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“The Green brigade”: Setting-up of a team of women to clean the streets of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso, a least developed country, is one of the poorest countries in the world with a GDP per capita income of US\$1,300. Lack of employment causes a high rate of emigration: for example, three million people from Burkina Faso live and work in Côte d'Ivoire. The “Green brigade” initiative aims at improving the city environment of Ouagadougou by providing secure employment to a group of 1200 women, most of whom are the main family providers, cleaning the streets and public spaces. Some of these women used to collect firewood by cutting down trees from the few “green zones” of the city and selling to households to make a living. Others were involved in harvesting sand and gravel from the city’s rivers and selling to building contractors. These precarious and casual activities did not guarantee a daily meal for their families, furthermore they contributed to environmental degradation.

The 1995-2000 plan of action of the municipal council puts great emphasis on issues related to waste management, improvement of the living condition for the city residents and, protection of vulnerable groups. In the implementation of this action plan, a visionary city mayor decided to stop the degradation of the limited green spaces of this Sahelian city by providing an alternative and secure employment to the women who used to make a living out of it. Several consultative meetings were organized between the mayor and the women involved, to convince them to stop the degradation of the city environment in exchange of a secure and remunerative employment. The outcome of these meetings was the establishment of the Green Brigade, recruiting 1,200 women as cleaners of streets and public spaces.

The Green Brigade initiative has three main objectives. The first one is to reduce poverty through jobs creation. From 1995 to 2005, over 1,500 direct permanent jobs were created, including opportunities for 1,200 women as cleaners of streets and public spaces. In 2007, five hundred additional women were enrolled for the initiative, from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, increasing the number to 1,700 job opportunities in 2008. The second objective is to improve the image and cleanliness of public spaces as well as urban streets. In this regard, 120 km of street and 3,000,000 sq metres are cleaned every Monday and Thursday. This practice allows the removal of all litter and all sort of waste from the streets. The final objective is to provide support to vulnerable social groups mainly women and children. The Green Brigade is made up of ninety eight percent women who are distributed in all the different sectors of the municipality of Ouagadougou. It is estimated that over 6,500 children have directly benefited from this programme, taking into account that, on average each women has to cater for the needs of five children, mainly: school fees, health care, and family nutrition.

In order to improve the welfare of the women workers, the Ouagadougou city council has put in place a money saving scheme. Limited basic healthcare is also provided to the women. This initiative has contributed to the protection and preservation of the city’s

green spaces. The beginning of the initiative was not easy since women were very reluctant to work as street cleaners and be seen by other women doing so. This constraint has been overcome with sensitization campaigns and civic education to give value to the job of street cleaners. Women were provided with appropriate equipment and uniforms. A municipal budget allocation was also made to pay the women.

The cleanness of the city's streets has brought changes in hygiene practices among citizens. Waste is now disposed in appropriate bins. This initiative has also resulted in the protection of the city's environment. It is estimated that since the inception of this programme in 1995, over US\$ 2 million tax payer money has been redistributed to over 1,000 women, enabling them to send 800 children, including 300 girls, to school.

This initiative stands out for:

- a) The great personal commitment of the mayor to supporting the women's work, and
- b) The fact that the city is actually paying for a job that women's groups often undertake for free in many cities of the developing world.

Replication of the project has started in other Burkina cities, such as Bobodiolasso, Koudougou, Ouahiguoya, Gourcy, Banfora, Kaya, Dano, and Diebougou. Because of its social, economic and environmental sustainability, this project has been visited by several mayors from neighbouring countries with a view of replicating it in their own cities. For example, replication initiatives have taken place in Bamako (Mali), Conakry (Guinea), and Cotonou (Benin).