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Rural Women's Empowerment in Nonfarm Employment Issues for ICT Initiatives and Territorial Policies in Latin America¹

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Introduction

In the mind of the general public, the rural sector is equal to agriculture and for a great majority of policymakers, rural development continues to mean agricultural development. Not surprisingly, it is a sector traditionally covered at the governmental level by the ministries of agriculture, and at the international development level by agencies with an agricultural development mandate such as the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) and in the Americas, the Organization of American States' Inter-American Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture (IICA). In turn, the national ministries of agriculture are the natural counterparts to these international agencies. Moreover, most rural development projects financed by international financial institutions (World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, African Development

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

² www.rimisp.org

Bank or Asia Development Bank) have worked with their country counterparts in agriculture departments.

It is only recently that some countries in Latin America have an institutional set-up that aims at broader rural aspects, with typically a vice-ministry or sub-secretariat within the ministry of agriculture. However, this is not necessarily accompanied by an in-depth understanding of the wide range of economic sectors in which rural inhabitants are active (Dirven, 2011).

There is no doubt that agriculture is a very significant sector in the economy and livelihoods of rural societies. What we want to point out here is that **agriculture is not the only important sector**. In today's rural world, in the strategies of rural inhabitants, **non-agriculture/nonfarm income and employment opportunities have emerged**. Public policies and agencies continue to essentially treat rural poverty from the lens of agricultural development, while local actors are increasingly incorporating rural nonfarm income and employment in their livelihood strategies. And if we have insufficiently addressed gender in agricultural development, nonfarm rural income and employment can suffer the same situation if we don't pay enough attention to gender systems in its realm.

In this paper, we aim at contributing to the discussion on rural women's empowerment by exploring the non agriculture, nonfarm components of the rural economy, their growing importance in Latin America in the livelihood strategies of rural people, the new opportunities they provide and the changes they bring to the rural landscape, and how and where rural nonfarm employment can be a significant driver of rural women's empowerment. In doing so, we look at the importance for development programs to successfully integrate gender issues in rural initiatives. We expand on this subject taking examples of gender-sensitive approaches in the design and implementation of rural development initiatives focused on **information and communication technologies (ICT)** for their potential in increasing access to nonfarm employment of rural women.

The paper also brings the attention to place-based policies for addressing within-country disparities as well as gender inequalities, through their uses for improving nonfarm employment opportunities for rural women. Finally, it presents the vision for gender systems research in the concept of territorial development in Latin America.

Rural sector is not just agriculture

Results of research since the mid 1990s in Latin America have shown that some 40% of rural income and rural employment is nonfarm related. These studies also calculate the share of rural household income that stems from non-agricultural sources to range from 35% in Asia to 45% in Sub-Saharan Africa (Berdegue et al., 2000 and Reardon et al., 2001 provide a fairly complete overview on this research of the mid 1990s). More recently, Dirven (2011) estimates that at present, 45% of rural workers in the Latin American region are involved in some nonfarm activities **as their main occupation**, and that this proportion is growing fast with some groups more strongly represented than others, such as women, people with a higher level of education and the middle-aged group.

In the definition that we use, “nonfarm” includes industry and manufacturing (secondary sector) and services (tertiary sector) and excludes primary production, whether in agriculture, minerals or fisheries. Rural nonfarm income (RNFI) is income generated by rural inhabitants through self-employment or wage-earning work in secondary or tertiary sectors. Rural nonfarm employment (RNFE) can involve a wide range of activities. The most common are in commerce, manufacturing (mostly agroindustry), tourism (in a variety of scopes – ecological, adventure, etc.), gastronomy, construction, transport, and public and private services (health, education, administration, domestic and others). RNFE are spatially concentrated in rural agglomerations and areas along connected roads. In fact, a real increase in nonfarm rural employment brings a modification to a traditional rural landscape; this is made visible by the appearance of non agriculture commercial stores and shops, transportation systems, repair shops, restaurants, banks, etc., that inevitably increase and strengthen rural-urban linkages and can have an impact not only at the economic level, but also in offering more opportunities to rural people and options to close the gap in the difference in the quality of life available to urban people.

A way out of poverty

RNFI is very often a part of the livelihood strategies of the rural poor involved in agriculture. The **pluri-active nature** of the economy of poor rural households is a characteristic of rural societies in Latin America. Berdegúe et al. (2000) relate to this characteristic as “a complex relationship between agricultural and non-agricultural income flows, and between non-agricultural income and income from subsidies, conditional cash transfer programs, and cash transfers from migrants (remittances) or other private sources.” They further argue that in the economy of rural households, RNFI tend to have a stabilizing effect on rural employment and income.

For many rural households and individuals lacking resources and the type of capitals required to generate self-employment in agriculture (or even to opt for emigration), RNFE can be a determinant means for their way out of poverty. Working in manufacturing, commerce, tourism or other services can also be **more attractive** than working in agriculture (and as wage-earning workers in agriculture in particular) since it can present **better options for personal and professional development**. Against what is often believed, we emphasize here that rural people do not only seek opportunities of RNFE because they have no other options; it can be for personal preferences as part of an empowerment process through a capacity to take life-changing decisions.

Gender in rural nonfarm employment

Data from ECLAC (2000) already strongly suggested that RNFE in the late 1990s had become dominant in the case of rural women’s employment. In the ECLAC study covering eleven countries, with the sole exception of Bolivia, rural women’s share of RNFE was much higher than that of rural men. In nine of the eleven countries, between 65% and 93% of rural women participating in the labor market did so in non-agricultural activities. By contrast, in most countries, with the exception of Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic, agricultural employment was predominantly for rural men.

For sure, rural women's participation among the economically active population is considerably lower than that of their urban counterparts and much lower than that of men (49% women versus 86% men adult population – according to the year 2000 data compiled in the World Development Report 2007 on the rural labor market of Latin America). If their participation is greater in RNFE, in the agricultural sector they face social barriers to working in agriculture³ in addition to problems of access to resources. They can have advantages however in some jobs in the RNFE area, such as in domestic services that some still label “naturally female”⁴ when they clearly are **unnaturally low paid**. We know that generally women earn less than men for the same job and with the same level of education, and the same goes for all the major sectors of RNFE.

In several categories of income-generating jobs, women in the rural nonfarm employment sector are predominantly in the informal economy, and this is associated with serious concerns over women's rights and social protection. “The poverty reduction and empowerment potential of paid employment depends not just on the quantity of jobs that are created, but also on the quality of such jobs, including whether the rights, protection and voice of the workers are respected” (Fontana and Paciello, 2009).

There are important links between the sex of an individual and other factors which help to determine access to RNFE. Among them, education stands out as one of the key factors that determine employment outcome and earnings potential. Migration experience, ethnicity, local market size, distance to population centers and other proxies for transaction costs play important roles in shaping rural nonfarm employment prospects and earnings (Jonasson and Helfand, 2010). It should therefore be made clear that “women” are not a single homogenous unitary category. In order to understand men's and women's incentive towards RNFE, a more systemic gender analysis is needed. **We cannot fall in reducing gender to women only, and even less to RNFE projects for “poor rural women only”**. This would be like checking population growth through women-only education, or projects for overcoming poverty through giving micro-credits only and to women only.

The nature of some RNFE can promote innovations in the way we look not only at rural development, but also at gender. Going beyond the typical discussion on access to agricultural technology or to credit for agriculture, one can look for example at the roles of rural women and their empowerment potential in terms of valorization of cultural and biological diversity, and of services derived from them. Encouraging the formulation of rural development strategies based on territorial marketing, favoring a fabric of diverse and innovative entrepreneurship and enlightening the creativity of talents with investments in human and social capital, are approaches which have been proposed in developed and developing countries alike (Rural Cultural Forum - UK, 2010; UNCTAD, 2010).

“Location” is a factor being given much importance for a viable, diverse and significant RNFE sector that can improve the living standards of rural households. Short distance to larger

³ That can include responding that they do not work when in fact they are working in agriculture, for equating this activity to only “helping” the male farmer.

⁴ In a provocative allusion to a belief we continue to encounter in the RNFE literature, and NOT our position on questions of social construction or biological determination.

markets, road infrastructure, and a close-by geographic concentration of economic activities are attributes that are traditionally and logically referred to as favoring factors. Notwithstanding, information and communications technologies (ICT) **are also expected to unveil their potential for making distance and location much less important** conditions for at least certain types of RNFE, as well as to expand RNFE possibilities for rural men and women.

ICT in the Rural Women's Empowerment Agenda

For several years, we have seen the drastic and rapid changes brought about by access to and use of information and communications technology (ICT). The Global Information Technology Report 2010-2011 (World Economic Forum and INSEAD, 2011) indicates that a number of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean region post notable improvements or consolidate their achievements in Networked Readiness⁵. However, out of the 138 countries covered, very few LAC countries are in the top 50 (the highest being Chile 39th, Uruguay 45th and Costa Rica 46th) and the region as a whole continues to trail behind international best practices in leveraging ICT advancements. In the 2010 data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the average percentage of internet users in LAC in 2009 was 32.37 per 100 inhabitants, with Nicaragua having the lowest penetration (3.48), and Mexico the highest (58.16). Many LAC countries have a rather high internet adoption rate with estimates above 40% of their population. There is however a major difference between the urban and rural areas. Rural Chile for example is barely above 10%. A subsector of ICT which has a phenomenal penetration is mobile telephony. With Cuba at one extreme (and an exception) with 5.54, and Panama at the other with an incredible 164.37, the great majority of the LAC countries have above 50 cell phones per 100 inhabitants, with Antigua, Argentina, Barbados, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Panama, Surinam, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uruguay with more than 100 cell phones per 100 inhabitants.

A common opinion is that ICT penetration will grow, thanks to explicit policies to increase coverage, and will bring a revolution in many aspects of rural life. We can foresee change brought about by ICT providing market, climate and other useful information to farmers, or by enabling the relocation of services and manufacturing facilities to rural areas, to name a few, with their opening up new possibilities for RNFE. It is also clear that young people are the most “connected” and are those who will be able to benefit most from such technology.

From these perspectives, ICTs add tremendous potential for improving rural livelihoods, including through expanding the range of opportunities available to rural population. It must be however recognized that **a gender-sensitive approach to the design and implementation of ICT initiatives is fundamental** to their success for improving the lives of rural women and men.

We illustrate this requirement using the learning of the Women Networking Support Programme (WNSP) of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC)⁶. WNSP is both a program within APC and a network of women throughout the world committed to information and communications technology for women's empowerment and equality. The network has

⁵ The Networked Readiness Index is defined as a measure of the “*capacity of countries to fully benefit from new technologies in their competitiveness strategies and their citizens' daily lives.*”

⁶ <http://www.apcwomen.org/>

currently over 175 women members (individual women and women's organizations) from some 35 countries. Founded in 1993, WNSP has a tradition of advocating for women's rights and women's empowerment through access to ICT. For example the advocacy efforts made by WNSP on behalf of the right of women to have equal access to computer communications technology and networks, led to the creation of a new chapter - Chapter J - in the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women.

In the promotion of gender-sensitive ICT for development initiatives, WNSP has elaborated gender evaluation methodologies, practical guides, resources and communities of practice involved in assessing how and if ICT projects contribute to changing gender relations towards empowering relationships within rural communities⁷. In the following box, a quote from Chat Garcia Ramilo, Manager of APC WNSP, encapsulates the gender concerns that must be understood and addressed in ICT initiatives in rural areas and in RNFE. Too often, ICT initiatives are gender-blind and result in the kind of damages that Chat is warning about.

“It is very common to see or hear about information and communication technology (ICT) being used in development projects in rural areas all around the world. These rural ICT for development (ICTD) projects are often located in very different contexts from each other and usually face multiple and complex challenges.

The rural context brings with it a number of elements that can be similar and also different to urban-based development projects. There are several elements that are most often addressed in ICTD projects. The most common are: geography and topology which impact on infrastructure and access to ICTs; literacy, education and language which impact on the capacity to use ICTs; and, the level of income and quality of economic activities which impact on access to and appropriation of these technologies.

Less commonly addressed in ICTD projects are gender relations and power dynamics in rural communities that complicate how ICTs are controlled and how access to these technologies is distributed. Many ICTD projects in rural areas often touch the lives of communities in varying ways. Residents can have access to new information, new knowledge and new skills. Or they can find new employment opportunities and earn additional income. Some play new roles that in turn affect social relations within the community. In the same way, ICTD projects impact on gender roles and relations in communities and the way they are appropriated can either lessen or further perpetuate gender inequalities.”

Quote from the Preface by Chat Garcia Ramilo, Manager, APC WNSP, in Kuga Thas, 2011

Geography matters

Poverty and inequality have a geographic dimension with differentiated intensities of conditions, exposure and vulnerability at the regional, national and local levels. Just like for other indicators and statistics, averages hide the large disparities existing within regions and countries. At a national level, disparities not only exist between rural and urban sectors, they also appear within the rural sector itself. It is not surprising that in Latin America indicators of some rural areas of a country are similar to, say Switzerland, and others can be much closer to, say Rwanda, while

⁷ <http://www.genderevaluation.net/>

national averages take the country to the Upper Middle-Income category. And these differences can often happen in very short distances, and in sister regions of similar landscape and production potential.

“Location” is therefore brought back to the equation, and if ICT penetration can play to somehow reduce the geographic factors - and could favor women in accessing and benefiting from RNFE, provided the ICT interventions follow the guidance mentioned above -, place-based policy can present another avenue.

There is controversy over the use of place-based policy, with the conventional economic approach often wanting to relegate its application to a narrow range of cases. Furthermore, the 2009 World Development Report: Reshaping Economic Geography (World Bank, 2008) is making the case for economic integration through “spatially-blind” institutions and connective infrastructure, with evidence that economic growth is uneven across and within countries, and that this **inequality is beneficial**.

Place-based policy is ambiguous and is applied to favor well endowed regions and increase their comparative advantages, as well as to improve the condition of regions lagging behind and concentrating poverty. Olfert et al. (2011) are providing an extensive review on the subject. They strongly suggest that place-based policies will continue to be used, and that it is therefore required to make them more effective at reducing geographic disparities. Arguing in favor of what the World Development Report 2009 is warning against, the study makes recommendations for considering place-based policy in regions lagging behind with high levels of poverty and inequality. It goes on to offer a method drawing from examples in Canada, Chile and Peru for choosing regions where and how place-based policy can be successfully applied. However, **communities/regions must have the potential to benefit from these types of interventions**. It follows that a good use of gender analytical tools is a must for such diagnostic, and the process can be conducted with, as opposed to on, the local stakeholders in a way to turn “interventions” into “investments” that can be appropriated by them. New RNFE opportunities can develop from place-based policies with an effect on within-country, regional equality.

Territorial Development and Gender Systems

Using the concept developed by Schejtman and Berdegué (2004), the principles pursued in Latin America with the Territorial Development approach are for augmenting the opportunities of **economic growth with social inclusion** by aggregating value to the assets available in the territories. The territory has economic and productive resources that together **with its social, institutional and cultural assets enable the development of endogenous entrepreneurship**. Defined as a rural space with a socially constructed identity, at the operational level a territory falls between large political or economic regions and the very small and local communities; it is large enough to be relevant to policy makers - it has political, social and economic critical mass; its limits are apparent to the diversity of its local inhabitants and social actors; and it has linkages with urban nuclei that can be located in distant areas or physically included within its boundaries. Because policy processes are constrained by the hierarchy of political and administrative authorities, and the spatial units in which each one operates, the limits of a territory need to be reconciled with the relevant political-administrative divisions.

Gender research can be approached from different angles: working with women; documenting the inequality and subordination of women, analyzing the roles and relations between men and women, and/or looking at the socio-cultural systems of norms and structures that give significance to the roles and relations of men and women. Favoring the latter, Paulson (2011) puts the accent on providing a broad vision of the socio-cultural gender systems that produce and reproduce the territorial stakeholders and their coalitions, and that define the relations among them and the access to assets. In contexts of change, the role of gender in organizing the diversity of activities, knowledge and initiatives is essential for successful territorial dynamics. This goes in a very **different direction than the “women = tradition = culture = environmental conservation” paradigm** and its *status quo*'s impacts on gender inequality. The related rural development frameworks have not been effective in empowering rural women, in closing the gender gaps, or in closing the geographic disparities within countries.

Recommendations

From a synthesis of the main messages in this paper, we draw the attention to the following issues and recommendations that should be considered by the 56th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women in New York in 2012:

- We need to recognize the pluri-activity characteristics of rural economies.
- We need to explicitly emphasize that the rural sector is not only agriculture, and that rural nonfarm income and employment is a major feature in the economic empowerment process of rural men and women.
- We need to understand the requirements for ICT investments in rural areas to use gender lenses in order to unveil their potential in favor of rural women's empowerment.
- We need to stress that governments must provide social protection to rural women in the informal economy in which a majority is active. Governments cannot wait for rural women to become part of the formal economic sector to recognize their rights as citizens.
- New rural development frameworks need to be designed in order to tackle both the gender gaps and regional disparities within countries. Gender sensitive place-based policies can be effective towards this objective, and significant complements to national social protection and economic programs. In Latin America, such innovative rural development framework is being pursued with the “territorial development” approach.

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