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Role of Institutions in Rural Areas Addressing Women's Needs, With a Focus on Indigenous Women

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Introduction

Only in Latin America and the Caribbean, the rural population amounts to about 121 million people, who represent - approximately - 20% of the total population. Of these, 48% are women (58 million)². If we accept that 60 million indigenous peoples live in the region, at least 30 million are indigenous women. Worldwide, there are 370 million indigenous peoples in 90 countries. In the world, women produce between 60-80% of food consumed (45% in Latin America), nevertheless, they receive less than 10% of loans and less than 5% of technical assistance.

Rural women have a special relationship with the land, natural resources and other people with whom they share their productive, reproductive and community work. In the case of indigenous women, the relationship with the land and nature has particular connotations, since it covers aspects such as socio-economic organization that combines individual and collective characteristics, generally based on customary institutions, cosmology, spirituality and ritualization, collective history, among others, that support their membership to collective identities as peoples.

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

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² The employment of rural women. What the numbers say. Marcela Ballara. Soledad Parada. FAO, ECLAC, 2009.

I also want to highlight the role that women play in the transmission and preservation of cultural guidelines -such as language-, as well as the means of production and forms of organization. In that sense, it has been widely recognized that for the preservation of cultures of the various communities, as well as sustainable production, food production and distribution, it is very important to recognize the contributions of rural women and, especially of indigenous women.

Even though the work of rural women constitutes the base of household and community economy -through the combination of a variety of productive activities such as the collection of seeds, fruits, herbs, fishing, sending of remittances for which they work as laborers or domestic workers-, it is unregistered work, not valued and not translated into hard data for economic, social and let alone cultural policies.

Demands and engaging experience

In the 1980s and early 1990s there were three very important parallel processes for the analysis of the subject matter. On one hand, women conquered important opportunities for political participation at the national level and in the United Nations system; on the other hand, the indigenous movement emerged in a powerful way to become a proactive and belligerent political actor in different areas. Nevertheless, these processes coincided with the implementation of structural adjustment programs in countries, which focused on economic stability and growth of the economy through trade and financial liberalization, reducing government spending, reducing the welfare state, the dismantling of productive bases in various territories, privatization of state enterprises and deregulation of the labor market.

Economic policies aimed at large enterprises, foreign trade and global markets. This approach left no room for economic policies aimed at small production units or local markets, which had no chance of competing with the products of transnational corporations. The policies and institutions caring for rural communities placed themselves in the area of social policy on "poverty alleviation"³. As stated in different forums, social policy became an ambulance for the ravages of the economic policy.

Although there have been important advancements in women's political participation in Latin America, with the implementation of decentralization processes, reforms of municipal nature, quota laws, implementation of channels of popular participation, training processes and strengthening of women's leadership; access to key areas of political decision is still a challenge for women in general and for rural and indigenous women in particular.

Rural women have always been involved in the struggles of their movements. They have been at the forefront of local, national and global movements, which is clearly seen by the manifestations on the Via Campesina, in the National Associations such as ANEC in Mexico, UNAG and ATC in Nicaragua, Federacion de Mujeres Campesinas in Bolivia, and similarly throughout the world. The strategies they have adopted have been to articulate a proper movement, within rural and indigenous movements, to have representation in decision-making so that their specific agenda is contemplated within the agendas of rural movements. In this manner, even though their representation in the leadership process is not proportional

³ Social Investment Funds, in El Salvador and Honduras, and programs to alleviate poverty as the Family Allowance Programme (PRAF) in Honduras and the National Program to Support Microenterprise (PAMIC) in Nicaragua.

to their participation, rural and indigenous women have today a space where their organizations and their needs and proposals are already part of the movements.

For indigenous women this has been a challenge, because of the profound changes that their peoples are living, including the modification of traditional mechanisms of decision-making, increased political involvement, and the proposed structural changes in the context of States that began to reduce their sovereign decisions to the international financial institutions and large corporations. They now feel the obligation to adopt new forms of political participation.

Indigenous peoples have been regaining the right to self-determination, understood as the right to freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development (Article 3 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples). In this process, indigenous women have channeled their demands towards changes in their towns and communities, promoting conditions for exercising their rights on a more equal footing. They have even defied customs and traditions that oppress them, while at the same time promoting external changes, both at state and international levels. Their main demands are still the exercise of the right to self-determination, legal security over their ancestral territories and resources and the right to development with culture and identity. The concept of rurality has therefore, a deeper and more comprehensive connotation.

In some cases - and very slowly- certain patterns have changed within their communities, such as reproductive age, the exercise of leadership, occupying positions, relationships with the leaders of organizations, particular demands, the creation of specific structures of women in or out of the mixed groups, "out of the private to the public."⁴ The global movement of indigenous women has understood and demonstrated that the exercise of collective rights cannot be complete, without the fulfillment of the rights of women within their villages.

The internal process has resulted in interconnection with the struggle for political participation outwards, against the States and at different levels to be more precise. Indigenous women have joined forces with their male counterparts to achieve greater visibility and occupy spaces within States and internationally. We can affirm that indigenous representation has increased although there is very little data to compare the evolution in the different decades of the man / woman relation. In this conquest of outward spaces, indigenous women have also had to dialogue with non-indigenous women to understand a different language and to develop joint strategies.

Experiences of institutional policies directed to rural and indigenous women

In recent decades it has been demonstrated that small and medium-sized production units and rural production processes have been the subject of attention of social institutions, which, beyond the movements and demands, identify small-scale farmers and indigenous peoples as "vulnerable groups", "beneficiaries" and "poor"; not as people living in poverty, or impoverished as a result of development models. In additions, they are far from being considered as subjects of economic rights and development actors. They are simply considered a burden to the State, a statistic to measure poverty, extreme poverty and economic growth or decline.

⁴ View Martha Sanchez Nestor (Ed.), *La doble mirada. Voces e Historias de Mujeres Indígenas Latinoamericanas*, editado por el ILSB y UNIFEM, México 2005.

The response of States has been to design social compensation programs, without offering the possibility of participating in the formal economy. In this context, palliative programs were conceived, while Structural Adjustment Programs solved macroeconomic problems and ensured a steady and increased growth. The "drip theory" represented the economic spill towards groups excluded from economic processes. In fact, it had important effects on rural and indigenous women. In this matter, attention has been characterized by the following trends:

- a) Absolute negation. Rural women are invisible in statistics, in economic planning, and in production processes. They are referred to as a homogeneous group, and they are considered a "vulnerable group" and assigned jobs without taking into account diversity and multiple cultural identities, as well as specific local contexts. In the long run this results in institutional neglect;
- b) Recipients of social funds to alleviate poverty are those who receive the aid and put their available time at the disposition of institutional programs designed to: improve the living conditions and development of girls and boys, strengthen social cohesion and community organization, implement preventive health measures, and promote the development of schooling while developing productive projects presents an overload to the already long and heavy workday.
- c) Women victims of eviction from their ancestral lands by the expansion of industrial agriculture and mining corporations, forestry, infrastructure construction, and others are forced to become field-workers -with lower wages than their male counterparts- or are forced to migrate to urban centers outside their countries.

These elements, along with productive programs at precarious levels, have been, in general, the institutional care given to rural women. In this context, women are not considered subjects of rights or as social, economic and cultural agents; on the contrary, they serve as suitable instruments for the implementation of social spending. Even in cases where allegedly a rights-based approach is implemented, it merely recognizes the individual right but not the collective rights of women that belong to the indigenous communities. In other words, the programs are designed considering the women group as a homogeneous population, and ignoring cultural and ethnic diversity as well as their territorial diversity (e.g., women-owned farms, rural workers, the self-employed, members of indigenous groups, women in coastal areas, indigenous territories, forests, etc).

In recent decades, with the latest constitutional reforms through which States are recognized as multinational or multi-ethnic autonomous regions, as in the case of Bolivia and Nicaragua, we have some exceptions. In the case of Bolivia, a national program has been incorporated to extend health care coverage through an intercultural approach, including services for pregnant women through intercultural health brigades dispersed in rural communities. The design of this national program seeks to articulate gender and intercultural perspectives, and to recognize that rural women play a central role in the processes of prevention and health promotion.

In Nicaragua, the North Atlantic Autonomous Region, which enjoys an ethnic autonomous regime for over two decades, a gender policy that emphasizes the rights of indigenous and rural women has been adopted. They have incorporated gender practices in the public sector planning. Agricultural and rural development and planning tools are being implemented mandatory for all state officials, with the goal to include the gender equity approach and the intercultural and intergenerational approach. It articulates the national program, which allows

Nicaraguan women, mostly single-parent household heads, the ownership of economic resources and to become agents of development. For example, the Zero Hunger program, a social, economic, production program that has provided opportunities for rural women by increasing their access to land, property and other productive resources. The program promotes the right of women to land and land titling to facilitate access to credit by private institutions. In this manner between 2007 and 2009 nearly 50,000 titles had been delivered. The establishment of cooperative processes has been facilitated, by the Fund and the Rural Credit Cooperative Development Institute, imparting workshops of financial support and cooperative law.

In the international arena, rural and indigenous women are mentioned and “prioritized” in strategic programs, politics and international institutions, however, resource allocation as well as projects and programs do not correspond with that priority. There are many arguments that explain the situation: dispersion of rural and indigenous population, lack of infrastructure, poor communication and lack of institutional attention cause programs to become difficult and expensive, unlike what is thought that rural projects are cheaper and easier than the majority of the development projects and programs. On the other hand, the lack of credibility in public, international and private institutions do not allow an immediate return of recognition and prestige expected of investments. And finally, because of the existing delays in rural areas, development investments only make sense for processes in a medium and long term, making it difficult to achieve results in periods of 1 to 3 years, which is the period established by the international community for their investments.

Experience indicates that there is still work to be done in order to change the paradigm of international cooperation and unrealistic preconceptions, including that programs and projects must be executed by efficient external agents, that projects for rural and indigenous women are cheaper, that demands for collective rights set back the processes because they require more time, that these women have no capacity to be the managers of their own processes, that traditional indigenous institutions are out of date and finally, and most importantly, that consider women for their shortcomings, as “beneficiaries” but not as partners with skills, knowledge and unique potential necessary for rural development.

Despite this, important experiences have shown that investment in rural women can have positive impacts for women, communities, countries and international cooperation. Analyses teach us the following characteristics: base on long-term structural processes and not on projects; apply the human rights approach to facilitate the creation of spaces for intergenerational dialogue; apply a holistic integral approach; respect and apply local and traditional knowledge, including language, spiritual and productive practices; build a trusting and a horizontal relationship with the target population; target resources (human, technical and financial) to the areas; and enhance and develop institutional capacities of local, self-governing institutions, including indigenous peoples.

For example, a case in the international arena where you can draw some lessons from is IFAD in its relationship with indigenous peoples over the last decades. IFAD has emphasized⁵ the importance of valuing and leveraging diversity of indigenous peoples, as an asset and potential factor for economic development since they “represent important resources for the development of rural livelihoods”, and also acknowledges that when these resources are not recognized and not taken into account through specific approaches which

⁵ MyDEL, as PRORAAS and Cuetzalan.

respect their values and build upon their strengths, the projects have had limited effectiveness.

Other lessons learnt from IFAD share the proposals made consistently by indigenous peoples such as:

- The use of participatory approaches in the design and execution of programs;
- Strengthening of the rights over natural resources;
- Strengthening of local government institutions;
- The combination of indigenous knowledge with modern technology.

IFAD's policies with indigenous peoples is based on the following principles: a) the recognition and respect of cultural heritage and identity, and therefore the approach of its use as development assets, b) full and effective participation and promotion of the practice of FPIC, c) development activities promoted by the communities, d) the need for legal certainty and the rights to land, territories and resources, based on the view that indigenous peoples have on these elements, e) the need to interrelate environmental issues and assess the impact of climate change on indigenous peoples to address these issues, f) empowerment as a result of human rights approach, g) gender equality, taking into account that the results of any intervention can only be effective when the entire population participates on an equal footing.

The performance of IFAD's policy aims to: a) share the experience acquired in micro-financed projects by the Indigenous Peoples Assistance Facility (IPAF). These projects are the seed to build a learning community, from which lessons can be drawn to contribute to larger operations between IFAD and States. b) Another strategy is the constitution of an Indigenous Peoples' Forum, similar to the Farmer's Forum at IFAD. Similar bodies have been established by FAO to discuss issues such as sovereignty and food security, the creation of operating guidelines on lands, territories, fishing, among others. These fora are suitable for dialogue and should be used to analyze lessons learnt, propose lines of action to governing bodies and thereby improve its intervention in our countries. In both cases, action policies have to work with indigenous peoples, which have specific guidelines on the importance of valuing women's knowledge.

However, the promotion of specific policies for working with indigenous peoples on one hand responds to the progress of the presence of institutionalized mechanisms for indigenous peoples within the United Nations systems. The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at the UN -ESCOSOC's subsidiary body, and space for dialogue between states, United Nations agencies and indigenous peoples- has made recommendations recalling that indigenous women are possessors and transmitters of traditional intergenerational knowledge on biodiversity and sustainable environmental management and conservation, and in this sense have asked international agencies and governments to guarantee the access to resources, including credit, new technologies, and assistance for food and agriculture production, and that women's experience be reflected in national and international sustainable development initiatives, ensuring consultation, FPIC as well as the participation in formulation and decision-making.

The key step is the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, which states in Article 42 the need for all institutions at UN to make appropriate adjustments for its implementation. In this context, the guidelines of the United Nations Development Group on issues of indigenous peoples constitute an important framework.

I conclude by stating that indigenous women within their own organizations have also promoted a series of participatory strategies and proposals in order to improve conditions in rural areas, and for that I shall use a few examples.

In Peru, the Andean and Amazonian Indigenous Women Permanent Workshop (now National Association of Andean and Amazonian Women), coordinated by CHIRAPAQ, has conducted a program with a productive component, aimed at increasing agricultural promotion, the improvement of productivity, diversification of crops and the recovery of indigenous biodiversity in areas with an agro-ecological approach oriented to the use of Andean ancestral knowledge and practices and improvement of the nutritional status, focusing on mother-child, encouraging the adequate intake of Andean food, as well as performing preventive health actions. Such promotion of local food consumption took place by highlighting their nutritional benefits and identifying them as part of the cultural heritage. The populations' knowledge was shared by making activities with the participation of organized women from the Clubs of Mothers and lounges, which strengthened their competitive training process through food contests based on local foods and replicating what they learned in their organizations.

At the same time, organizational strengthening processes have been promoted. Many rural women are organized, for example in Mother's Clubs, productive partnerships, diners. Regarding this, gender equality relationships at a community and family level have also been promoted, aiming at empowering women for them to become active members at an adequate organizational level.

Another example is the Center Wangki Tangni, a community organization developed in Nicaragua that combines food safety work with training in human rights and combating violence faced by indigenous women. One program offers indigenous women sustainable development programs, trains indigenous Miskitu women in organic agriculture and sustainable management of livestock, and provides families with seeds and farm animals. A seed bank is organized, in which women grow, save and share organic seeds from one season to another. The program emphasizes methodologies of sustainable land use, safeguarding indigenous traditional knowledge on natural resource management and reinforces self-sufficiency of women and their participation in public life.

Some lessons learned from community experiences are, among others, the following:

- a. A strategic element at a local level is to have a starting point, knowledge (diagnosis, mapping, research/action, etc) and "recognition" (assessment of the potential of both people and territory). Information, including the context of territories, women and men who inhabit them, their assets, businesses, conditions, identities, knowledge, experience, physical assets, social, political and technological, the identity and history, provides reliable data and serves to define specific public policies, allowing the identification of differences and specificities of rural and indigenous women and, moreover, contributes to the knowledge of their abilities, their knowledge and skills, association and especially their potential on which the State's investments for livelihoods depend.
- b. Develop cognitive processes through partnerships with academic institutions and government, in order to democratize knowledge, build virtuous relationships, strengthen local leadership and create territorial dynamics for sustainable development. Some examples of these processes are: involvement in process mechanisms of women and the Council of Ministers of Women in Central America

(COMMCA), the incorporation of MyDEL as part of the Joint Initiative Thematic Networks and Territorial Cooperation Human Development Initiative (ART), UNDP's decision to allocate a special office for the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, based on the experience of ProRes, and last but not least, the decision of the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (BCIE), from working with MyDEL processes, to create and establish gender equity and to develop specific attention to women entrepreneurs. These dynamic and innovative processes of knowledge development and recognition driven by MyDEL also had its impact at the regional level, with the creation of ECCA.

- c. Define the target group in the framework of human rights, considering that all rural and indigenous women are subjects of rights and as such have the right to enforceability. This develops a horizontal dialogue between State institutions and local indigenous institutions, which find their mission and vocation in the mirror of subjects of rights and which strengthen their position and demands from local authorities to national authorities.
- d. Contrary to structural adjustment policies intended to reduce the welfare state, these processes promote the strengthening of the state as an institution with moral authority and legislative power, responsible and guarantor of human rights. In this process is where a solid foundation being established for building local institutions.
- e. National and public policies derived from governance processes make the connection between local and international levels. The support of international organizations, and especially the United Nations system, boosts and influences political dialogue and economic development at the multi-national, regional and global levels. The national level is the hinge operating between local, regional and international levels.
- f. The relationship, the partnership with academic institutions is a common first noting element: universities and academic institutions whose mission is to develop knowledge, research and training, are suitable allies, to draw a work map based on the promotion and democratization of knowledge.
- g. The participatory approach of all the processes had a direct effect on women's empowerment. They positioned themselves as partners, as strategic contributors, allowing them to directly require state institutions to care for their needs and for the protection of economic rights.