

ECOSOC

Global Preparatory Meeting for the 2010 Annual Ministerial Review

"Implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to gender equality and the empowerment of women".

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Issues Paper

Who Feeds the World in 2010 and Beyond? Rural Women as Agents of Change and Champions of Global Food Security

1. The Global Preparatory Meeting will focus on the role of rural women in achieving the MDGs¹. It seeks to strengthen the dialogue among Member States and UN system organizations on concrete actions needed to support rural women's contribution to reducing poverty, improving food security and the right to food, and promoting economic and social development. Insights and conclusions from this discussion can help to guide the international community in accelerating implementation of existing policy commitments.

2. The meeting builds on a growing shift in global attitudes regarding women's role in economic and social development -- from viewing women predominantly as a "vulnerable group" to recognizing women as key contributors to development. Further efforts are needed to translate this new perspective into more robust action to support rural women's role as agents of change and drivers of economic and social development. This meeting will provide an opportunity for the Council to call attention to the need for priority action in support of rural women's rights and empowerment and to facilitate coalition and partnership building toward this end.

A. Background

3. The world has recently recognized that global poverty is heavily concentrated in rural areas and that substantial progress toward achieving the MDGs and other international development goals thus depends heavily on improving agricultural and rural development. The rural poor are predominantly smallholder farmers – (particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa) and agricultural wage laborers (particularly in South Asia). In general, the agricultural sector is characterized by highly differentiated roles for men and women, and these are important factors in the allocation of time, labor, and resources within households. On a global scale, women make up a substantial proportion of the agricultural workforce and cultivate more than half of all the food that is grown. A greater proportion of women than men are employed in agriculture in all regions and the sector provides employment for more than 80 % of women in sub-Saharan Africa and close to 70 % in East Asia

¹ The meeting is sponsored by DESA, FAO, IFAD, UNIFEM, WFP, the World Bank in collaboration with The Hunger Project and WOCAN (Women Organizing Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management).

and the Pacific (excluding China).² Progress to improve agricultural production and productivity thus requires recognition of the different roles and responsibilities of men and women in rural areas.

4. Despite the fact that smallholder farming in most developing countries has a woman's face, women farmers are too often invisible and under-supported when it comes to investments, policies, and programs. For example, women receive less than 10 percent of the credit awarded to smallholders, and female farmers receive only five percent of all agricultural extension services worldwide and only around 15 percent of the extension agents are women.

5. Women smallholders experience the same constraints as poor rural people in general, such as limited access to capital, markets, and services, but these are further compounded by gender-based constraints. These include the double burden of responsibility for both productive and reproductive work, including unpaid family work. Women farmers often suffer from ill health, have less access to land and financial resources, experience limitations on their mobility outside their homes, and are often not included in community-level decision making or in decision making within producers' organizations. As a result, rural women often have less disposable income than men and fewer pathways out of poverty. Women belonging to indigenous and minority groups are often doubly discriminated against, as they face both gender inequalities and exclusion on the basis of ethnicity.

6. On the other hand, women's increased access to resources such as land, credit, technology, training and marketing can lead to improved agricultural productivity and production. Increases in incomes and overall improvements in women's lives often have an immediate positive impact on the well-being of household members -- particularly on the nutritional status and education of children, as women typically spend a higher proportion of their income on food for the family than do men. Promoting women's on- or off-farm productive activities can also make a direct contribution to household food supply. There is considerable evidence that improved access to essential services -- including health and education, water, labor-saving technologies, and basic infrastructure -- is a key factor in improving the well-being and productivity of rural women. There is also much evidence that women are agents of change, but need to be supported to build their assets and capacities.

7. Discussion on the important role of rural women in contributing to development and the eradication of poverty and hunger is not new. For example, the First World Conference on Women held in Mexico in 1975 acknowledged rural women's critical contribution to development. This was subsequently acknowledged by every World Conference thereafter and in article 14 of the CEDAW Convention, numerous resolutions of the General Assembly. ECOSOC itself, in its 2003 Ministerial Declaration, called for an enhanced role for rural women at all levels of rural development, including decision-making. Yet, while there is an impressive body of legislative and normative work addressing women's role as key producers of the world's food and important actors in the rural economy, progress in the implementation of those policies has been mixed. The most recent report of the

² World Development Report (World Bank, 2007)

Secretary-General on the situation of rural women³, for example, shows that member states and United Nations entities have taken measures to improve rural women's participation in public life, as well as their opportunities for employment, access to and control over productive resources, and access to health facilities and services for victims of violence. The report also notes, however, that rural women's knowledge, experience and contributions are still not sufficiently taken into consideration in research, data collection, policy development, resource allocation and programmes in all areas of sustainable development

B. Toward a Common Agenda for Strategic Action

8. In today's world, poor farmers and rural producers – men and women -- pursue their livelihoods in a context of increased opportunity and risk. On the one hand, increased demands for agricultural goods, expanding markets, and improved technologies offer the prospect of increased income for those in a position to take advantage of these new opportunities. On the other hand, continuing price volatility, a changing climate, and growing pressure on land and water resources create a situation of risk and uncertainty.

9. Our current efforts to improve global food security must help poor farmers to manage risk and build on new opportunities. Equally important, new and expanded investments in agricultural and rural development urgently need to take into account women's critical role in economic and social development. New investments that fail to recognize the different roles of men and women risk further marginalizing rural women and undermining the effectiveness of such investments. Empowering rural women will require sustained efforts to ensure that benefits generated by the heightened attention paid to food security issues are captured by women and that women's roles and responsibilities in producing, marketing and preparing food are central elements of policies and operational activities.

10. Increased awareness of the critical importance of gender equality and women's empowerment has been evident within renewed global attention to agriculture, food security, and the right to food. The fundamental role of rural women as agents of change has been given added emphasis in a series of initiatives and high-level meetings held over the past 24 months.⁴ Yet, this discourse and the subsequent policy statements have not yet translated into the breakthrough action needed to achieve and sustain results to improve the lives of rural women and their families.

11. Now is the time to turn earlier commitments into concrete actions on the ground and to start a serious and broad-based effort to support the women who plant, grow, harvest, process, market, distribute, and use the food, fuel, and fiber that is consumed around the world. Member States, UN Organizations, the private sector, and civil society are involved in global, regional, national and local efforts to

³ A/64/190

⁴ For example: 2008 Gender in Agriculture Source Book (World Bank, FAO, and IFAD); the July 2008 Comprehensive Framework for Action adopted by the Secretary-General's High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis; the January 2009 Madrid High Level Meeting on Food Security, the February 2009 Windhoek High Level Ministerial Declaration on African Agriculture in the 21st Century; the July 2009 L'Aquila Joint Food Security Initiative; the September 2009 G20 Leaders' Statement; and the outcome of the November 2009 World Food Summit

achieve greater food security through agricultural and rural development. Each of these actors needs to examine its role in contributing to the empowerment of women and equality between men and women. All are urged to deepen their commitments and improve the effectiveness of their efforts, working to ensure that their own mechanisms, policies, and practices give priority attention to gender equality and women's empowerment in agriculture and rural development. Three strategic areas for reflection and action are outlined below.

- Gender-responsive investment in agriculture and rural development
Within increased levels of overall investment in agricultural and rural development, adopt measures to ensure that such investments do not further marginalize rural women and implement affirmative measures to ensure that a larger share of programming resources support the economic empowerment and well-being of rural women and women farmers.
- Accountability for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in agriculture and rural development. Track investments that support rural women's empowerment and measure the impact on rural women of investments, policies, and programmes in agricultural and rural development to ensure optimal outcomes for rural women. Disaggregate rural and urban data and indicators, especially for health and education, and improve data collection to improve accounting for rural women's work.
- Women's voice, organization, and leadership
Recognize and affirm the dignity and value of rural women's roles and contributions; support their organization, leadership, and participation in decision-making at all levels.

Possible questions to guide the discussion:

- *What are good practices in gender-responsive rural development strategies that have empowered rural women as agents of change for economic and social development?*
- *What further actions can be taken to address constraints to rural women's empowerment? What has worked and what can be scaled up?*
- *What role can various stakeholders play in ensuring targeted allocation of resources for gender equality and the empowerment of rural women?*
- *How can data collection and analysis on women's contributions to food security be improved to better inform policy-making, planning and monitoring of results?*
- *What are successful strategies for enhancing rural women's ability to influence decision making on the local, national, regional and global level?*