



## Farming Seaweed

In the summer of 2009, I photographed seaweed farmers in Zanzibar. The photographs were exhibited in *Picturing Power & Potential*, a juried group show presented by the San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery in association with the International Museum of Women. The exhibition highlighted women's potential as active participants in the global economy.

Globally, the import and export of seaweed generates approximately \$200 billion annually, with the United States alone importing nearly \$50 billion each year. Algae extracts are used in processed dairy, meat, and fruit products, cosmetics, paint, toothpaste, air fresheners, fertilizers, and pharmaceuticals, and in greenbiofuels being

developed to revolutionize transportation and mitigate global warming. Currently, multinational corporations like Exxon Mobil are investing hundreds of millions of dollars to genetically engineer synthetic strains of algae capable of absorbing carbon dioxide.

But in Zanzibar, the sustainability of this form of aquaculture is imperiled because the infrastructure, hardware, and skills needed to extract valuable algae from dried seaweed are not available. Many illiterate seaweed farmers are forced to rely on local middlemen who monopolize profits from the export of this prized raw commodity. One seaweed broker in Zanzibar reported that he paid farmers 7 cents per kilogram of seaweed. The thin thread that

connects seaweed farmers to the global economy grows more fragile by the day.

The Seaweed Center is an NGO founded by students at the Chalmers School of Entrepreneurship, with support from the Rylander Foundation and Jan Iversen, a Danish social entrepreneur. Based in the rural village of Paje, the center provides women with the tools and training they need to create value-added products from dried seaweed, such as shampoo and soap. This endeavor has brought together Swedish graduate students, Tanzanian marine biologists, and local women in an effective alliance that illustrates the potential of international collaboration for social justice. —**JOANNA LIPPER**