



Global Preparatory Meeting for the 2010 Annual Ministerial Review

Who Feeds the World in 2010 and Beyond?
Rural Women as Agents of Change and Champions of Global Food Security
22 April 2010 – New York,
UN Headquarters

PRESIDENT'S SUMMARY

The official summary of the President of ECOSOC provides a synopsis of the discussion held at the Global Preparatory Meeting of ECOSOC and presents substantive recommendations on practical measures and policy options proposed at the meeting, with a view to turning existing commitments into concrete and effective action on the ground.

Programme:

Chair	H.E. Mr. Hamidon Ali (Malaysia), President of the ECOSOC
Moderator	Dr. Marcela Villarreal, Director, Gender, Equity and Rural Employment Division, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Panelists	H.E. Ms. Florence Chenoweth, Minister of Agriculture of Liberia Ms. Carol Kramer-LeBlanc, Director for Sustainable Development, Office of the Chief Economist, United States Department of Agriculture Ms. Mirna Cunningham, Director, Center for Indigenous People's Autonomy and Development Ms. Carmen Griffiths, Coordinator, GROOTS, Jamaica.

Executive Summary

Women grow more than half of the world's food, and agriculture is the main livelihood source of 80 percent of rural women in sub-Saharan African and 70 percent in Asia. Rural women are key stakeholders in economic and social development; in fact, in many countries they are the backbone of local and national food security and a critical force in reducing poverty and hunger and promoting development. Yet, when it comes to investments and policies, women's contribution to food security and agricultural production is largely invisible, often ignored and generally under-supported. Without a fundamental shift in the way national governments, development agencies, UN organizations, civil society and the private sector view and support rural women, development efforts -- including efforts to reach the MDGs -- will continue to bypass the majority of the world's food producers and jeopardize development effectiveness.

If countries are to achieve their development goals, and in particular the reduction of hunger and poverty (MDG1), concerted and targeted action is needed to empower rural women and to redress existing levels of gender inequality. Women's role and contribution in producing, processing, marketing, and preparing food need to become central elements of development policies and operational investments and activities. Allocation of resources and services need to take into account the differentiated roles women and men play in the rural economy to ensure that women capture a share of development benefits that corresponds to their contribution. Policy and programmatic interventions that target rural women enable them to play their economic and productive roles more effectively. National governments need to take the lead in recognizing and supporting women's contribution to the national economy and food security initiatives and need to be assisted by development partners, UN agencies and other stakeholders. The time has come to take action on all levels and across institutions to support rural women's economic empowerment and accelerate progress toward the achievement of the MDGs.

Key Recommendations

A number of key recommendations emerged from the discussion:

Invest in agriculture and in rural women. The fight against hunger needs to address rural women's specific needs. Prioritized country-led investment plans and appropriate legal and policy frameworks are necessary for countries to bring out the productive potential of 50% (or more) of the population.

Recognize women as stakeholders not beneficiaries. National development and food security policies and programmes need to recognize women's roles as agricultural producers, entrepreneurs, and managers of natural resources. To accelerate results, policies and investments should give priority attention to gender equality and women's empowerment in agriculture and rural development.

Make women's contribution visible. Improve local and national data collection to account for rural women's work in the agricultural sector, including on and off-farm production, and the informal economy.

Give women their share. Investments in agriculture and rural development need to be country-led, and correspond to the different contributions men and women make to agriculture and rural development to ensure that a larger share of programming resources reach women farmers and agricultural producers and support their economic empowerment.

No one size fits all. Policies and programmes need to be holistic and address both women's productive and reproductive roles, including social safety nets, nutrition, health, and action against gender-based violence, and take into account rural women's occupational diversity as farmers, fishers, herders, and entrepreneurs, their ethnic identity and the value of traditional knowledge and practices.

Be accountable. Monitor implementation of existing commitments in support of agriculture and rural development and evaluate and report on their impact on rural women's economic empowerment.

Women's empowerment is not only about women. Empowerment is an important tool for enabling both poor men and women to overcome poverty while recognizing their different roles in society. Men need to be part of the dialogue and can be powerful champions for women's rights and gender equality.

A piece of land, equipment, and credit of her own. Strengthen legal frameworks to ensure gender equality and adopt measures to ensure women's equal access to productive resources, including land, credit, technologies, training, markets and information.

It's time for new tools. Support an agricultural research agenda that focuses on rural women's needs for agricultural technologies, labour-saving agricultural equipment and modern means of communication.

Hear women's voices. Enable rural women to make their voices heard and participate in decision-making by taking concrete measures to facilitate women's and women organizations' participation in local, national, regional and global fora related to food security, agriculture, rural development, environment and climate change.

Strength in number. Support women organizations and promote women's leadership in farmer organizations as important means for rural women's empowerment and for increasing the capacity of those organizations to address gender issues.

Summary of Panel Discussion

Opening the session, the President of the ECOSOC reiterated the critical role of women in the rural economy and their contribution to crop production, livestock care and off-farm activities. Despite their contribution to the local and national economy, women continue to have limited access to vital resources and services, including health, education and productive services, as well as decision-making processes. Rural women have been disproportionately affected by recent crises and climate change as their livelihoods largely depend on agriculture. Despite some progress towards improving the condition of rural women, there is a need for renewed efforts to transform existing commitments into action and empower women to exert their potential as agents of change. Panelists and participants were encouraged to identify best practices in this regard that show potential for replication and scaling up. It was stressed that the discussion would be an opportunity to provide concrete recommendations for actions for the ECOSOC session in June/July and the MDGs Summit in September.

Panelists raised a number of critical issues affecting rural women and their capacity to become agents of change:

The centrality of women in agriculture, rural development, and food security

Agriculture and rural development are strategic entry points for reducing rural poverty, improving food insecurity, and ultimately for achieving the MDGs. There is a need to reverse past trends of under-investment in the sector and re-focus attention and investments on those who produce a large share of the food consumed around the world: rural women. Women play a central role in rural communities and are largely responsible for household food security. They produce 50% of food in the world and 80% of food in developing countries.

Women also play a fundamental role in the transmission of knowledge, particularly of traditional agricultural practices critical for the conservation of traditional crops and biodiversity. They also make a central contribution to many other development goals, such as poverty eradication, health, education and child malnutrition. For this reason, investments in women tend to have a higher rate of return than those in men, especially in agriculture and education. Despite the centrality of women in the rural economy and development, they continue to remain largely invisible, unrewarded and unsupported. But it is becoming apparent that the food crisis cannot be resolved without tapping into the potential of 50% of the population's production power. Gender equality and empowerment of women is central to food security and development. Women should have equal employment opportunity and wages; be trained to use agricultural technology; and participate in decision-making on food security.

Addressing gender-inequality and promoting women's rights

Female-headed households have been more harshly affected by the food crisis than male-headed households, as women spend a higher portion of their income on food while at the same time having less access to resources. Levels of gender inequality in rural areas tend to be high with women having less access to knowledge, information, resources, health and education services, property rights, tenure security, agricultural extensions, and access to credit and other activities that can generate income. Such persistent gender inequality hinders local and national development and prospects for the achievements the MDGs. There is a need for country-led development plans/strategies that systematically incorporate a gender perspective and adopt policies that address women's specific needs –e.g. appropriate technologies, access to natural and productive resources.

Frequently, rural women are also the subject of violence and discrimination. Despite progress in the recognition of women's rights, there is often a gap between the law and its application. Changing this situation requires a change in people's mindset and attitude both at the political and implementation levels, which in turn will require appropriate governmental institutions, policy and legal frameworks that actively promote gender issues.

Need for gender-disaggregated data and women's inclusion in national statistics

Despite rural women's sustained contribution to the national economy of many developing countries, they continue to be invisible in national labor and other statistics. The situation is particularly grave for indigenous rural women who are often subject to both gender and ethnic discrimination. Making rural women's contribution visible through disaggregated data and gender sensitive statistics is essential for putting in place and strengthening economic, social and legal policies, mechanisms and practices that work support rural women rather than ignoring them or even undermining their ability to improve agricultural production and food security. This will

require investments at the national level in disaggregated statistics to ensure that data collections are gender-sensitive and geographically balanced in order for rural women's contributions to become visible and recognized. Such statistics should also take into account the diversity among women in terms of occupations, e.g. farmer, herder, and ethnicity.

Limited access of rural women to productive resources and services

Limited access to productive resources is one of the major challenges faced by poor farmers, especially female farmers, in developing countries. This includes access to credit, agricultural input, land, agricultural extension, but also access to market, technology, and market information as well as property right and land tenure capacity. Women tend to own less productive land/plots and only small proportion of extension resources directly reach women farmers. Women, especially indigenous women, have very limited access to agricultural knowledge, education, and technology that is responsive to their specific needs as agricultural producers. Hence, there is an urgent need for a strategic action agenda to help women increase their access to resources, technology and information that respond adequately to their needs.

Alternative livelihood strategies of rural women

Rural women have long shown ingenuity and resilience in the face of crisis, and have more recently, been able to address several of the current challenges, including climate change, by adopting creative coping strategies to ensure food security, nutrition and agricultural production. Some of these coping strategies have included: diversification of food sources; exchange of market information; government's lobbying to secure access to land; use of different cultivation techniques and genetically modified and traditional seeds; use of seed and food banks to maximize production in times of shortage; and use of alternative and more sustainable methods of farming, such as the use of organic fertilizers. Some rural women organizations are promoting a more integrated approach that combines food security, nutrition, access to inputs and credit, strengthening of women participation, prevention of violence against women, etc. These examples demonstrate that rural women have a great untapped potential to strengthen food security and promote rural development. Their role as major stakeholders in local and national development should be supported and strengthened.

The need for a holistic approach to agricultural programmes and national policies

In order to reach hunger and poverty reduction goals, countries need to address the challenges faced by rural women. This requires a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to rural and agricultural development. National development strategies need to implement a strong gender focus that cuts across policies, institutions and programmes in order to ensure gender equality and empowerment of rural women. This also requires concerted efforts to promote gender-sensitive programmes in every economic and social sector, including health and education, in order to improve the situation of rural women. Such programmes will also need to be more decentralized and bottom-up to allow the participation of local rural organizations, including women's organizations, to have a say in local decision-making.

Among the additional themes emanating from the discussion with Member States and civil society organizations were: the need to take into account the interrelation between agriculture, environment and natural resources, particularly in terms of the impact of climate change, including desertification of arable land, on the livelihood of women; the importance of

decentralizing government, finance, and right of information to allow women to have a voice in decision-making and problem-solving; the need to allocate budget resources to women's needs as a practical way to ensure implementation of gender-biased policies and change people's mindset; the need for cross-cultural planning tools that take into account the ethnical diversity of indigenous women.