

**2010 ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL (ECOSOC)
SUBSTANTIVE SESSION**

HIGH LEVEL SEGMENT

**“FROM DIALOGUE TO ACTION -
THE EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN IN
AGRICULTURE”**

LUNCHEON DISCUSSION

29 June 2010

Programme

Moderator Mr. Jim Butler, Deputy Director-General, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Panellists

H.E. The Honourable Florence Chenoweth, Minister of Agriculture of Liberia
Ambassador Patricia Haslach, Deputy Coordinator for Diplomacy, Global Hunger and Food Security Initiative, US Department of State
Ms. Myrta Kaulard, Country Director for Haiti, WFP
Ms. Nereide Segala Coelho, grassroots leader and women farmer, Rede Pintadas, Brazil

Executive Summary

Ministers and high-level officials from 30 countries, meeting in New York for the High-level Segment of ECOSOC, signalled their support for recasting the image of rural women from that of beneficiaries or aid recipients to that of stakeholders and managers at a luncheon on the theme "From Dialogue to Action: Empowering Rural Women in Agriculture." The luncheon, which was part of the official ECOSOC programme, was organized by IFAD, FAO, and WFP and co-sponsored by Woman Organizing for Change in Agriculture and NRM (WOCAN). The Hunger Project, the Huairou Commission, and UNIFEM supported the event. The luncheon discussion built on the Global Preparatory Meeting of ECOSOC on April 22nd, which identified rural women as major contributors to food security and agricultural development when addressing the question of the future of agriculture in the 21st century.

The luncheon event brought together some 75 high-level government representatives, UN Officials and executives from civil society organizations. Presentations by a diverse panel of policy makers and practitioners, followed by an interactive discussion amongst several ministers and officials in attendance, described specific actions that can accelerate progress toward

empowering rural women and enabling them to realize their potential contribution to food security and agricultural development. Participants agreed that the momentum towards a more holistic and accurate perception of rural women's role as agents of change and drivers of economic and social development needs to translate quickly into more robust action on the ground. The main messages from the panellists and participants fell into five areas, as summarized by Cheryl Morden, Director, North American Liaison Office, IFAD:

- Accounting for rural women and making their roles and contributions more visible;
- Ensuring that women stakeholders are engaged in the development of country strategies so that their interests, perspectives, and knowledge are incorporated;
- Ensuring that resources and access to resources are targeted to women, including through affirmative or preferential measures;
- Strengthening the capacity of institutions to integrate gender perspectives throughout operations and to ensure coordination and synergies between economic development and social interventions; and
- Empowering rural women by recognizing and respecting their work, abilities, and knowledge, and providing them with appropriate tools and technology.

Panellists and participants also agreed on the need to continue taking these messages forward to the MDG high level plenary meeting, so as to ensure the commitment of world leaders to support rural women.

Summary of Panel Discussion

Mr. Jim Butler, Deputy Director-General, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

In his introductory remarks, Mr. Butler observed that issues of gender equality and women's empowerment have received increased attention in the context of the renewed interest in agricultural development. Yet, more needs to be done to ensure that all stakeholders understand the benefits of investing in women as a means to improve the agriculture sector's performance. It is especially critical that new and expanded investments in agricultural development take into account women's critical role in economic and social development. Women are agents of change, but need support to build their assets and capacities. Sustained efforts will be needed to ensure that the heightened attention to food security issues generates benefits that accrue equitably to women and that women's roles and responsibilities in producing, marketing, and preparing food are central elements of policies and operational activities.

H.E. The Honourable Florence Chenoweth, Minister of Agriculture of Liberia

Minister Chenoweth started out by noting that agriculture is, and will remain, the main source of growth and poverty reduction in Liberia for at least another decade. Rural women grow more than half the food in Liberia and agriculture serves as the main livelihood source for about 80% of women living in rural areas. In light of the fact that agricultural growth is more effective in reducing poverty than any other sector, the Government of Liberia is placing great emphasis on the sector, both in terms of value-addition exports and food security at home. The strategic objective is to revitalize the agricultural sector to bring about sustainable economic growth and measurably reduce poverty. At the core of this effort is a transformation of smallholder agriculture into a sustainable, income-generating sector with solid market integration.

Among the concrete measures that have been taken to enhance food security and improve agricultural production is to provide farm inputs, training and capacity building to rural women through targeted support. Some initiatives have already shown positive results, as rice production in Liberia increased by 43 percent between 2006 and 2009. Liberia's efforts to rebuild the country are taking place against the backdrop of limited public resources, a heavy debt burden left over from previous administrations and the social, economic and cultural remnants of a decade-long conflict. Yet with the right mix of political will, sound policies, and donor support, agriculture has the potential to become an engine for growth and a major source of employment for a significant part of the population.

Ambassador Patricia Haslach – Deputy Coordinator for Diplomacy of the Global Hunger and Food Security Initiative, US Department of State

Amb. Haslach highlighted the increased engagement by the United States in global food security and the empowerment of women. Both are central objectives of the government's development and diplomacy strategy. The new Feed the Future initiative recognizes that women play an indispensable role in agriculture – as drivers of agricultural development, rural entrepreneurs and caretakers of this generation and the next. Yet, rural women routinely face discrimination and inequalities that hamper their ability to reach their full potential. Gaps that need to be addressed include unequal access to land and other productive resources, equipment, and training. The US government is pursuing an approach that emphasizes the integration of gender perspectives in all of its investments and seeks to ensure women's involvement and participation in all decision-making processes. US efforts also focus on policy reforms and programs to help ensure that countries have strong and clear property rights for women and men. Finally, empowering rural women requires practical measures that translate awareness and commitment into action on the ground. Robust, outcome-oriented monitoring

and evaluation systems are needed to achieve a more agile, adaptive, and evidence-based foreign assistance program.

Ms. Myrta Kaulard, Country Director for Haiti, WFP

Ms. Kaulard, speaking on behalf of FAO, IFAD, and WFP, focused on the topic of empowering rural women in post-earthquake Haiti. The earthquake severely affected Haiti's farming system resulting in many deaths, the collapse of homes and villages, the destruction of natural habitats and rural roads, and damage to the irrigation and waste water systems. Urban to rural migration has caused the rural population to increase by 20 percent and worsened the food security situation in already-vulnerable areas. Almost half the women living in rural areas depend for their livelihoods on farming, but the income generated from their work barely covers their basic needs. Women do not enjoy the same rights as men, often lacking access to land, water, loans, agricultural infrastructure, and transportation. "De-feminizing" poverty and empowering women in Haiti go hand in hand and require -- first and foremost -- that women's work is recognized, respected and supported. Strengthening women's access to adequate food and nutrition, enhancing access to income-earning opportunities and improving women's access to basic services and infrastructure are some of the areas in which FAO, IFAD and WFP are working together with the Government of Haiti to ensure that rural women are fully integrated into the reconstruction process.

Ms. Nereide Segala Coelho, grassroots leader and women farmer, Rede Pintadas, Brazil

Ms. Coelho drew on her experience in rural development in Brazil. She stressed that women perceive agriculture differently than men, because they see it as a dynamic and regenerating source of life and sustainability. She noted the importance of youth participation in agricultural production and rural development and identified innovation, partnerships, and technology as critical for increasing productivity. Among her main recommendations were to:

- 1) Learn how to utilize all local natural resource;
- 2) Combine popular with scientific knowledge;
- 3) Utilize proper technology for food production: water storage, irrigation, technology, organization of production, and distribution;
- 4) Encourage the creation of women-led organizations and initiatives;
- 5) Guarantee land access to women;
- 6) Engage the youth;
- 7) See food as a generator of life.

Inter-active Dialogue

During the inter-active dialogue following the panel presentation, Ministers and high-level government officials pointed out that insufficient investment

over several decades, combined with structural causes of food insecurity, have significantly contributed to the ongoing crisis. Only through sustained engagement at national and international levels can the agricultural sector be revived. Women play a critical role in this regard because 70 percent of agricultural production is generated by women. Yet, as one speaker noted, women are the poorest of the poor and the most discriminated against amongst those experiencing discrimination worldwide. Thus, empowering rural women is crucial in promoting food security, improving agricultural production and achieving sustainable development.

Prepared by Xenia von Lilien
Liaison and Public Information Officer, IFAD