“Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls”

Despite playing a key role in rural economies and communities, rural women and girls continue to face structural barriers to the detriment of their human rights and full potential. Such barriers represent strong impediments to rural and agricultural development. As stated by Dr. Kundhavi Kadiresan, FAORAP ADG, during her opening statement of the ‘Asia-Pacific Regional High-Level Meeting for the 62nd session of the Commission of the Status of Women (CSW62)’, “Evidence shows that if rural women had access to, and control over the same resources as men, their contributions would increase food production by as much as four percent”.

Reflecting on the priority theme of CSW62: “Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls” and the 2030 Agenda’s principle to “leave no one behind”, the Asia-Pacific Regional High-level meeting for CSW62 was convened by UNESCAP, UN Women and FAO, in collaboration with WFP and other members of the UN Regional Coordination Mechanism’s Thematic Working Group on Gender Equality and Empowerment of rural women and girls.
Women (TWG-GEEW), on 23 February 2018, in Bangkok.

High-level government representatives, including ministers, from national women’s machineries and ministries responsible for the advancement of gender equality, agriculture, and rural development attended the meeting together with multilaterals, farmers’ and indigenous peoples CSOs and UN Agencies representatives to identify good practices and develop policy recommendations to tackle the inequalities and enhance opportunities to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls in Asia and the Pacific.

Throughout the meeting, participants exchanged and shared their experience on best practices and lessons learned towards advancing gender equality and rural women and girls’ empowerment in the Asia-Pacific region. Such sharing was facilitated by means of a high-level roundtable and multi-stakeholder dialogue interspersed with country interventions. A particular focus was put on means of implementation to address the challenges faced by rural women and girls, including information and communication technologies and innovative financing models to support the empowerment of rural women and girls.

Towards the end of the meeting, participants agreed on a set of recommendations to close the gender gap between rural women and men in the Asia-Pacific region (see box). The recommendations reflect the urgent need to take collective actions and measures towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals while at the same time promoting partnerships in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls. This set of recommendations fed into the preparations for the CSW62 deliberations in New York, 12-23 March 2018.

The full report on the Asia-Pacific Regional High-Level Meeting for the 62nd session of the Commission on the Status of Women is available here.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The 47 recommendations agreed upon by government representatives during the “Asia-Pacific High-Level Meeting for CSW62 reflect on the following six areas of action:

A. Strengthen normative and legal frameworks, and ensure coordinated action for the empowerment of rural women and girls
B. Implement policies for the social and economic empowerment of rural women and girls
C. Undertake measures and approaches that enhance rural women and girls’ meaningful participation in society and access to justice
D. Establish innovative financing models to support the advancement of rural women and girls’ human rights in all sectoral areas
E. Enhance access to and use of ICT and other technologies by rural women and girls
F. Improve availability of data and generation of gender statistics to enhance evidence based policy making for rural women and girls

FOR INFORMATION

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Greater economic empowerment and improvement of livelihood for women are being achieved thanks to the Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) which is encouraging many smallholder farmers in parts of Cambodia and Lao PDR to shift from chemicals-based to organic farming.

According to the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), PGS is a low-cost, locally based system of quality assurance with a strong emphasis on social control and knowledge building based on active participation of stakeholders.

FAO has been working together with the Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries of Cambodia and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Lao PDR on projects to implement PGS since 2015. PGS aims to provide an alternative guarantee system for consumers seeking organic produce, while promoting the development of sustainable local food systems and improving the livelihoods of smallholder farmers.

**PGS in Lao PDR: Ms Bouchan’s organic vegetable farming**

“PGS really helped us to communicate to consumers about organic and to build their trust in our practices. Before joining the PGS, selling my vegetables was very difficult. Firstly, consumers did not know me, what was I doing and I had no way to offer them a guarantee on how I grew crops. As a member of the PGS, we have become more accepted and people trust that we follow the Lao Organic Standard. Now I can sell my products very easily”, Ms Bouchan said proudly during an interview with a FAO officer.

Ms Bouchan is a PGS certified farmer living in Xieng Khouang, one of the leading provinces for organic agriculture in Lao PDR. Ms Bouchan and her family used to live in poor conditions when her income from weaving and her husband’s government official salary were not enough to afford the education of five children. After being introduced to organic farming through the

Sustainable Agriculture and Environment Development Association (SAEDA) training programme and encouraged to join PGS by the Laotian government, Ms Bouchan can speak about the change as “finally we are able to eat what we want every day. Not only do we have money to buy meat or fish, we also have plenty of our own vegetables.”

Although an organic farmer, she had no way to prove it to the consumers. The PGS certificate fulfilled such needs for her at a low cost.

Being a PGS-certified farmer, authorized her to access organic markets and soon gain the consumer’s trust to sell her products directly from home.

Ms Bouchan finds PGS very useful to learn from other farmers and improve practices on quality assurance that can benefit female farmers who may experience limited access to formal training programs. Seventy farmers in Xieng Khouang are now PGS certified and most of them are women. PGS is bringing
women economic empowerment through agriculture.

PGS in Cambodia: Ms Bun Sieng, a PGS-organic small entrepreneur

Ms Bun Sieng is an agronomist who has worked in the rural communities of Cambodia for years. Based on her experience and observation, she recognized that one of the main reasons why the Cambodian farmers are stuck in the poverty cycle is their lack of access to markets.

To link farmers to markets and provide good quality locally produced vegetables to as many people as possible Ms Sieng started a business. It was not fully successful from the beginning. She started off selling chemical-free vegetables supplied from local farmer’s market. Struggling from finding the right location to sell, to lack of consistent supply, and small diversity of products, it took time for her to completely manage the business.

The opportunity arrived 2 years later, when the Royal University of Agriculture in Cambodia started a project to support domestic vegetable production and offered training on compost making and supported farmers in purchasing net-houses.

“Net-houses protect the crops from insects and other pests. They reduce loss and make it easier to plan and ensure consistent supply. This was the opportunity I had been waiting for.” Ms Sieng described the moment.

Ms Sieng was able to partner up with farmers of the net-house farmers’ initiative in Kandal province. Assuring her supply source, she agreed to buy all of the farmer’s surplus production with a fair fixed price regardless of market price instability.

Her products transitioned from “chemical-free” to complete organic agriculture as she persuaded the farmers to join in adopting the PGS. Eventually Ms Sieng created jobs in the urban area through PGS. A total of 16 full time and some more part time staffs are working with her while 48 of 87 farmers are organic PGS-certified.

Looking forward to extend her small initiative, Ms Sieng said, “Consumers are becoming more aware of the benefits of organic food. More and more are willing to pay the slightly higher price, safe in the knowledge that they are getting better and more nutritious produce. When I think about the future, I also think about how we can work with whole villages to become organic giving more people access to sustainably produced fruit and vegetables.”

PGS supports women’s economic empowerment

Becoming part of a PGS opens up opportunities for smallholder farmers who cannot afford the services of third party certifiers to label and sell their produce as guaranteed organic at local markets. This opportunity extends to women as well. Its low cost of participation and form of voluntary time involvement makes it more accessible to small operators as women. Thus, training and farmer interaction in PGS improves empowerment.

The complete publication on PGS field stories in Cambodia and Lao PDR can be found [here](#).

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NEW PUBLICATION

We are excited to announce the finalization of the Country Gender Assessments (CGA) report for Lao PDR. Congratulations to the FAO Laos team!

FAO RAP has been supporting CGAs in agriculture and the rural sector in Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines, Lao PDR, and Viet Nam. CGAs are also ongoing in several Pacific Island Countries namely Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu and Solomon Island. Designed as part of the regional proposal for Promoting gender equality through knowledge generation and awareness raising, the CGAs will contribute to accelerate effective implementation of the Regional Gender Strategy and Action Plan for Asia and the Pacific 2017-2019.

The CGA report for Lao PDR will be circulated to all as soon as available.
Climate Change Adaptation project in Nepal promotes women leadership and empowerment

Katari, Udaypur: The Global Environment Facility (GEF) under the Least Developed Countries Funding (LDCF) window has been supporting Nepal on reducing vulnerability and increasing adaptive capacity of small scale farmers to the impacts of climate change and variability. The projects known as Climate Change Adaptation in Agriculture (CCA), within the Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Reduction Management Priority framework 2011-2020, initiated in September 2015 and is expected to reach completion by August 2019.

Nepal is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change impacts. Climate related hazards like floods, drought, hailstorms, heat and cold waves; pest diseases, soil erosion, deforestation, and desertification are recurring and posing severe threats to Nepal’s agriculture sector. Increasing frequency of natural hazards and extreme climate events undermines future food security threatening the low income population and marginalized rural people the most. Although the Government of Nepal has been constantly responding to climate risk, a renewed focus on reducing vulnerability and increasing adaptive capacity is crucial to save agricultural livelihoods from climate change impacts.

Katari Municipality is one of the entities under the district of Udaypur project area in eastern Nepal.

Shobha Magar, 37, is a female farmer living in Gabuwa Village of Katari Municipality, with her husband, three daughters and her mother-in-law. Shoba had to manage all household chores by herself after she dropped out of school for marriage. She was also in charge of farming in a small patch of land that had been under the pressure of degradation for the last five decades, yielding food grains which were merely enough for 6 months.

Shobha’s life changed after her village was brought under the CCA project. She was selected for a 13-day facilitator training which led her to work with one of the 30 farmers’ group in Udaypur district, affiliated to the Farmers’ Field School.

The training taught her the varietal qualities of wheat, maize and rice including new vegetable farming technologies like riverbed farming. It was not easy to apply new methodologies from the beginning because the village farmers would not trust new techniques.

"Now, the same villagers are happy to see the success of riverbed farming where they have grown cucumber, pumpkins, bitter gourd etc." says Shobha, "Even my mother-in-law, who was initially reluctant about vegetable farming has been encouraging the village women for vegetable farming."

The project also gave the villagers training on how to raise pigs. Shobha was given a female pig that delivered 13 piglets after 5 months of care. She sold the male piglets at NPR 3 000 and female ones at the rate of NPR 2 500.

Expressing happiness over her mother-in-law’s altering attitude, Shobha said, “Previously, my movements were restricted by her. Now, after noticing the quality of leadership that I gained through the farmers’ field school, she encourages me to teach other women what I have learnt.”

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Thai woman receives ‘Asia-Pacific Model Farmers’ awards

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) supports livelihood and food security of rural female farmers while supporting biodiversity and the promotion of traditional culture.

Boonpheng Nasomyon is among the five farmers who received the “Asia-Pacific Model Farmers” award from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations during the last year’s World Food Day.

A native of Udon Thani province in the arid northeastern Thailand, she received an award for her never-say-die spirit and the bold initiatives which have created sustainable jobs and self-sufficiency and helped farmers in her region.

Her life reflects the plight of migrant workers who leave their hometown to seek jobs in big cities. High cost of living, economic hardship and social problems often overwhelm migrants including Ms. Nasomyon. She could barely make ends meet during her days in Bangkok. All her income was eaten up by daily expenses, transportation and house rental fees. Like most other mothers working away from home, she was also duty-bound to send money back to her family back home. Then her marriage failed. Ms Boonpheng was divorced and penniless. She felt defeated and returned home to Udon Thani province to start rice farming 10 years later.

Born into a farming family, Ms Boonpheng is well aware that insufficient savings and technical know-how, as well as single cropping practices, will never help improve agricultural-based households income and living conditions.

Ms Boonpheng was determined to demonstrate that farmers could save the money they earn from selling rice and earn additional income from other local agricultural products.

With her never-say-die spirit and strong will to improve the lives of other local women, she pushed ahead with her project requesting technical support on occupational training and livelihood development from district and provincial agricultural offices.

Udon Thani Rajabhat University’s faculty of business management liked her ideas, and students came to her village to research and map product development feasibility.

Eventually a total of 14 occupational groups were formed, producing different products based on local wisdom and innovation. These range from snacks and herbal medicines, to agro-tourism, backyard poultry farming, textiles and financial cooperatives, based on the interests of individual members. Ms Boonpheng is now a leader.

Ms Boonpheng accepts that her life has slowly but sustainably changed for the better. Her determination and outreach to others, her endurance, sincerity and respect have helped improve the livelihood prospects of women in her community and others nationwide.