

UNITED NATIONS
INTER-AGENCY NETWORK ON WOMEN AND GENDER EQUALITY

Fact Sheet prepared for WSIS, Geneva 2003 and Tunis 2005

FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS



GENDER AND ICTS

INTRODUCTION

Greater access to information can help rural communities to avert marginalization and facilitate their ability to make informed choices to improve their livelihood and welfare options. The information and communication technology (ICT) revolution has greatly increased the possibilities for disseminating and sharing knowledge. ICTs have the potential to alleviate the spatial and social isolation of rural communities and reduce information barriers for rural women. Rural women and girls usually have less access than men to information and to new technologies. They are therefore at a disadvantage in making informed choices about what and how to produce and when and where to sell their products. Lack of information also limits their influence within their communities and their ability to participate in decision-making. The integration of ICTs into rural development policies and programmes can improve rural women's access to information, educational opportunities and channels for more effective networking. Appropriate knowledge and timely information for rural communities, men and women, are essential to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of reducing hunger and poverty by half by 2015.

1. FAO'S STRATEGIC RESPONSES

The World Food Summit Plan of Action (1996) reflects a commitment of FAO's Members to full and equal participation of both men and women in development as essential for achieving food security. FAO's Strategy for Action, "Gender and food security – the role of information" (1999) addresses the issue of rural women and information. In its Gender and Development Plan of Action (2002-2007), which integrates and builds on the aforementioned Strategy, FAO has recognized that globalization and new information technologies are transforming the way that production is organized and information shared around the world. FAO considers it crucial that rural women should have a voice in how these new technologies are developed and used, because, used inappropriately, they could very well exacerbate existing inequalities. These emerging technologies can also create new opportunities for linking rural women with markets, learning institutions, agriculture and health service systems and financial and government centers. They may also improve the options for

networking among rural NGOs working with women and improve their linkages with urban institutions. It aims to:

- improve the quality and quantity of the available data and statistics on rural women;
- expand rural women's access to the information they need for economic and social advancement;
- Harness the potential of ICTs for the accelerated empowerment of rural women, and to avert their marginalization in an increasingly knowledge-based society.

Major achievements:

- **Knowledge-sharing and advocacy**
Underpinning all FAO's work is the recognition of the important contribution of both women and men to the world's agriculture and food production. FAO has also created and promoted a dialogue about the role of ICTs in relation to rural women through its publications, methodologies, field studies, workshops and consultations.
- **Bridging the rural digital divide**
FAO, governments and other international agencies are implementing a strategic programme entitled Bridging the Rural Digital Divide (BRDD). The programme highlights innovative approaches to knowledge exchange that take advantage of new digital technologies, and that are based on synergies between information management and communication for development. The BRDD Programme addresses the first Millennium Development Goal of reducing extreme hunger and poverty by half by 2015, and the Plan of Action of the World Summit on the Information Society, which undertakes to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society. The BRDD Programme is also addressing the "promotion of gender equality and women empowerment" by mainstreaming gender.
- **Information management**
The World Agricultural Information Centre (WAICENT) is the Organization's corporate framework for integrating and harmonizing

standards, tools and procedures for the efficient and effective management and dissemination of high-quality information products (www.fao.org/waicent). More information about FAO's Gender & ICT-related activities can be found at: www.fao.org/sd.

- **Capacity building**

FAO utilizes its comparative advantage in communication for development methodologies such as the Participatory Rural Communication Appraisal (PRCA) and strategy designs as well as Rural Radio to organize training that makes the best possible use of the convergence of new and old technologies. FAO has also initiated a partnership-based e-learning programme known as the Information Management Resource Kit (IMARK). This is a partnership-based e-learning initiative to train individuals and support institutions and networks world-wide in the effective management of agricultural information. IMARK consists of a suite of distance learning resources, tools and communities on information management (www.fao.org/imark).

- **Distance learning**

The Organization has promoted the use of ICT for training purposes. In 2001, FAO's Gender and Population Division conducted the first distance-learning programme on socio-economic and gender analysis (SEAGA) in rural development, via the Internet, in coordination with the REDCAPA (Red de Instituciones de Capacitación Agrícola) in Latin America and the Caribbean. Through the FAO project FODEPAL (Proyecto Regional de Cooperación Técnica para la Formación en Economía y Políticas Agrarias y de Desarrollo rural en América Latina) another regional programme took place early 2005. In December 2002, a regional expert consultation on strategies for harnessing ICTs for distance learning in rural areas was organized by FAO's regional office for Asia and the Pacific in India. In 2005, in collaboration with Commonwealth of Learning – CEMCA - a CD Rom on "Gender and Women in agriculture and rural development in Asia" was released for online distance learning programmes and trainings.

- **Networking**

The Dimitra project is an information and communication project aimed at empowering rural populations by reinforcing their networking and advocacy skills and facilitating access to information, through ICTs and traditional communication channels. The project is operational in Africa and the Near East. It is a tool to enable rural women, through their associations and grassroots organizations, to make their voices heard. To date, the project has some 1500 organizations working with and for rural women registered in its database (www.fao.org/sd/dimitra), as well as some 3000 projects and a list almost 1000 publications. Dimitra publications and CD-ROMs are distributed in English and French worldwide to 6000 recipients. Dimitra is also building strong links with rural community radios, which can play

a fundamental role in supporting local development and women's empowerment. The project utilizes Dgroups and distributes IMARK modules to its partners to reinforce their capacity in information management.

2. WSIS AND GENDER: FAO'S ROLE

- FAO participates in the Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANWGE) Task Force on Gender and ICTs.
- FAO's position paper on WSIS (posted on the WSIS website) stresses the need to address both the rural digital divide and gender gaps in access to ICTs, and the need to develop gender-sensitive information and communication policies that recognize the special needs and circumstances of rural communities both in terms of the content of information and access to information and communication technologies.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- The specific concerns of rural women should be clearly integrated in all themes to be addressed at the World Summit on Information Society to be held in 2005.
- An **enabling environment** for gender-sensitive information and technology policy should be created and funds should be mobilized for addressing **cross-cutting issues of gender, information and communication, with a special focus on rural communities**. The actions should focus specifically on policy formulation support; research, case studies, publications, training manuals and guidelines, workshops and networking; support of offline communities utilizing rural radio, listening groups and traditional media.
- Concrete measures should be taken to establish **infrastructure and appropriate applications, and assist in capacity building**, to enable the technologies to be used for sharing information relevant to rural communities.
- Support should be provided to the development of **content** and user-friendly approaches that explicitly address the information and technology needs of rural women and their relative disadvantages of illiteracy, lack of self-confidence and unfamiliarity with sophisticated technologies.
- E-extension should be promoted in terms of ICTs application and content of programmes so as to expand technology access to rural women.

Rome, September 2005

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