

6 March 2012

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women**Fifty-sixth session**

27 February-9 March 2012

Agenda item 3 (a) (i)

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: priority theme: the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges

High-level round table on the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges

Chair’s summary

1. On 27 February 2012, the Commission on the Status of Women held a high-level round table on the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges. The interactive high-level round table focused on sharing of national experiences, lessons learned and good practices. A discussion guide provided the framework for the interactive dialogue.

2. The high-level round table was organized in two parallel sessions in order to allow for interaction among the large number of participants. The sessions were chaired by Marjon V. Kamara, Chair of the Commission, and Carlos Garcia Gonzalez, Vice-Chair. The meeting opened with the screening of a short video on rural women. Invited representatives from the United Nations system, Sheila Sisulu, World Food Programme (WFP), and Lakshmi Puri, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), responded to the interactive dialogue and presented the common message prepared by the United Nations entities comprising the Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality. In total, 61 government representatives made interventions at the high-level round table. The high-level round table also benefited from presentations made at the opening of the Commission by Michelle Bachelet, Executive Director of

UN-Women, Ann Tutwiler, Deputy Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), on behalf of FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and WFP, and Elisabeth Atangana, President of the Pan-African Farmers' Organization.

3. Participants welcomed the Commission's consideration of the priority theme. Rural women and girls constitute a sizeable share of the global population, and are important actors for economic and social development at the local and national levels. Rural women play an important role in agriculture in all parts of the world and carry out a wide range of agricultural and non-agricultural work in addition to domestic tasks, such as caring for children and the elderly. They play a crucial role in ensuring and promoting food security and nutrition in all parts of the world. The centrality of rural women to the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals, is increasingly recognized.

4. However, rural women and girls remain disadvantaged in many areas compared to rural men and boys, and to urban women and girls. Poverty continues to be a predominantly rural phenomenon, with a heavy toll on women and girls. The impact of global crises, including the world financial and economic crisis, volatile food and energy prices and food insecurity, also disproportionately affect rural women.

5. Lack of and limited access to land and other productive resources remain major obstacles to overcoming poverty and hunger for rural women. A number of countries have adopted legal and constitutional provisions to improve women's access to land, including provisions for land tenure rights and joint land titles for spouses. However, broader gender-responsive land reforms would be required to ensure women's equal access to and ownership of land.

6. Lack of land ownership limits women's ability to borrow. Many countries promote access to finance for poor women in rural areas, in particular through microcredit programmes, often combined with financial literacy, entrepreneurship, management and related types of training. Access to loans without collateral, subsidized or interest-free loans, or reserving a specific percentage of bank credit for women, are also effective measures to expand financing. However, for rural women to sustain and expand their businesses and increase agricultural productivity, they need access to mainstream "macro" financial services. Women's cooperatives have been instrumental in providing women with collective access to financial services.

7. While women play an important role in food production, they continue to face limited access to markets. Some countries have developed programmes to purchase local agricultural produce from family farming for schools, hospitals and other public institutions through governmental entities. Women farmers are being specifically targeted and are paid good prices for their produce. Increased access of women to information and communications technologies, including mobile phones, can also facilitate women farmers' access to market information and open new markets.

8. Rural women also need equal access to productive resources such as fertilizers, seeds and tools to help boost food and nutrition security. Experience has shown positive results when the cultivation of locally consumed crops, such as

millet, cassava and sorghum, which are primarily produced by women farmers, are specifically promoted through agricultural policies and programmes.

9. Rural and remote areas are characterized by a lack of public infrastructure, including roads and public transportation, water and sanitation facilities, modern energy sources and information and communications technology resources. This lack of infrastructure compounds rural women's heavy work burden and related time poverty. Increased investment in infrastructure can alleviate women's large — and often unpaid — burden of work, on the farm, in non-agricultural income-generating activities and in the household. Initiatives such as the installation of water pumps, food-processing equipment and energy sources help to reduce women's workload, thus freeing time for education, skills training and remunerative activities.

10. Recognizing the need for greater employment opportunities in rural areas, some countries have adopted laws to boost rural employment generation and have put in place employment guarantee programmes. Many efforts have also focused on entrepreneurship training for rural women to enable them to take advantage of micro and small business opportunities in various sectors. Steps have been taken to redress gender-based labour market segregation by offering rural women vocational training for non-traditional jobs, such as auto mechanics and electricians, or in emerging markets and sectors such as rural infrastructure, agrotourism and ecotourism. Such initiatives play an important role in increasing women's economic opportunities in rural areas, thus slowing young women's migration to urban areas. However, migration to cities is a reality for many rural women, and training programmes need to impart skills that enable women to reduce vulnerabilities that they may face in new environments, including in regard to employment opportunities.

11. The informal nature of much of rural employment, weak or non-existent labour standards and rights and poor implementation of national legislation and regulation contribute greatly to rural women's vulnerability to poverty and hunger. In order to remedy such risks, social protection systems in some countries have contributed to safeguarding a minimum level of access to essential services and income security. Some governments support vulnerable groups of rural women through targeted grants, conditional cash transfers and school feeding programmes for poor households living outside the reach of social insurance. Several countries have responded to rural women's lack of access to pensions due to the unpaid nature of their work on family farms and in off-farm enterprises by revising conditions for coverage under public pension schemes.

12. Insufficient attention has been paid to the scourge of violence against women living in rural areas. Rural women are victims of various forms of violence, including domestic violence and trafficking. While many countries have in place laws and action plans to eliminate violence against women, rural women often have little access to prevention and support services. While some government-funded projects specifically target women in rural and remote areas, there is an urgent need for innovative ways to further expand services in underserved and hard-to-reach areas. One such example is the use of mobile centres that support victims and raise awareness about violence against women.

13. Women's and girls' access to health services is often inadequate in rural areas. In particular, greater attention must be given to the availability and accessibility of sexual and reproductive health facilities to reduce the often high levels of maternal mortality and morbidity in rural areas. Expanding primary care services, building

new health facilities, training midwives and providing free health care for pregnant women have proved to be effective ways of expanding access.

14. Formal and non-formal education is a cornerstone for the empowerment of rural women. It generates economic benefits and employment opportunities and facilitates women's participation in public life. However, rural areas are often characterized by poor access to education and training, and illiteracy remains high among rural women. In response, governments have created schools in rural areas, provided free education and incentives for families to educate girls and supported literacy programmes for adult women. Revisions of school curricula that aim to increase skills for income-generating activities are a promising practice. Initiatives are also carried out to upgrade women farmers' skills, including training in modern agricultural techniques to help mitigate the impact of climate change and build their computer literacy.

15. Progress has been made in strengthening rural women's participation and leadership in public and political life. Many countries have implemented initiatives to increase the number of women at various levels of government, including through temporary special measures, affirmative action and quotas combined with training for women candidates and elected officials. Yet, more efforts are needed to further increase the representation of rural women in national parliaments, local councils and public administration as well as at senior decision-making levels in all areas.

16. Rural women's rights, priorities and needs, including their workload and time poverty, must be taken into account in the development of gender-responsive policies, resource allocation and planning at both national and local levels to achieve sustainable results. Holding local or national consultations with rural women is one way of ensuring that their priorities are taken into account in policies, budgets and planning, and ongoing dialogue with rural women is key to the effective and beneficial implementation of such instruments.

17. Rural organizations, including farmers' organizations and cooperatives, play an important role in giving rural women a voice, advancing their rights and promoting rural development. In recognition of those benefits, some countries facilitate the establishment of, and capacity-building for, all-women cooperatives and rural organizations. There is a growing number of good examples where rural women organize with the aim of strengthening the development of their rural communities. However, more efforts are needed to strengthen rural women's role in existing farmers' and community-based organizations, especially in leadership positions.

18. Participants agreed that many policy and legal frameworks continued to respond inadequately and insufficiently to the situation of rural women, and that ad hoc, limited interventions could not yield the long-term, systemic change needed to achieve gender equality. Comprehensive, gender-sensitive policies and programmes were urgently needed, including greater coherence between the priorities of rural women, macroeconomic policies and development policies and strategies. A number of countries have incorporated a gender perspective in their planning, budgeting and monitoring processes within sector ministries and local governments. Those efforts should be scaled up and expanded to create a favourable policy environment for the empowerment of rural women.

19. A human rights-based approach grounded in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is essential to the empowerment of rural women. The Convention has a specific article — article 14 — dedicated to the situation of rural women, which calls on States parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against them. The Convention in general and article 14 in particular should thus consistently guide national efforts aimed at rural development.

20. Family law, as well as property, inheritance and social security laws, need to be regularly reviewed, monitored and evaluated to identify and rectify any direct or indirect discrimination against rural women and girls. As civil registration is the basis for the exercise of many rights, concerted efforts are needed to ensure that all rural women and girls are registered. Furthermore, in many countries, rural women continue to lack the national identification documents required to exercise their right to vote, to own and inherit property, to apply for loans and to access basic services. The provision of such documents ensures that rural women are treated as citizens with equal rights. In order to exercise their rights, rural women must be aware of their rights and have access to information and legal services. Awareness-raising campaigns and national days of rural women have proven useful in that regard.

21. Policies and programmes should take into account not only the differences between urban and rural groups, but also recognize that rural women do not constitute a homogeneous group. Their circumstances vary on the basis of many grounds, such as their age, ethnic group and situation of vulnerability, such as migrant or internally displaced status. Rural women also face differences in their access to productive assets and opportunities. Needs assessment surveys can be an effective tool in identifying and targeting the priorities of rural women based on such grounds.

22. The availability of reliable data and evidence on rural women and their contribution to the economy and the well-being of communities is critical for a better understanding of their priorities and for drawing up policies that can effectively address them. A number of countries shared their experiences in strengthening data-collection systems and building evidence through gender-sensitive assessments. Investments in data collection, and the development of gender-sensitive indicators that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (“SMART”), must be given high priority. At the same time, there is a widespread need for much better utilization and analysis of already existing data in policy development and implementation.

23. Strengthened cooperation is needed between all stakeholders at the national level, including governments, civil society and the private sector, to implement the ambitious agenda needed to transform rural women’s lives. Cooperation and coordination across different sectoral ministries is also crucial for enhancing policymaking processes. Many countries have in place inter-ministerial committees to respond more effectively to the challenges of food security and rural development. National machineries for gender equality are often instrumental in facilitating such collaboration for the benefit of rural women, and such efforts can also result in increased investments for rural women.

24. International cooperation, and in particular official development assistance, is necessary for the empowerment of rural women. Yet, donor financing for the

empowerment of rural women remains sparse, and might even be decreasing in the current context of global crises. More efforts are needed to reach the official development assistance target of 0.7 per cent of gross national income and to ensure that rural women benefit from such cooperation. Local initiatives spearheaded by rural women should benefit from international financing. In addition, the entities of the United Nations system should prioritize gender-responsive agricultural and rural development in their support to Member States at the national level.

25. South-South cooperation should also be promoted, as it can be an effective tool for sharing and replicating proven solutions for empowering women. Countries that have successfully integrated the needs of smallholder farmers, in particular women farmers, into national agricultural and rural development policies, should share their experiences with other countries. Good practices could be collected and shared in the context of the Commission on the Status of Women.

26. Participants pointed out that the priority theme of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission is directly relevant to the forthcoming United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20). The impact of climate change, including loss of biodiversity, drought and desertification, is particularly severe for smallholder farmers' economic prospects. Rural women's rights and priorities, as well as food and nutrition security, should therefore be strongly reflected in the outcome of the Conference.
