECF flyer and read about what they were doing. I took the flyer home and then back in Uganda I wrote to Margriet Samwel of WECF and she came with Maureen to visit us in Uganda and that's how we became connected. In Rio I was an East African representative of the Civil Society on community and food security as a part of the More and Better network from Italy. We are members of that network so I gave with them a presentation in the Farmer's Major Group in Rio. They were talking about things we had in common so I made an application to join the WECF network.

We do not have a project together yet, but I told them I had an Urban Farming project where we compost waste and gather solid waste and plant vegetables. It prevents flooding; in the slum areas the slum dwellers dump waste in plastic bags that clogs the waterways, so they flood. To prevent this we train them to compost. They gather all the waste, put it one place, sort it and then the recyclable materials are taken out and we compost the rest. We give the recycled items to the city council to dispose of and we grow small vegetables and fruits in soil packs made out of the compost. This helps to take care of the micro-nutrient needs of the slum dwellers who are mainly poor people and cannot afford to buy fruits and vegetables from markets to supplement their diets. These people were growing flowers on their verandas, but now instead of flowers they grow food.

I took the WECF women to see our project. Then I drove them to the Dutch Ambassador's residence and we kept in touch after that. They added me to the Women's Major Group reserve list. Every time there was anything happening I would take part. I kept reading the Women's Major Group emails, I would endorse letters that came and looked for other opportunities to participate.”

As someone who works at the local level, do you think it was worth to come to the UNFCCC COP meeting in Warsaw?

“Well, I’d never been to a COP before, but that’s only because I never had the support to come. I could not have come this time without WECF’s support. And in answer to your question, the COP was worth the time I spent here. I felt that maybe in fact the length of time, one week, was not enough. There were so many things running parallel at the same time. I went to side events, I went to the Women’s Caucus and preparatory meetings every morning, I went to the UN Parties’ Plenary, I was part of the group of women that drafted an intervention and I was chosen to deliver the women’s input into the deliberations and for the new agreements under the ADP. I think that as long as our intervention gets adopted, my being here will be worth every minute.

I wanted to come here because I have worked on climate issues for a long time, they are my passion. I thought that if I would go to the climate conference I would get a lot of experience, make connections with like-minded people and I would go away from here more empowered. I have seen the effects of organising with people. I have seen that we are able to adapt and sometimes even to reverse the course of undesirable situations like the climate change if we commit ourselves. I would like to come again to see how far we have moved globally from where we are now. And I would like to know if the intervention I made was actually adopted, did it have an impact? COP needs organisations such as WECF to connect them to the people. If the people are not involved then COP will remain just an exercise in tourism.”

Are there things you learned from other women in the WECF leadership training that you will apply back home?

“Yes, I have learned a lot of things here. Being a part of the WECF Leadership training has clarified several concepts that were hazy before: like the concept of mentorship and the concept of leadership. They helped define them for me. Before the training, I thought they blurred with each other, I thought they overlapped or even meant the same thing and that the two words could be used interchangeably! And, I discovered during the training that I had already been doing mentoring and leading! I also realized that mentorship is something that I can use as a tool back home. I can use it to achieve a lot more to fight climate change and poverty, and to achieve gender equality and women empowerment. I realized that we have common challenges throughout the world. There were other ladies from other parts of the world and in all work that we did together, every submission that we wrote for the COP together, we had the common denominator of being from a women’s organisation addressing women-specific challenges in the gender equation which were common to all of us.

I will need four women for the training I will bring back to Uganda. I am thinking to have women from different villages. I already have women in all of the villages who are potential candidates for the training. So I am thinking of women who will have a multiplier effect and will spread the work. I have so many women in my mind already, but if I create an application process for choosing, it will create too much expectation and there will not be enough places, so I am just going to choose on my own. I will select four who are already somewhat experienced and who can get the most from the training.

WECF gave me a lot of confidence and a lot of encouragement to continue to do what I am doing. When someone is appreciating what you are doing and giving you recognition for what you are doing then suddenly you want to do more since what you are doing has been recognized for being good, appreciated. I hope that being given the opportunity to take part in the WECF mentorship programme is going to expand my horizons. I'm a little disappointed that all I am being asked to do is to organise two regional and one national event; I would like to do more!"
