

UN Women

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**Expert Group Meeting**

**Enabling rural women's economic empowerment: institutions, opportunities and participation**

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## **Rural Women's Role in Agriculture**

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### **Introduction**

In the CARICOM region, a recent study found that food security is compromised not so much by lack of food availability as by inadequate access to foods and dietary patterns that adversely impact on nutritional status.<sup>1</sup>

Many Caribbean countries are experiencing a shift in nutrition patterns, which has resulted in an increase in the rate of obesity, which in turn contributes to an increase in chronic non-communicable diseases which includes diabetes and hypertension. With limited data by country, it will appear that these phenomena have significantly contributed to increased poverty and malnutrition. This resulted in an increase in the total number of undernourished people in the region during the period 1990 – 2005, changing from 7.5 to 7.6 million people. Poverty and inequalities in income and access to resources in post-independence CARICOM are at

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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.

<sup>1</sup> Regional Food and Nutrition Security Policy, 2010

unacceptably high levels, and continue to be major challenges in this region.<sup>2</sup> An estimated 25% of the population of CARICOM is said to be living below the poverty line.<sup>3</sup>

The socioeconomic challenges are compounded by topographical constraints and natural disasters, which affect the economic performance of the Caribbean agricultural sectors.

Despite the several summits and recommendations, it should be noted that public and private investment in agriculture in the region has not increased significantly. For many CARICOM countries, the proportion of national budget allocated to agriculture development by government remains below 5%; for Barbados, Belize, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and Saint Kitts and Nevis, it is below 2%. This translates into a lack of services that affects the ability particularly of smallholder farmers and fisher folks to access and adopt new technologies and to reinforce advantageous traditional practices.

### **Rural Women in the CARICOM**

From a Caribbean perspective rural women are grossly affected. In August 2010, CARICOM prepared a regional policy on food security.<sup>45</sup> This would take into account the distribution inefficiencies and high income inequality, focusing on the disparities between rural and urban areas. In the recommendations it specifically stated that improved access to livelihood for rural women should be achieved through identification and mapping of vulnerable groups (taking a gender sensitive approach) and the livelihood of rural populations, especially smallholder producers and marginalized dwellers should be improved through the promotion of entrepreneurship and programmes to pay for environmental services. The CARICOM group has decided to promote micro credit and carbon credit schemes to encourage diversification of economic activity in rural areas, foster the value chain, which is the link in agriculture between food crop post harvesting, food processing and preparation and other activities, to broaden the base of families.

### **What makes the difference?**

A cadre of rural women in the Caribbean Network of Rural Women Producers (CANROP) has been trained on how to appreciate the value chain, and given exposure to the issues and options for entrepreneurship. This was done through Inter-American Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture (IICA) and funded by UN Women. It is a regional training program which is structured as a Train the Trainer concept. Women from twelve Caribbean countries were sensitized on the following issues:

***Vulnerability - a very critical issue in terms of ensuring that both current constraints and future threats to food security are addressed.***

The poor, both urban and rural, are the most vulnerable to shocks to the food system. In the Caribbean, the majority of such poor are women living in rural areas.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Overview Vulnerability and Food and Nutrition Security in the Caribbean CFNI Aug 2007

<sup>3</sup> Challenges and Outlook for the Caribbean Subregion, FAO Regional Conference for LAC 31<sup>st</sup> session, 2010

<sup>4</sup> Regional Policy for Food and Nutrition Security

<sup>5</sup> Caribbean Food Security Strategy, IICA

The effects of Hurricane-induced food shortages in the Caribbean in the past several years, the more recent Hurricane Ivan in Grenada in 2004 and the earthquake in Haiti in early January 2010, underscore the vulnerability of the region to descend into a food insecure situation.

While all the formal steps are taken to ensure that food security becomes a priority, rural women in the Caribbean are able to identify financial gaps which reflect attitudes that do not believe that rural women are important or deserving of what is often understood as “*special treatment*” in the form of additional funding. The Caribbean Week of Agriculture Alliance meeting which is hosted by the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture annually comprises of all the Ministers of Agriculture in the CARICOM region. In this meeting, a representative from the Caribbean Network of Rural Women Producers is privileged to solicit help from the Ministers of the respective countries. In 2004, the chairperson of the alliance proposed that each Minister from the respective member state should assist rural women in that country with a budgetary allocation in cash or kind in the sum of USD\$5000.00. Since 2004 it has been mentioned annually, but it was never endorsed. To date only three countries have voluntarily upheld the obligation.

Article 14 (CEDAW) is not taken into account by Agricultural Ministries and non-governmental agencies in the member states. It requires a participatory approach, with rural women having a voice. *The Caribbean Network of Rural Women Producers is one of the Regional organizations that can play a role in developing and implementing a Food Security Plan for the Region.*

## **Jamaica**

Jamaica’s culture is perpetuated from a Eurocentric model, a legacy inherited from British colonialism. The evidence is visible in the social and economic space which is embedded in social gender arrangements and is now recognized as predominant male practices. In other words, the society dictates and recognizes the roles of labour, politics, and work as jobs suitable for males, while women must be child-bearers, be housewives or settle for what is seen as mediocre jobs. The evidence of success in agriculture of Jamaica’s rural women is masked by lack of data and failure to recognize the contributions of these women, mainly because Jamaica is a patriarchal society with its roots embedded in slavery which helps to create cultural norms and causes a producers’ divide in agriculture. Based on the way men and women prioritize and manage their tasks and time, our socialization concludes that they do things differently.

The absentee fathers in the homes due to migration, incarceration and death have forced the majority of mothers who live in rural communities to accept the dual role of mother and father, thus clearing and in most cases providing the opportunities for an improved quality of life. This means creating niches that contribute to sustainable livelihoods.

The Institute of Gender Studies of the University of West Indies at Mona conducted a study in Mount Friendship community, Golden Spring, St Andrew on Women’s Economic Leadership and reports as follows. Fifty-seven per cent of the households were headed by women who were more likely to be single and sought assistance from relatives inside the home. Data reflected the women’s high levels of vulnerability, indicating that 75% of the women interviewed stated that

they would not be able to survive for more than three months if there should be some disaster or sudden emergency. The women who obtained primary through tertiary level education were more likely to be involved in agriculture, as against those without secondary education. Consequently, no male heads of households had gone beyond secondary level education.

### Women as Farmers

Jamaica's agricultural statistics reflect that it has 144,685 farmers utilizing 259,358 hectares of land. It also indicates that, 43,808 (30%) are women between the age of 35 – 54. The average land space utilized by women is 1.4 hectares in comparison to an average of 2.6 hectares of land cultivated by male farmers.<sup>6</sup>

### Women as Agricultural Labourers

There are a larger number of women who work on large farms belonging to others as labourers, assisting with labour-intensive chores in greenhouses, doing task work, applying fertilizers, reaping and packaging crops etc., and who have not been captured in the collected data, mainly because they do not have access to land. In most cases, these women are heads of households, single parents or main providers for their families.

### Women in Backyard Gardening

Jamaica's rural women have perfected the art in backyard gardening under the theme "Eat what you Grow, Grow what you eat" campaign. The intent was to encourage the idea of securing food for families and friends. The campaign has catalyzed a renewed pride among our women with a replication of the program in urban areas at the household level.

### Women in Marketing

For some rural women, they prefer selling their own goods in the municipal markets or to vendors who would purchase in large quantities for resale purposes. These goods are produced by clusters of women, or sometimes their spouses. In order to acquire the quality and quantity goods they desire, they would visit other farms and purchase and then travel long distances from the rural areas of origin to municipal markets in the cities where they would spend 1-3 days before returning home. There is also a small fraction of women who are involved in international export. They focus on packaging raw and processed goods which are sold overseas to investors. They experience several challenges with unfavorable trade barriers. There is evidence of discrimination in different stages of the process.

### Women in Agro-Processing

Despite the pivotal role that women play in agriculture, the use of food preparation skills to convert raw indigenous food to a value added meal has now been introduced to enhance food consumption. This is supported by the ancient norm that the woman's place is in the kitchen. Views began to differ when women in Jamaica started to organize themselves into groups and

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<sup>6</sup> Rural Agricultural Development Agency, Agri –Business Information System (ABIS)

clusters (based on common interests) to produce delicacies, gourmet foods, desserts and pastries for income generation. Interestingly it was also appreciated by tourists who enjoyed these specialty foods and identified rural women's link between tourism and agriculture. Women participate in agro-processing or value-added activities at different levels. It ranges from cottage industries to micro, small and medium sized businesses. There are rural women who employ each other in their small businesses as casual labourers while others work in larger establishments. The transition from housewives to business women in rural communities has created for women a high level of respect and the chance to achieve dreams including the opportunity to change the quality of family life and make decisions on the way forward. The following case study highlights an Agro-Tourism Participatory Business Model used by a women's group in Jamaica and its success. Through a series of actions, the community was supported to develop markets and diversify their product range, which improves income generation and economic resilience.

The Mango Valley Visionaries Friendly Society (MVVFS) is a registered rural community cooperative, located in St Mary, one of the poorest parishes of Jamaica. Traditional banana farming in the area declined significantly after Hurricane Hugo, but this also spurred diversification into a wide range of crops including tomatoes, cucumbers, cabbage, corn, lettuce, sweet peppers and a variety of fruits that are organically grown. Further income revenues are based on agro-processing activities producing a line of Mango Valley Pride products which include guava cheese, jams, otaheiti apple balls and jerk seasoning. There is a steady local demand for their products with uptakes from local supermarkets, market vendors, as well as a small number of restaurants and hotels on the North Coast. Currently, this supports a workforce of 26 women employed in agro-processing and 75 male and female farmers who work on land that they own or for which they hold the lease. MVVFS is a viable community enterprise that has the potential to expand and thrive, and has been a recipient of grant funds. The dynamic role of women within the MVVFS is of considerable importance to development, which seeks to help women in particular to develop their skills and competencies in order to address rural poverty and gender inequalities.

The overall objective is to develop an Agro-Tourism Participatory Business Model, which will not only benefit communities in the parish of St. Mary, but also be replicated in other communities in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean region. The participatory model develops novel ways of integrating organic production and sales of local products with agro-tourism. It has proven to be an appropriate activity for small-scale communities in transition from monoculture crop production to more diversified agricultural economies, where livelihoods are threatened by a whole range of factors, notably natural disasters, unfavorable trade patterns, crop disease and climate change. It specifically engages and benefits rural women in the design and implementation of strategies appropriate to local needs.

Ten women from the group actively assign themselves to the greenhouse where fresh vegetables are cultivated to supply the hotels and restaurants within a five mile radius of the community, while another ten women work in the factory utilizing the seasonal fruits which are available to produce jams condiments and jellies, banana flour and other delicacies that are unique, yet in demand. Occasionally visitors come to the community to visit this community-based cottage industry which also serves as community tourism.

The activity in the community allows women to be trained, provides support to expand organic production, and develops Highest Analytical Critical Control Point (HACCP) certification, which increases competitiveness and enable the community to meet both certification and quality standards required for local, regional and export markets. They have also been exposed to improvements in the packing, labeling and marketing of agro products, which has led to higher prices, the development of luxury and specialty brands and overall increased sales. These training were tailored specifically for the target group. They are now empowered to make their decisions and to facilitate data collection. They also have community toolkits which can be used to replicate their success elsewhere.

### **Factors Driving Progress**

- a. Access to information technology (ICT) and farming technology has created friendly environment for women farmers with sharing or management of time for care giving, domestic duties, and income generation. It also provides the opportunity to network faster and virtual marketing opportunities are available. It encourages more women's involvement, which contributes to economies of scale.
- b. The circulation of success stories. These practices are named differently in different countries or regions.

### **Challenges**

- Access to credit is barred by the bureaucratic gesture of financial institutions who boast a 7% -52% per annum interest rate for secured and unsecured agricultural loans. The question of collateral is unachievable for most rural women as they are not owners of land or other assets. Their literacy level prevents most of them from writing or preparing a business plan which is also a requirement of the bank. Although it is proven that women are more reliable and consistent in paying back loans, the patriarchal aspect minimizes women's economic strength. They prepare their own record keeping in their own language and introduce a workable mechanism with the assistance of the PARTNER plan which has gained its reputation over the years. (It is a method of pooling monetary resources among the group and a different person of the group collects this pool every week).

**Within this context it can be argued that:**

### **Member states should**

- Include rural women in inter-agencies consultation, appoint them as representatives on Boards
- Ensure that all Agriculture and Gender Ministries consider the obligations of including rural women's organizations and umbrella NGOs in their budgetary allocation annually. They should be held accountable to the UN by including the proof in the Periodic Reports of the respective state to international bodies.
- Prepare sex-disaggregated data and make them available by all ministries in member states

- Reduce discrimination by recognizing the contribution of rural women in the respective states
- Ensure that the programmes for rural women's development do not further marginalize them
- Allow rural women to utilize idle agricultural crown lands to improve agricultural development and women's empowerment.

### **Regional Government**

- Rural women require a special financial arrangement tailored to meet their needs and endorsed by CARICOM. This can be introduced to the agricultural banking system of member states or a cooperative/credit union can be established for rural women. It would facilitate:
  1. Disaster Management Scheme;
  2. Agricultural Insurance for women farmers especially small business and fisher folks against natural disasters (hurricanes, drought, floods and earthquakes etc.);
  3. Assist with loans, especially for micro, small and export challenges;
  4. It would also be charged with the responsibility of giving an oversight on the group/cottage industries or community-based agricultural activities with the potential to grow.

### **United Nations**

- Consider the option of providing scholarships for professional training in the area of research and development for rural women. This will enable rural women to utilize all the mechanisms to voice the challenges and intelligently introduce solutions. It will also strengthen the eligibility process of taking on leadership roles.

### **Other Agencies**

- It should become mandatory for rural women to participate in all consultations relating to agriculture, gender and development, and that a rural woman is included in the board of the respective agencies.