

DEVELOPMENT TOPIC A: WATER FOR FOOD SESSION 3

The role of women in building resilient agricultural systems

Ladies and gentlemen,

Sri Lanka oscillates between floods and droughts with extreme weather taking a high toll on communities. Moreover high use of chemical pesticides and weedicides in agriculture lead to the loss of soil fertility. A member of Women for Water Partnership in Sri Lanka, called NetWwater, designed a programme to build the resilience of women facing these circumstances and received support of a private company. Across Sri Lanka women community leaders were trained in climate change adaptation, disaster risk resilience, enhanced food security through eco-friendly agriculture and non-toxic gardening and the use of modern and appropriate water conservation and agriculture technologies. It resulted in a year round supply of food from home gardens through eco-friendly organic agriculture based on best crop selection and user friendly techniques such as buried pots and drip lines as irrigation methods. The key success factor of the programme was that the programme built on existing skills and strengths of women leaders, it supported both livelihood development and economic empowerment and strategies were adapted to the multitude of stakeholders involved. A holistic approach.....And most importantly women became game changers in adaptation to climate change in their communities.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is only one of the many stories, I can tell about the role of women in building resilient agricultural systems... the subject I have the privilege to talk about. It is the vision of Women for Water partnership to strive for a water secure world for all and we, the 27 member organisations of Women for Water Partnership, experience that once women have access to water, they will enlarge their activities in food production not only for their family, also for the market.

Why is it important to talk about the role of women in building resilient systems?

Agriculture is the single largest employment source globally and represents 80 percent of the world's working poor. In sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia 60-70 percent of women work in agriculture. The vast majority of this work is informal, seasonal, and difficult, dangerous and de-valued. Women are crucial in translating agricultural production - including livestock, crops, fisheries, agro-

forestry, and wild-harvesting of foods - into food and nutrition security for their families, their communities, and their nations. They cultivate food crops, produce commercial crops alongside men, manage livestock, grow vegetables in home gardens, fish, and harvest from the forest. Women also use their local knowledge for wild-harvesting of nutritious foods and herbs to provide food and nutrition security for their families. In short, many women are involved in agricultural practices, although to be honest, we do not hear a lot about their contributions. The work they are doing is often invisible. That has to change!

What about the impact of climate change? In general climate change could potentially reduce agricultural production between 2-15 percent and decrease the nutritional value of crops as CO₂ emissions reduce the nutrient content of soil. It is well documented that climate change impacts women differently and more deeply than men; it is recognized that women are exposed to increased risks because of their primary role in care work and agricultural production. Furthermore, rural women and girls, particularly in developing countries, are the most water insecure. They are disproportionately responsible for water fetching for domestic uses and for irrigation, but they often lack access to affordable and appropriate water infrastructure or water of good healthy quality. Climate change increases the burden of water and food collection, particularly for rural women. Rural women are also likely to suffer higher disaster-related mortality and carry the burden of the long-term impacts of loss of land, livelihood and security as a result of climate change. That has to change!

Climate change can exacerbate existing gender inequalities in rural communities. For example, in Bangladesh, a persistent link was identified between the loss of productive agricultural land due to climate change and early, child or forced marriage. The demands for dowry payments increased and child marriage and dowry are forming local, however bad, adaptation strategies.

Next to the effects of climate change, you all know that in general women have less access and control over land, natural and productive resources, services and inadequate or inaccessible infrastructure. Another phenomenon is land grabbing threatening this unequal situation even more, since investors buy land that was before often used for farm and non-farm subsistence purposes including the collection of firewood, water, food, traditional medicine and remedies. The limitations women face in turn impose huge social, economic,

and environmental costs on society as a whole and rural development in particular including lags in agricultural productivity and in coping mechanism to face climate change. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization has calculated that if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase the yields on their farms by twenty to thirty per cent. That could raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 to four per cent per annum, and reduce the number of hungry people in the world by twelve to seventeen per cent.

Around the world, resilient and resourceful rural women contribute in a multitude of ways through different livelihood strategies to lifting their families and communities out of poverty and face the challenges of climate change. It is never a single action to change the situation and it is never only about technical solutions. A more holistic approach is needed in order to face the uncertainties of droughts, floods and storms and its impact on security of food and water. As we have also seen in the example of NetWwater in Sri Lanka, economic empowerment coupled with training are important means for guaranteeing families' secure livelihoods and overall well-being. Women's economic empowerment is interconnected with their social and political empowerment, through their increased respect, status, and self-confidence and increased decision-making power in households, communities, and institutions.

The importance of a number of combined measures and a focus on empowering women is also shown in the following example from Senegal. As you know, rural Senegal is experiencing drought, deforestation and desertification as a result of climate change. A programme was set up in rural communities where women were trained and empowered. In the end they created their own cooperatives for income generation. Wells were rehabilitated and solar-powered pumps made sure year round access to clean water. Trees were planted to serve as windbreaks and stabilize soils to slow down desertification. Moreover improved cook stoves were introduced to reduce deforestation. Sustainable agricultural practices were introduced as well. With all these different measures taken, women and their families have access to clean water, fresh food and income generating opportunities. With access to water, women established agricultural cooperatives to grow healthy vegetables throughout the year.

A very nice and small initiative is an experimental training programme in South Africa to empower young rural women to imagine a career in sustainable food

systems. It is aimed at inclusion of young women in higher training for agriculture and sustainable food value chains in South Africa and remove the negative image of agriculture among the youth. It takes a holistic approach by providing training in finance, sexual and menstrual health as well as knowledge of local food, key environmental – climate challenges, organic food production, and commercialisation etcetera.

A last example is from Northern India where women practice seed conservation and are agro-ecology experts to help their communities resist climate change. The State Uttarakhand intends to become a 100% organic State. The project relies on women's knowledge about seeds and they learn agro-ecological techniques as well as food transformation techniques. Agro-ecology reinforced soil fertility and moisture since organic matter contents increased by 25% between 2011 and 2015; seeds conservation and reproduction ensured biodiversity rehabilitation and food sovereignty: yields have improved by 20%; dependence on the purchase of seeds lowered by 50% and the quality and quantity of food supply are increasing.

As owners of knowledge, being conservation actors and distributors of seeds, as well as being trainers in agro-ecology and having access to micro-savings, women have gained a local political role and their living conditions and financial autonomy are improved.

All these examples show that women are playing and can play an important role in facilitating a transition towards more equitable and resilient agricultural practices. Also because they hold traditional and local knowledge of a diverse range of seed varieties and livestock breeds, natural enemies of pests, fodder and grazing land, forest produce, and wildlife, as well as knowledge about past climate variability which is indispensable for maintaining resilience to temperature increases and more extreme climatic events. However, this knowledge is often not acknowledged or recognized by initiators of programmes to address these type of situations. If there is attention for women, women are often seen as victims or beneficiaries of programmes and not as beings with vast experiences and important knowledge to transition to a more resilient and sustainable practice, also not as leaders or agents of change. That needs to change!

On the other hand, as mentioned in the beginning of my speech, to be a leader or agent of change is constrained by unequal access to productive resources, services or inadequate and inaccessible infrastructure. As FAO has

pointed out, women are less likely than men to own land and livestock, adopt new technologies, access credit and other financial services, particularly formal services, or access education and extension services. That needs to change as well!

As also the World Economic Forum stated in its global risk report of 2017, environmental risks are growing in prominence both in terms of likelihood and impact over a 10-year horizon. In 2017 we were faced with several hurricanes, extreme temperatures and heavy rains. Agricultural systems are stressed, not only because of climate change, also because of the growth of the population; water systems are not evenly distributed and equally accessible. To redress this situation, it is of utmost importance to include the experiences and knowledge of women in every initiative to counteract these trends.... And remove the barriers, cultural and discriminatory practices and make sure that women join or take the lead in endeavours aimed at reaching a food and water secure world for all.

Thank you for your attention.

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