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Striving for sustainability: Holy Trinity Sisters tend to their crops in Isiolo, Kenya. (Catherine Ciingi)



by Sr. Catherine Ciingi

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I am Sr. Cathy Ciingi, a member of the Institute of the Holy Trinity Sisters and the initiator of a new venture toward self-sustainability and restoring the Earth. I engaged my community sisters to join me in the challenging environment of Isiolo, Kenya, where we live.

Growing up in a farming family in a village called Ciikori in Mbeere North, Kenya, I was immersed in agricultural practices and values from an early age.

Our Institute of the Holy Trinity has 30 members and was established in the Isiolo Diocese in 2003 by the late Fr. Mario Meggiolaro. Our special mission is to propagate the Gospel and uplift marginalized pastoralist communities. However, this mission is impeded by formidable environmental challenges. Isiolo County is an arid region of Kenya that experiences a stark reality of climate variability, nomadic lifestyles, and conflicts over land and resources.

These adversities result in food insecurity, malnutrition and economic instability among the pastoralist communities.

Nevertheless, our small community was determined to confront the challenges in spite of the many setbacks that came with them. In 2016, we set out to transform our barren landscape into a symbol of hope for our entire community of families around us.



The aftermath of the destruction of the fence on the Institute of the Holy Trinity Sisters' farmland in Isiolo, Kenya (Catherine Ciingi)

We began by enclosing our 6-acre farmland with sturdy chainlink fencing and concrete posts, and by planting a diverse array of trees, including fruit trees suited to the climate. We prayed for rain to help us.

To demonstrate our solidarity with the local people, we also began building a convent but faced our first disappointment when elephants trampled the fence and crops. This forced us to abandon the project, unsure of how to move forward.

Help arrived unexpectedly in 2018. Our parish priest, Father Timothy, volunteered to drill a borehole, finding water about 3 miles from our farm. We dug trenches and connected pipes to bring the water there.

Thrilled with this success, we did not anticipate that lack of security would become a problem. Local herders watched the process and later stole all the pipes.

This was a huge disappointment, not only for us but for the local people who needed our help. It seemed as though our dream of nurturing the Earth and the community was slipping away. But in 2020, hope was rekindled. Through a connection with Sr. Pat Bombard, a member of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we received a grant to drill a borehole closer to our field. The Sisters of Peter Claver also donated funds to install solar panels to provide sustainable energy to run the pump.

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The shattered fencing remained a problem as herders took over our land, fetching water for their animals and destroying taps and pipes. Even our unfinished convent became an animal shelter for the herders' cattle. The only solution was to construct an electric fence around the solar panels and pump and install an alarm bell to keep elephants and other animals away. Unfortunately, even these attempts failed.

In 2022, Brigidine Sr. Loretta Brennan, who lived in Nairobi for many years, introduced us to Dr. Alan Channer, who ignited in us a renewed hope and sense of purpose. Channer told us about the pioneering work of Tony Rinaudo, who started the Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration program. His approach matched our goal of empowering local communities by regenerating indigenous tree species with a variety of benefits. Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration has transformed barren land into thriving ecosystems in places like Niger, reducing poverty and hunger.



Holy Trinity Sisters revive the forest by implementing Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration practices and using stumps from indigenous trees in Isiolo, Kenya. (Catherine Ciingi)

The Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration method involves regrowing and managing trees and plants from stumps, root systems, or seeds already present. It improves soil structure, fertility, and moisture retention, rehabilitates water tables, and enhances biodiversity. It's a low-cost method with far-reaching benefits, including better crop yields and increased food security.

All of these benefits help fulfill 2030 U.N. sustainability goals:

- Sustainable production and reduced disparities (Sustainable Development Goal 10);
- Improved gender equality in decision-making and access to natural resources (Sustainable Development Goal 5);
- Environmental and economic benefits (Sustainable Development Goal 8);
- Positive impact on climate change (Sustainable Development Goals 13 and 15).

We were enthusiastic and happy when Channer agreed to sponsor me to participate in a course on Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration.

I learned that the acacia trees of Isiolo are indigenous trees that could be restored. These acacias can become natural barriers to soil erosion, replenish groundwater reserves, enhance biodiversity, and provide lost habitats for a variety of flora and fauna. Reviving these trees can even regenerate current microclimates that will bring much-needed rainfall. It was very exciting to consider.

As our community learned about these new methods of regeneration, we realized that the 10 other religious communities in and around Isiolo might also be interested in learning about them. Everyone knows that sisters are deeply rooted in their communities and have invaluable networks, resources and influence. We invited them, and a number excitedly joined us.



The present state of the land in Isiolo, Kenya, showcases vibrant communal action and growth. (Catherine Ciingi)

We have been surprised that our efforts have sparked new hope for a grassroots movement in environmental restoration and sustainable development among the sisters and the communities they serve. Our goal is to encourage and empower families to reclaim stewardship of their land and foster an awareness of our interconnectedness with nature.

Since March 2024, Sister Loretta also helped us begin a collaboration with the Brigidine Mission Fund. With their help, we hired a company to once again fence our farm, but this time with an elephant-proof solar electrified fence that promises to deter them and other animals from breaking it down. With this new security, we are ready to wholeheartedly begin a Natural Regeneration Pilot Program, nurturing young trees and pruning existing ones.

In May this year, we dedicated a day to tree planting with our Christian community neighbors, fostering bonds of fellowship and symbolizing a shared commitment to stewardship and sustainability of our Earth.

We truly hope our example will encourage others to begin using the Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration techniques and, with us, become a testament to the resilience of the human spirit.