



Coral stone used as building material.



A DELICATE BALANCE: SHORT-TERM GAINS OR LONG-TERM FOOD SECURITY?

Seaweed plays an important role for livelihood security to many families on the southeastern coast of Zanzibar. Male villagers quickly lost interest in cultivating the crop as it requires hard work for poor cash return. But the women were ready to take advantage of the benefits of the seaweed.

HASSAN IS TEARING DOWN the last section of the stone wall surrounding the family farm in the so-called coral rag area stretching beyond the village of Jambiani on the southeastern coast of Unguja island, Zanzibar. Some women passing by yell out their resentment before hastily disappearing along the narrow path into the bush.

– What a stupid thing to do! Your children will starve! We can hear Bibi Amina crying. What did she do to deserve a husband like you!

The coral rag area is covered in thick thorns and it is here that the villagers, using swidden techniques, grow cassava, sweet potatoes, papaya, some maize and a few varieties of pulses that can cope with the thin topsoil and the very limited rainfall. Most of the stone walls were built generations ago to demarcate the lands of the descendants of a common ancestor. They also serve to keep the steadily growing number of forest swine away from the crop. When the stone walls are torn down, or a poorly maintained section of the wall collapses, the swine invade the farms and destroy everything in their way in their search for tubers. Tearing

down stone walls is seen as a violation of the ethics of social belonging and identity. The walls represent a significant labour investment by previous generations.

HASSAN'S PLAN IS to sell the coral stone as building material in Zanzibar town. He needs cash to invest in a small trading business, since fishing is no longer a viable source of income. The fishermen have experienced a dramatic decline in catches over the past decade. Hassan recalls a time when he caught enough fish to feed the family and also to sell to local guesthouses and the market in the town. With declining catches, the family is often without fish on the table. This is one effect of climate change that the coastal dwellers have experienced. Hassan and his fellow fishermen are aware of the importance of healthy coral reefs for the reproduction of fish and they refer to the increased prevalence of "white" (that is, dead) corals as a major reason for the diminishing catches.

The women passing by, yelling out their contempt, are right about the wife's resentment. Bibi Amina has tried in



Seaweed cultivation on the southeastern coast of Zanzibar.

vain to stop her husband. It is she who takes care of the farming and who worries about food security if the farm were no longer capable of providing the staples to feed the family. Hassan had argued that sweet potatoes and cassava could be bought in the village shops, using Bibi Amina's money from sales of seaweed. Seaweed cultivation has expanded dramatically since the early 1990s, when it was introduced to a small group of male villagers. The men soon found that the new crop required hard work for poor cash returns, and lost interest. But the women, with few other options to earn an income, were ready to take advantage of the benefits of the seaweed. The income, however small, is fairly regular and therefore important for livelihood security. Predictability also implies that they can purchase on credit in some village shops.

THE PRICE IS ABOUT 250 Tanzanian shillings per kilogram (about 15 US cents). A good harvest during a spring tide can bring in up to 16,000 shillings (about 10 US-dollars) for about five days of work within the five to six weeks crop

»'You can't eat coins and notes', said one woman, referring to a neighbour who had abandoned her farm in order to concentrate on the seaweed.«

cycle from planting to harvesting. Most women are able to make their own decisions as to how to use the money. It is typically spent on children's clothing, family healthcare and the purchase of basic consumer goods.

Although the majority of women in Jambiani nowadays devote considerable time and energy to seaweed cultivation, most of them also take care of agricultural production and undertake other activities to secure their livelihoods. They are aware of the risks associated with specialization in seaweed. "You can't eat coins and notes", said one woman, referring to a neighbour who had abandoned her farm in order to concentrate on the seaweed. ■

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All names mentioned in this article have been changed in order to protect the identity of the people interviewed.