

A Tanzanian Mother Teresa is born: Pauline Samata, the "bamboo saint"

The International Network for Bamboo and Rattan (INBAR) estimates that approximately 1.5 billion people depend in some way or another on bamboo and rattan. Bamboo not only is deemed to be the fastest growing plant on the planet, it also is a viable replacement for wood, an essential structural material in earthquake architecture and a renewable source for agroforestry production. These characteristics make bamboo unique in terms of its potential contribution to sustainable development. What is less well known is the fact that bamboo has helped protect young Tanzanian girls and women from HIV/AIDS by saving them from the trap of prostitution. This is thanks to a Tanzanian woman by the name of Pauline Samata.



Pauline Samata

Pauline Samata, a 44-year-old single mother of four children, is the group leader of the Mbeya women's bamboo association in the United Republic of Tanzania. Samata is an inspiring leader. She possesses both genuine humility and an unquenchable thirst to learn and to share her knowledge with her African brothers and sisters. She has the commitment and courage of a great leader: she has taken – and continues to take – her share of risks by investing in the country's most disadvantaged people. Her mission in life is to raise awareness about the marvels of bamboo.

"Bamboo is a special plant. It offers excellent opportunities for environmental sustainability and it is helping populations in developing countries to reduce poverty; this is why it is called 'the wonder wood of the poor,'" says Sheila Mwanundu, Senior Technical Adviser, Environment and Natural Resource Management at the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

In 2001, thanks to a grant from IFAD, INBAR embarked on the Livelihood and Economic Development Programme. The programme aims to create sustainable rural livelihoods and enterprises by using bamboo and rattan resources. It focuses on developing innovative processing technologies and production techniques and on enabling rural communities to produce a range of high-quality bamboo and rattan products. It also provides rural communities with capacity-building in bamboo and rattan harvesting, cultivation and management techniques, thus making sure that local resources are used in a sustainable way.

One of the capacity-building activities of this grant-financed programme was a south-south exchange between Asia and Africa.

"I did not know the marvels of this plant, until the day IFAD and INBAR sent me to China and the Philippines for training," says Samata. "This is why I want everyone to understand the potential of bamboo, and the many things that they can do with this plant."



Photo credit: Roxanna Samii

Bamboo charcoal

Thanks to the south-south exchange, Samata discovered the vast potential of bamboo. In the Philippines, she learned how to use bamboo to build houses, while in China she was shown how to make furniture and such diverse objects as dustbins for offices, desks for schools, and scarves, using bamboo. She also realized that the days of going to collect firewood could soon be over if she were to replace it with bamboo charcoal. This also meant that she could help save trees.

"Our country is poor; our young women and mothers have little or no education and very few opportunities to make money," says Samata. "Mothers need money to feed their children, but because their choice of employment is limited they end up falling into the prostitution trap."

The United Republic of Tanzania has a number of natural resources. Among them are the bamboo plantations that grow naturally on the main mountain and highland ranges. The country's bamboo forests cover an estimated area of 127,000 hectares. These forests are mainly found in two ecological zones: the high rainfall forests of the Eastern Arc Mountains and the lowland areas. Over the last two decades, bamboo has been increasing in importance as a non-timber forest product.

Once Samata mastered the art of working the bamboo – the wood of the poor – she quickly put her newly acquired skills to use by helping her less advantaged sisters. She created the women's community-based organization, the Mbeya Bamboo Women's Group.

This Tanzanian Mother Teresa made it her mission to exploit the potential of the wood of the poor not only to make a living for herself and change her life for the better, but most importantly, to keep her younger sisters from falling prey to prostitution and save them from the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Samata's training courses are free of charge. However, she sets one condition: that the ladies come to stay with her in the community for at least six months. As a disincentive to dropping out of the training programme, Samata pays the ladies 1,500 Tanzanian shillings (TZS) a day (US\$1.30).

"So far I've trained 60 women on how to work with bamboo," says Samata with a smile. "I need to make more money to be able to train more women."

Samata also trains children who are heading households and young girls who have not benefited from any type of education. "I do not like young girls to work as domestic helpers, I want to teach them a trade so that they can have a better life," says Samata.

"I teach them how to make a living by using bamboo and also how to count and write their names.

Thanks to Samata's training, women, young girls and households headed by children are now generating enough income to allow food and medicine to be bought and children to attend school. Most importantly, Samata, through the training she provides, has saved many of her sisters from HIV/AIDS and prostitution.

"The women are very intelligent: they use the income generated from their bamboo sales to buy food, medicine and malaria prophylactic and to undergo HIV/AIDS tests."

Samata's bamboo business is flourishing. She has set up a workshop 10 kilometres away from the village. A couple of years ago, she used to go to the forest herself to cut bamboo and it took her two days to carry the sticks back. Today, she can afford to pay local villagers TZS 200 per stick to cut and transport the bamboo sticks to the workshop.



Photo credit: Roxanna Samii
Variety of bamboo products
produced by Mbeya women's
association

Samata and her women colleagues use 30-34 bamboo sticks a month to make a variety of products. They cut the poles into six pieces and use these to make baskets, chairs, tables and dustbins. The association has created a catalogue featuring their numerous products, and use youngsters to distribute the catalogue to offices and hotels.

To meet the growing demand, Samata and the other Mbeya women always make sure their inventory is well stocked. They sell their products to their clients at the workshop. The women have managed to secure a fixed revenue of TZS 3,000,000 by selling their products to Shoprite in Dar es Salaam.

"The women make TZS 50,000 per month," says Samata triumphantly.

"They use their income to pay for their children's education, for food and medicine, and each month the women save at least TZS 5,000".

"I am encouraging the ladies who live in rented houses to build their own homes with bamboo."

Samata's vision is to train as many people as possible. "I need to build more awareness among Tanzanians so that more people understand the many benefits of bamboo and learn how to use bamboo for different purposes," she explains. "This way they can help themselves to overcome poverty."

This charismatic leader has a well-thought plan. She owns a piece of land and is building a big integrated workshop and shop in Mbeya. She has explored potential new markets for her products and has identified Zambia, Malawi, Kenya and Uganda as potentially viable.

Her long-term plan is to buy more land to plant bamboo. "You know, bamboo is a fast growing plant. It takes two years for the plant to grow and when you cut it, you only have to wait one year before it grows again", says Samata with a smile.

Pauline Samata – the bamboo saint – is contributing to reducing poverty in her beloved country. Thanks to her efforts and those of others, today almost every household in the United Republic of

Tanzania uses a bamboo product and many young girls and women earn a respectable living by creating objects made of bamboo. Samata's new slogan is: Yes, we can!

And indeed she and the Mbeya women's association have made a difference and can continue to make a difference.

Source: IFAD