Lessons learnt from grassroots women living in rural and indigenous communities

By Esther Mwaura-Muiru

Gender, Governance and Development Expert

Background

The concept of contracts in the 21st century introduces a formal approach to a process of agreements. It gives rise to responsibilities, liabilities, and a deeper essence of their existence – a perceived mutual benefit between parties. This level of formality at a glance may implicitly mean that almost all contracts are written and/or adhere to some prescribed legal precedence. Nevertheless, whether their formality results in their adherence and success is food for thought. Do they also achieve their intended moral, social, environmental, and political benefits? Some scholars agree, while others do not.

Social contracts, on the other hand, introduce a different concept altogether. While the social contract tradition has been critiqued as being less inclusive and introducing aspects of racism and domination, particularly to women,[1] Kant's theory negates that a social contract has to be concluded by the members of any society but sees it as an intellectual construct with moral and practical significance.[2]

The moral and political rules that make up social contracts are contextual and take different shapes in different societal settings. Their manifestation does not always follow a common discourse or one that is directly observable or explainable. Some aspects are so intrinsic to communities' everyday ways of life, particularly those living in rural areas and indigenous communities, that outsiders can barely understand.

This essay expounds on the ideas of social contracts experienced from the grassroots perspective of women who live in rural communities. It structures these ideas into intrinsic social contracts with nature, and with the solidarity economy and capital. It then discusses building from the ground up and thus micro is macro, but macro is not always micro, before exploring the external threats to grassroots social contracts. Finally, it summarises this idea by clarifying what works.

The author comes from the school of thought that social contracts, as practiced and upheld by local communities, are the drivers of any amount of ecosystem and development sustainability the world has left today. Women, in particular, have demonstrated leadership in these local communities as the custodians of functional social contracts. The paper acknowledges that this contribution by women comes at a cost, including enormous voluntary and implicitly forced unpaid work. The achievements are also against insurmountable growing internal and external threats that continue to dismantle this sustainability equilibrium.

Grassroots and rural women's social contract with nature

Women's first level of social contract is with Mother Nature: a contract that emphasises the importance of harmony and reverence not only for self and family but also for what surrounds them. In most African societies and cultures, women were and still are an integral part of this harmony, majorly as custodians of land and de facto managers and frontline users of other natural resources – water, forest, and soil. Their task in agriculture and animal husbandry makes them daily managers of the living environment with profound knowledge of the plants, animals, and ecological processes. Women also participate in the commercial sectors of society, protecting the raw materials used in rural enterprises, which otherwise would be vulnerable to environmental degradation and contamination. As farmers and traders, they are cognisant that the degradation of natural resources directly undermines the basis of their daily lives. As a result, they hold nature sacred within a relationship of respect and contrary to the contemporary capitalistic urge to control and dominate it.

This idealisation of nature is heavily borrowed from African cultures and traditions. Wane et al. document the cultural and environmental knowledge of the Embu women elders in rural Kenya and note that the African society's environmental discourse was premised on the suggestion of cosmological principles.[3] A key principle was the need to care for every form of life. This principle emphasises the interdependence between various earth components, including geological, atmospheric, and spiritual systems. Disturbing one biospheric part would affect other parts: a key lesson the world is learning with the devastating negative global impacts of climate change today.

This, therefore, means that the social contract between women and nature has long existed in one form or another. Rural women have an exceptional understanding that the living environment is the source of life for all and is not infinite. For example, for rural women, harvesting of plants as farmers, hunters, and gatherers will always be accompanied with

an integrated immediate process of replanting or separating seeds to stock up and then plant when the seasons are right. More often than not, men will take the role of facilitating the transfer of the produce from the farms to homes or markets. Even where men are engaged in the actual farm labour, they seldom engage in the selection and propagation of seeds. Were it not for the pressure of capitalism and its negative competitive nature to accumulate for self, a clear balance has always been established and embedded in cultural and societal norms. There was a deliberate effort within traditional communities to protect the diversity of natural systems and species; life sustained itself. The plants contributed to the production and reproduction of systems above and below the ground. They contributed to the soil's nutrients, composition, and texture. Above the ground, the plants provided the universe with food, air, and moisture. As a result, ecosystems renewed their services, and the biodiversity and conservation of local plants and animals could continue as part of the sustainable world.[4] It is perhaps very possible that nature is capable of sustainably producing for our everyday needs without the capitalist appetite to stockpile.

The knowledge that forms these social contracts within nature is contextual, interdependent, vital, lived experiences based on collective understandings and interpretations of the social, physical, and spiritual worlds. We believe the accumulated experiences and their resilience enable grassroots women from rural and indigenous communities to claim expertise. However, they remain excluded from decision making or formal educational processes. Developmental decision making is done for them by entrenched patriarchal forces devoid of collaboration. Outsiders often do not realise that these women, who are producers and gatherers of food, fuel, herbal medicine, and keepers of traditional knowledge, have intimate knowledge of their local ecological contexts.[5]

Rural women's knowledge has long been ignored or viewed as unworthy of integration into teaching, learning, or research, whether non-formal agricultural extension training, formal science, or other subject curricula. When foreign-trained experts introduce environmental or development projects, indigenous women's knowledge concerning farming, or the local ecology remains excluded and ignored.[6] This has broken the very fabric of the unwritten social contract with nature creating a disconnect between what is in policy versus what is in practice.

Rural women's solidarity economy and capital

African society and perhaps many indigenous communities worldwide have never worked in the scarcity mentality of contemporary economics. The principle of 'I am because you are' was integrated at every level, roles were clearly defined, and a strong belief in the

intrinsic shared value of everyone, their capability, and their needs, existed premised on Ubuntu. **Society embraced harmony and respect for every human dimension**; nothing exists in isolation, and culture went beyond individual interest. Remnants of this tradition still exist in many communities. Many other communities have transformed their livelihoods and ways of life to respond to modern challenges and realities by practising selected traditional knowledge and skills passed down through generations.

The fabrics of indigenous societies are still seen best in the working of grassroots women and their communities. Rural women's movements worldwide depict a very important and critical social contract. Working through self-help groups, savings and credit cooperative organisations and community healthcare groups, to name just a few, has established solidarity economies and generated capital that has sustained families and communities in all aspects and in the true spirit of Ubuntu. They portray the value of mobilising like-minded people within a common value structure to advance priority needs that benefit all. It is critical to note that with rural women's operations, a 'like-minded' approach is not equated to 'shareholding'. The output of these organised groups always benefits the associates and the larger communities. A good example is the role these social groups have played in fighting for and supporting the most vulnerable members of rural communities such as orphans, older people and people who are ill. Over the years, their capacities to organise have proved vital in protecting rural and indigenous communities from destructive capitalist principles. While their success in achieving systemic change is undeniable within diverse contexts and geographies, evidence indicates that two key aspects have been realised in the last four decades.

First, the ideology that **'there are no alternatives',** commonly referred to as TINA, no longer exists. This is an ideology established by then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s to affirm that free market capitalisation was the only viable economic model noting that people are naturally selfish and competitive. Second, this is replaced by the concept that there are 'thousands of alternatives.[7] This ideology developed by activists and progressive academia established that people could produce an abundance of life-affirming solutions to the problems they experience. As a result, this mantra has seen women and their movements designing and influencing life-affirming solutions to economic, health, social and environmental problems ranging from gender equality and health pandemics to the negative impacts of climate change. With all their diversity, transformative participatory and community-led practices and institutions have and can be seen to form the basis of inclusive and sustainable economies. Women who create these revolutionary movements now see themselves as capital to build an alternative economy.[8] For example, the ideological and theoretical orientation of feminist and women's

movements across the North and South shared a common viewpoint in that women citizens have been excluded, marginalised and invisibilised by the modified social contracts that gave rise to the modern state and inter-state systems.[9] Action in dismantling such an oppressive system has consistently been advancing women's rights as human rights.

Even then, the solidarity economy and capital we would like to focus on in this paper are created at the grassroots level, particularly by women. Such grassroots women's movements define real and natural social contracts. These solidarity economies advance social contracts which embody feminism and a no-harm approach within themselves through community-led participatory processes mostly based on traditional knowledge. They embed exceptional elements of volunteerism and portray levels of formality in their organisations but, at the same time, informality in their structure. Formed out of local women-led self-help and community-based registered and unregistered organisations, their viewpoint is that of the greater good. Unknowingly, they fill in a gap that has consistently led to the tragedy of the commons.[10,11] With their growth and rich contribution to humanity, they dismantle colonial and segregative individualistic models, which are riddled with extractive and capitalistic ideology. Indeed, they have taught us modernisation is not the only alternative to advancing and sustaining economies. Instead, they offer an ideology of community common good within which individual benefits are realised. In Kenya, numerous successful case studies exist from home-based care models that helped address HIV/AIDS, to village saving and loaning schemes that are improving financial inclusion, and grassroots budget academies that are helping in advocacy with local governments. For example, GROOTS Kenya's[12] grassroots movement has seen impactful community-led approaches in its 27 years. These approaches have 1) successfully fought gender-based violence through community champions referred to as first responders, 2) advanced agricultural practices with women farmers through the transfer of knowledge – lead farmers turned coaches that promote resilient group investments instead of individualised capitalist investments. Notably, these farmer groups have maintained a farming approach that has been able to integrate research, science, digital technology, and interaction with the commercial financial sector and still maintain their solidarity approach. They have 3) safeguarded women's land rights through community watchdog groups with a strong understanding that legal frameworks are important (hence the integration of paralegals) but not enough. Meanwhile 4) budget academies have revolutionalised public participation in public planning and financing. These solidarity approaches do not just advance the principles of Ubuntu but accelerate actions on a bigger scale leveraging on localised measures defined and implemented by the people most impacted. They are complex and respond to every need of the communities.

As clearly indicated, grassroots women's successful practices through the solidarity economies continue to sustain communities and complement states in their delivery of basic services and infrastructure development. States, however, need to acknowledge grassroots women's contributions to fully optimise and sustain these tested capacities. Additionally, the fact that these solidarity groups have a strong embodiment of volunteerism is by no means an underestimation of the burden of unpaid care work done by grassroots women. We cannot glorify this burden. It is indeed for this reason that most progressive grassroots women movements and feminists across the world have proposed a framework for consideration in the development agenda to recognise (value), reduce, reward (invest) and redistribute unpaid and undervalued care work.

Building from the ground up: micro is macro, but macro is not always micro.

The micro referred to herein bases its argument on using local scenarios and practices that grassroots women have explored and mastered for decades. Techniques are drawn from indigenous knowledge and new realities to survive and respond to the immediate needs of the societies. The micro starts with existing and tested practical actions that can be appropriately scaled. The micro in these cases could also be referred to as bottom-up approaches that see grassroots women as active participants in development rather than recipients of external aid and services. In contrast, macro approaches (top-down approaches) in this context are developed by 'experts' or 'technocrats' and more often than not see communities as passive recipients of development projects.

Grassroots women and communities have always been at the forefront of addressing their own challenges. This is, however, not to say that they have done this independently but through numerous positive relationships with governments, non-state actors and other development agencies that have worked alongside them.

Existing evidence and lived experiences of women in sustaining families and communities at the local level (micro) have contributed to the macro discourses through policy influence, replication and scaling of best local practices whose practicability is already proved. Many international and national policies and programmes are based on lessons from grassroots women's work and struggles, especially women in rural and indigenous communities. For example, communities around the world have a history of overcoming extractive influence by organising and developing community protocols to negotiate benefits from the use of the extraction of their resources, even before the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing[13] came to exist. Nonetheless, drivers of macroeconomic policies seldom acknowledge this contribution, and the absence of holders of knowledge in their design

creates layers of limitation. Essentially, the macro policies that lose track of acknowledging the contribution of local communities often lack the ability to factor into their implementation frameworks the role such communities play to generate the intended outcomes. Therefore, many macro development policies, even with well-intended purposes, have not sufficiently attracted community goodwill, and their practicability to solve current and future challenges is questionable. They remain alien to the local communities. This is not to say that there cannot be integration between the micro and the macro. However, it must start with appreciating grassroots communities as experts in their own right. This appreciation/recognition has to be accompanied by sustained investment to ensure that grassroots women, especially those who live in rural and indigenous communities, are at the front and centre of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of outcomes. Effective participation of local communities in all stages of development is a major pathway to understanding social contracts. As Jim Ife notes, with local knowledge, 'the outsider is not the expert: the outsider must listen and learn from the local people, who have far more relevant local knowledge and expertise.[14]

Willetts notes that the role of an expert should be facilitation.[15] The focus should be on local knowledge and supporting communities to identify their strengths and assets, create a vision of their desired future state and mobilise resources while ensuring the process is participatory and inclusive.

External threats to social fabrics

Exacerbated by capitalism, modern economies are dominated by maximising the benefits for self without considering the impacts on others and Mother Nature. The creeping of capitalism into the indigenous and rural economies has led to changes in the social fabric. At the micro level, even within the family unit, there is competition to increase self-worth rather than working for the collective good. In this light, understanding the threats that exist toward social fabrics that, in turn, negatively impact restorative positive social contracts is paramount as we reimagine a feminist, anti-racist social contract for people and planet.

First, robust, well-defined structures that were highly inclusive formed binding social contracts in traditional societies. Clarity on engagements, conflict resolution and roles exists within indigenous communities. The question of whether they were cognisant of the underlying principles that have given birth to today's feminist and gender equality framework is debatable. At the household level, the primary role of reproduction and production rested on women. Men on the other hand provided overall security for the

families and the society at large. They engaged in production roles like herding and opening new production sites that went beyond the residence boundaries. Stories are told that once women felt that the needed female companions and the load of care work was overwhelming, they would look for ready female suitors to become their co-wives. The process was mutually agreed by the to-be co-wives, primarily under the leadership of women. Male elders including the husbands were secondary to this process. There may have been boundaries of association and differentiated benefit-sharing of available resources among tribes, clans, and ethnic groups. This delineation facilitated harmony among communities in the use of natural resources. Where conflicts would arise, there were well-defined and laid-out processes to resolve them and redress the harm. Today, roles and responsibilities among men and women have shifted. People no longer live in structured ethically defined communities. Thus, the social contracts as were traditionally maintained and upheld are threatened with severe cracks.

Second, indigenous, and rural communities may not sufficiently address exclusion based on colour in their social contracts. Racism did not exist in indigenous communities, and everyone worked for the community's good. Likely, racism was only introduced after the arrival of the colonialists, who presented a superior front. Fear was instilled, and the colonial masters were placed above others. Unfortunately, with migration and global movements, racism is a reality for all and manifests in power over others. Understanding what triggers and perpetuates racism, acknowledging control and power as the main bedrocks for racism, and giving equal attention to solutions generated by both the aggressors and victims of racism can help address this shortcoming.

Finally, societies generally have seen the erosion of the Ubuntu principles and the growth of social, economic, and political inequality. As noted in an earlier section, modernisation in its current form is extractive, disregarding existing social contracts. This negatively impacts people living in poverty, which depends more on the social fabric. As capitalists take over and monetise what is considered common, ie, nature-based resources such as land and water, the care burden increases and is transferred to individuals within the community, particularly women. This creates a bigger burden. For example, traditionally, some specific people of both genders took up the role of a healer; however, with the destruction of the fabric, care for the wellbeing of the family has largely become a responsibility of women.

Building on what works: an opportunity to build a better now and future

Some critical questions come to mind when asking what works as we reimagine a feminist, anti-racist social contract for people and planet. What would transpire if grassroots women's ecological knowledge was included in environmental discourse and influenced curriculum, teaching and learning? For instance, what would occur if indigenous practices were valued within their long-standing cultural, ecological, and spiritual gendered contexts and combined with existing or appropriate technologies, innovations or approaches? The apparent answer to this question is that we would have a better world.

Starting with the people most left behind, this spirit of integration and cooperation is well captured in the leave-no-one-behind principle of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). This global agreement recognises that certain groups, majorly women, have always been left behind in decision making spaces and platforms. Yet, they have contributed significantly to sustaining families and communities. They have been custodians and implementers of sustainable development at the base of our society for many years. Our investment in development thus needs to recognise and build on these existing and tested capacities as a response to this new call within the SDG framework. Unfortunately, while the leave-no-one-behind principle has been taunted as one of the profound outcomes of the post-2015 development agenda, we are yet to see real shifts in the architecture of programming, representation, and financing to actualise it. A development model that builds on the 'leave-no-one-behind' principle must additionally be cognisant of the inequalities among countries, communities and across specific genders within society. More specifically, the recognition and inclusion of grassroots women as key players and decision makers in development is critical.

The view that macro policies and global institutions have a monopoly on knowledge and skills that solves world problems has constantly failed; hence our challenges call for new approaches. Further, the global development model that freely extracts grassroots organising without long-term goals and investment is misplaced and selfish. Organising by and with communities for effective change is a science well understood at the grassroots and can be scaled and propelled through adequate investment. There is evidence that micro-level approaches have worked and are still used by grassroots women in their daily lives; hence supporting their replication, scaling and integration into policies is urgent.

Reimagining social contracts is about solutions, alternatives, the rediscovery of old ways, and the creativity of new ways. It's about asserting that what is important is not blind growth and profit maximisation but living well with each other and the planet. As Kawano et al note, it's not utopian dreaming;[16] rather, it is an exploration of what exists, what

works, and the proposition that the solidarity economy provides a framework for interconnecting these pieces into a coherent system or, more precisely, systems, since we believe that different models will work in different places and at different times.

[1] Democratic silence: two forms of domination in the social contract tradition. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, Toby Rollo, 2020, pages 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2020.1796330

[2] *Kant's theory of the social contract*. Kevin Dodson, Doctoral Dissertations 1896 (February 2014, no 2074), 2019, https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_1/2074?utm_source=scholarworks.umass.edu%2Fdissertations_1%2F2074&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages

[3] *African Women, Cultural Knowledge, and Environmental Education with a Focus on Kenya's Indigenous Women*, Njoki Wane and Deborah Chandler, 2002.

[4] Ibid.

[5] *African Women, Cultural Knowledge, and Environmental Education with a Focus on Kenya's Indigenous Women*, Njoki Wane and Deborah Chandler, 2002.

[6] Rural Women in Development Issues and Policies, Mmakgomo Tshatsinde, *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 18, 1993, pages 63–70, https://doi.org/10.2307/4065670

[7] *Solidarity Economy I: Building Alternatives for People and Planet*, Emily Kawano and Tom Masterson and Jonathan Teller-Ellsberg, 2009.

[8] Ibid.

[9] International Seminar: 'Comparative Studies on Family Democratization and Socio-politics: An integral approach to the private and the public sphere'. Women's movements negotiating social contracts in transnational inter-movement spaces, Peggy Antrobus and Josefa Francisco, 2007.

[10] The 'tragedy of the commons' is the name the biologist Garrett Hardin gave to a thought experiment in a now famous 1968 Science article. It predicted global resource degradation and societal ruin from the net consequences of individuals acting in their short-term interests but at a long-term cost to the environment.

[11] 'The tragedy of the commons', Kevin Ells, in *Companion to Environmental Studies*, Noel Castree, Mike Hulme, James D. Proctor (eds), 2018, Routledge, pages 115–119. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315640051-24

[12] GROOTS Kenya is a national movement of grassroots women-led community-based groups (CBOs) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Kenya that facilitates grassroots women effective engagement in development through movement building, leadership, and advocacy. www.grootskenya.org

[13] A global framework that outlines sustainable use of natural resources.

[14] *Community development in an uncertain world: Vision, analysis, and practice*, Jim Ife, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

[15] The practice of a strengths-based approach to community development in Solomon Islands. *Development Studies Research*, Juliet Willetts, Sally Asker, Naomi Carrard and Keren Winterford, 2014, 1(1), pages 354–367. doi: 10.1080/21665095.2014.983275

[16] *Solidarity Economy I: Building Alternatives for People and Planet*, Emily Kawano and Tom Masterson and Jonathan Teller-Ellsberg, 2009.