

## CONCEPT NOTE

### SIDE EVENT ON THE OCCASION OF THE 39TH SESSION OF THE COMMITTEE ON WORLD FOOD SECURITY

#### LAUNCH OF THE JOINT PROGRAMME ON

# Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women

HOSTED BY FAO, IFAD, WFP AND UN WOMEN

MONDAY, 15 OCTOBER 2012

13:30-14:30

FAO, VIALE DELLE TERME DI CARACALLA, ROME

Red Room

## BACKGROUND

Women are central to the development of rural areas and to national economies: they account for a significant proportion of the agricultural labour force, play a key role in food production and perform most of the unpaid care work in rural areas. Yet, rural women and girls have restricted access to productive resources, such as land, agricultural inputs, finance and credit, extension services and technology, which in turn limits the efficiency of the agricultural sector. They face more difficulty than men in gaining access to public services, social protection, decent employment opportunities and local and national markets and institutions, due to cultural norms and security issues. They are the most affected by malnutrition and hunger. Unpaid care work further hampers rural women's ability to take advantage of on and off-farm employment and market opportunities in the agricultural sector.

National governments, development partners, the private sector and other stakeholders have made special efforts to support rural women over the past 20 years. Despite great progress in improving rural women's status, the majority still live in difficult conditions worldwide. Indeed rural women score lowest on all the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) compared to women in urban areas and to rural and urban men. Their rights, contributions and priorities have been largely overlooked by mainstream policies and institutions, as their participation in decision-making remains very low. The challenges facing rural women have been further amplified by the combined impact of the economic and financial crises, volatile energy and food prices, climate change, lack of investment in rural development and agriculture, and demographic changes. For instance, today around 900 million people are chronically hungry, and according to WFP estimates 60 percent of them are women and girls.

The recent Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development reiterated 'the importance of empowering rural women as critical agents for enhancing agricultural and rural development, and food security and nutrition'. It reaffirmed the central role of women in ensuring food and nutrition security, and the need to build partnerships for empowering women to be the drivers of the shift to sustainable development. The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication was also the theme for the 56th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 2012. CSW provided a critical opportunity for strengthening policy guidance and making concrete recommendations to numerous stakeholders. In the same vein, the United Nations General Assembly Resolution on 'Improvement of the situation of women in rural areas' adopted in 2011 recognized them as key contributors to poverty reduction, food and nutrition security, and achievement of all the MDGs. It urged the international community to respond to their needs and priorities in development planning and financing. Similar commitments were echoed at the 2010 High-Level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly on the MDGs.

Although various development partners have made strong commitments to invest in agricultural development, rural women have not yet felt the benefits of this. For instance the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports that of the US\$18.4 billion spent on agricultural aid between 2002 and 2008, just 5.6 percent included a focus on gender. In line with the aid effectiveness agenda, there is a need to engage donor coordination mechanisms to leverage support to rural women's rights and livelihoods in aid volumes and in their modalities for aid delivery.

A food secure world and a world in balance require gender equality and women's empowerment. By strengthening women's economic role and opportunities, economic recovery would be faster, deeper, and more sustainable. Effective strategic, policy and programmatic responses are called for to improve rural women's food and nutrition security, build the productivity potential of women smallholder farmers, improve their access to assets, resources and services, and expand their income opportunities and access to high-value product markets. It is also crucial to ensure rural women's participation and leadership in shaping responses to the identified challenges and key policy processes such as the Post-2015 and the Sustainable Development Goals, rather than to consider them as passive recipients of development interventions. Women's leadership and participation are indeed necessary to achieve the transformational change needed for sustainable development.

In this context, UN Women, FAO, IFAD and WFP have agreed to bring a more comprehensive UN system response in support of the economic empowerment of rural women and girls through joint actions. The Joint Programme on "Accelerating Progress toward the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women" will work to generate lasting and wider scale improvements in the livelihoods and rights of rural women and girls, and to show how the UN can work together more effectively and be 'Delivering as One'. The launch of these joint actions, in the format of a 5-year pilot programme, will take place on the occasion of the 39th session of the Committee on World Food Security in October 2012.

## OBJECTIVE

The launch event will provide a high-level forum featuring champions, supporters and others working to empower rural women at local, national and international levels. The discussion will focus on the four outcomes set out for the Joint Programme: improved food and nutrition security; increased income to secure rural women's livelihoods and create wealth; enhanced leadership and participation; and gender-responsive policy environments.

## KEY MESSAGES

- Economic empowerment and political participation of rural women are two mutually supportive foundation stones for more food-secure and gender-equal rural societies, but also for stronger societies for all. Economic empowerment of rural women means more than money, it is a prerequisite for leveraging their leadership and participation in shaping laws, strategies, policies and programmes in all areas, and for realizing their rights in other dimensions, such as freedom from gender-based violence. Indeed it provides rural women with greater social status and can drive the social consensus for their leadership in rural institutions, producer organizations and local governance systems. It is urgent to strengthen rural women's self-confidence and capacity to take on leadership roles at all levels, while working with men to champion and support change through removing gender-discriminatory norms and attitudes.

- It is time to scale up investment in food and nutrition security in rural areas! Women's greater access to productive resources and assets leads to productivity gains, enhanced growth prospects and improved outcomes for the next generation. Despite their key role as food producers, nutrition care providers and income-earning farmers, rural women are predominant among nutritionally vulnerable populations. Malnutrition and food insecurity affect their livelihoods, productivity and economic gains. Investing in the nutrition of rural women has long-lasting positive effects on the survival and healthy development of their children, and enhances their participation in economically productive spheres. It is crucial to enhance rural women's productive potential and their control and management of local food security reserves. Women and men should also be viewed as equal partners in all food and nutrition efforts.

- It is urgent to build systems and institutions that can deliver the range of financial services rural women need, and that can link them to remunerative and sustainable markets. Rural women are talented entrepreneurs, but they often lack access to markets due to inappropriate scales and/or standards of production, as well as context-specific gender roles and norms. It is essential to address the supply side constraints of women smallholder farmers by ensuring their full access to agricultural, financial and business development services. For instance, ensuring access to credit schemes with no collateral and low interest rates, setting up guarantee funds as well as savings and other financial services and strengthening the capacities of women-led associations to develop and manage savings and loan associations are all required to enhance rural women's entrepreneurship.

- Sporadic interventions are not enough to promote inclusive growth in agriculture! The broader policy environment must be responsive to rural women and girls' needs and priorities. Agriculture is an important engine for accelerated economic growth and sustainable development. However, persistent gender inequalities have hindered the performance of the sector, leading to lost agricultural outputs and poor economic performance, especially in developing countries. To make economic growth inclusive and meaningful for hunger eradication and sustainable development, there is a need to catalyze policy, legal, budgetary and land reforms in support of rural women.

## TARGET AUDIENCE

The launch event will gather high-level officials from Member States, the UN System and the private sector, together with rural women's leaders, representatives of civil society organizations, and members of the media and academia.