

Gender and Information for rural development: the Dimitra experience

Conference 'Women crossing the digital divide: empowerment through information'
Vienna, Austria
27-28 October 2003

Dimitra is an **information** and **communication** project which aims to highlight **rural women's** contribution to their community and their country. The project is implemented by the Gender and Development Service (SDWW), of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations – (FAO) and is coordinated in Brussels, with support from Rome and Accra. It relies on the active cooperation of a **large network of local partners** in Africa and the Near East.

Dimitra's main goal is to **empower rural women** and to improve their living conditions and status by highlighting the extent and value of their contributions. It provides a tool for grassroots organisations to make their voices heard internationally. The project's working methods centre around **three** main principles: **partnership** - valuing local knowledge and working closely with local partners; **participation** - the Dimitra network cannot function without the active contribution of civil society organisations; and **networking** - encouraging and supporting exchange of good practices, ideas and experiences.

The project has collected **detailed information** on organisations and projects concerning rural women in Europe, Africa and in the Near East and worked closely with **ten local partners** located in Africa and the Near East. Dimitra uses both **traditional and new** communication methods and tools to disseminate information as widely as possible. The Dimitra on-line database is regularly updated, and accessible free of charge on the FAO website at the following address: <http://www.fao.org/sd/dimitra/>. This database contains profiles on **organisations based in Europe, Africa and the Near East**, which have projects or programmes involving or concerning rural populations, especially rural women, and development (in English and French). Dimitra's publications include: a Guidebook on European organisations (NGOs, information centres and research institutes) working with/for rural women in the South; a Guidebook on African and Near Eastern organisations; bi-annual **Newsletters** (in English and French) which provide information about the activities of the project and its partner organisations and which are disseminated to about 4.500 organisations worldwide. A CD-ROM of the database will also be produced in the near future. To date Dimitra has gathered information on 1.100 organisations, among which 850 in Africa and the Near East, 2.300 project descriptions, 900 publications, and has an ever-expanding worldwide mailing list.

The main objectives of the second phase of the Dimitra project (2002-2004) are to consolidate and extend the network in Africa and the Near East, to promote information exchange by strengthening information and communication skills and to update and disseminate information on gender and rural development issues. The expected impacts include easier access to information; sharing of local knowledge and know-how through networking; less marginalisation for rural population, particularly women, and gender sensitization for all development actors. Dimitra partners in Africa and the Near East collect and disseminate information on the work of NGOs and civil society organisations in their sub-region in the field of gender and rural development.

These partner organisations are **ENDA-PRONAT** covering part of West Africa and **ABANTU FOR DEVELOPMENT** for the rest of West Africa, **FAN** for East Africa, **ONG-VIE** working on the

Dimitra Project - Rural Women and Development

countries of the Sahel, **SANGONeT/Women'sNet** covering Southern Africa, **CREDIF** for Algeria, Libya and Tunisia, **AMSED** for Morocco, **ONE** for the Indian Ocean: Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles and **CARDNE** for the Near East.

Promoting gender equality and empowering women

Example

In Tunisia, CREDIF has succeeded in integrating Dimitra into the Plan for the Promotion of Rural Women for the period 2002-2006 at the Ministry for Women, the Family and Childhood. This plan will strengthen the tools and mechanisms to help promote rural women's interests and integrate them into the development process. Dimitra is cited as a tool for increasing the visibility of rural women's contributions, promoting information exchange and networking of development actors.

Making rural women's voices heard

Example

A workshop on Rural Women's Access to Land was organised in Thiès Senegal, in February 2003. This event was conceived and organised by the Rural Women National Network of Senegal with the support of FAO-Dimitra and Enda-Pronat.

The workshop was widely attended by Senegalese rural women and representatives from other African countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Tunisia and Uganda) and provided an excellent opportunity for everyone to exchange of experiences, problems and initiatives. Participants spoke of the influence of the Sharia in Tunisia, factors influencing rural women's access to land in Niger and Burkina Faso, etc.

One of the first achievements of the workshop was that it was organised with, and by, rural women themselves. This is one of the objectives of Dimitra Project: to improve the availability of information on rural women and increase their opportunities to access information.

The workshop was conceived and organised by the Rural Women National Network of Senegal with the support of FAO-Dimitra and Enda Pronat, its main goal was for rural women to speak out and make known to decision-makers the problems they encounter in regard to accessing cultivable land, natural resources and land acquisition.

Approximately 100 participants came to the conference in Thies. The overwhelming majority of these were rural women and men. Many representatives from donor organisations attended – FAO, Belgian and Swiss Technical Co-operations, UNIFEM, ENDA-TIERS Monde, Union of Women Members of Parliament of Senegal, the media (print, broadcast, private and community-based/rural radios). Also present were representatives of decentralised State services, interested Ministries, researchers, and artists committed to women's promotion and gender equality.

Impacts of the Thies Workshop

- A set of concrete Recommendations and Plan of Action (sensitisation and legal literacy for all)
- Large-scale networking between women from Senegal and from other countries on land issues
- A seat for the Rural Women National Network of Senegal on the National Commission for the Revision of Land Tenure in Senegal (Government has been sensitised)

Dimitra Project - Rural Women and Development

- Widespread national and international media coverage
(broad discussion involving local communities and people on this topical issue)

Land rights: human rights and women's rights

There is a clear link between poverty and security of land access rights. Women's lack of control and access discourages them from making long-term investments on their land. This has repercussions at the level of household food-security and national food security as women are responsible for the whole food chain, from production onto our plates.

- Land Tenure reforms should be initiated so women and men have equal rights
- Governments need to recognise women as farmers and landowners
- Women must be present at meetings where rights to land and other resources are being discussed
- HIV/AIDS leads to increased land dispossession for women

Information and human rights

Human rights and information are mutually dependent on each other - information is a universal right and an essential means to fight poverty. Goal 8 of the UN Millennium goals mentions the need for everyone to benefit from new technologies, in particular information and communication technologies

Information is a crucial tool in the fight against hunger and poverty. Information is power. Too often women do not have access to it, particularly in rural areas. Moreover, rural women have limited access to the new information and communication technologies. Policies must be developed to encourage women's freedom of expression, the right to information and the right to communication using information and communication technologies.

Information is a human right

People's ignorance about rights is closely linked to lack of education, especially for girls. Traditions and customs which are detrimental to women and gender equality continue to be widely practised. In many countries women's lack of awareness of their rights prevents them from fully participating in community life.

While the UN Millennium Goals have set out strategic objectives to improve the situation in developing countries, rural women today remain in a highly vulnerable position.

Only development that embraces the principles of social justice and gender equality can be said to centrally address women's needs and redress fundamental economic and socio-cultural divides.

Networking supports Human Rights and Women's Rights

By linking up in networks women have the opportunity to share their concerns and experiences with others in similar situations and can combine their strengths together so their voices have more impact on decision-makers.

Dimitra Project - Rural Women and Development

Within grassroots organisations, women and men can share the power equally by encouraging the strengthening of decision-making procedures at village level. Women must be able to and dare to present themselves to be elected in the various decision-making institutions.

- Women's rights are integral to sustainable and equitable development
- Networks provide information on human rights and women's rights
- Networks provide support, information and solidarity to isolated populations
- By linking up with each other, rural women are better able to influence the design and implementation of policies concerning their livelihoods and well-being

Benefits of networking

Community organisations contain a wealth of information and local knowledge on which future actions and strategies should be built. Women's voices are even stronger when they join forces to work together. It is therefore important to encourage networking between rural women's organisations at grassroots level and to develop the federative spirit of these organisations.

Working together in a network helps to:

- Break through isolation and create solidarity
- Share problems, exchange information and experiences and work together to find solutions
- Reinforce self-confidence, build skills, provide training and strengthen organisations and individuals

Impacts of rural women's access to information

New information technologies offer a unique opportunity for women from developing countries to speak out, be more visible and less isolated. They increase political, social and economic participation through promoting access to and sharing of knowledge, the creation of networks and strengthening of decision-making processes.

New information technologies are not a luxury but an essential instrument for sustainable development. It is necessary to implement adapted and sustainable telecommunication infrastructures and to develop messages meeting the needs identified by the rural communities themselves, while respecting the social and cultural diversity of these communities

- Access to information will reinforce women's influence in their communities and their ability to participate in decision-making
- Information improves women access to resources (e.g. production and conservation techniques, credit, training, reproductive health, etc.)
- Modern and traditional information and communication techniques increase the visibility of the work being carried out by rural women

Impacts of rural women's access to information

Dimitra Project - Rural Women and Development

- New information and communication technologies (NICTs) offer rural people access to information that is rapid, broad, dependable and direct
- ICTs allow exchange and help create solidarity
- Accounts of experiences can be documented (on paper, cassette, video) instead of solely being passed on verbally
- When women are empowered with technological knowledge and skills, all members of the family benefit

Poor farmers are using mobile phones to get information about agricultural market prices; radio stations are broadcasting programmes on how to treat sick animals; rural women's groups are using the Internet to exchange information on how to farm organically.....

These are just a few good examples of how access to information and technology can improve rural lives in developing countries. Communication is relevant to the development of all societies, but this is especially the case for women, bearing in mind their role in household economics, as mother/educator and as the guardians of culture/traditions.

Obstacles to rural women's access to information

- A gender dimension is not included in national ICT policies
- Inadequate physical and service infrastructure
- Financial cost of IT hardware and software
- Relevance of language and appropriateness of content
- Gender specific constraints to access and apply ICT-based information systems

As regards obstacles for women accessing information, numerous factors come into play: heavy domestic workload, illiteracy, isolation, lack of financial resources, local traditions and customs, and the fact that technology considered as a male-only domain, to name but a few.

Traditional and indigenous forms of media and communications can sometimes more accurately reflect the communications needs and preferences of the diversity of cultural, linguistic, ethics, and value systems of women in rural communities. The ability to dispose of appropriate information technologies, both modern (computer, Internet, e-mail) as well as traditional (rural radio, printed press, posters, etc.) and to think up creative messages, are essential conditions for successful communication strategies.

Other Gender/ICT activities at FAO

Example

SEAGA is another programme within the Gender and Development service at the FAO. It carries out gender-based socio-economic analysis using a participative approach to identify the priorities of women and men. At a local level the programme focuses on men and women as individuals, on socio-economic differences between households, and on communities as a whole. The intermediary level focuses on structures, e.g. institutions and services within the context of gender. It includes communications, health/education programmes, credit institutions, etc. The macro level focuses on national and international policies and programmes.

Dimitra Project - Rural Women and Development

SEAGA tools help development actors clarify the division of tasks within the community, including divisions dictated by sex and other social characteristics. Moreover it improves understanding of the use and control of resources and encourages participation in community institutions.

SEAGA: works through a gender approach at local, intermediary and macro level; promotes a better understanding of community dynamics, especially linkages between social, economic and environmental factors; and uses various information and communication technologies, including long-distance learning, for its training activities.

FAO Gender and Development Plan of Action 2002-2007

The FAO has developed a new Plan of Action for women. This is the 2002-2007 Gender and Development Plan of Action which aims in particular to ensure the fair distribution of the benefits of change and their joint management between men and women, whether in matters of resources, agricultural services or jobs.

- Promote gender equality in the access to sufficient, safe and nutritionally adequate food
- Promote gender equality in the access to, control over and management of natural resources, and agricultural support services
- Promote gender equality in policy- and decision-making processes at all levels in the agricultural and rural sector
- Promote gender equality in opportunities for on- and off-farm employment in rural areas.