



# Ten years of the Dimitra network

2008 marks the tenth anniversary of the Dimitra network's inception as an FAO project under the auspices of the Gender, Equity and Rural Employment Division. This year's workshop provides an excellent opportunity to stop and take a look at the progress that has been made so far. We should first of all mention the cooperation and commitment of all of our partners in realising common projects and objectives. At our most recent meeting in Brussels, one word came up again and again when defining the Dimitra network: a network dominated by a warm and open state of mind, the Dimitra spirit. Commitment, the ability to persuade people and the pleasure of working, sharing and learning together are the cornerstone of cooperation within the network. The joint participatory approach extends to the choice of topics to develop and to the trust, friendship and loyalty of all members. So here's to ten years of shared experiences...

## No development without information and the ability to communicate

In 1998, the following was clear: there was a huge shortage of information on and for rural populations, particularly those in Africa. There was very little information available on the work of NGOs dealing with the issue of *rural women and development*. From its launch in 1994 and the publication of a first directory with information from European development NGOs working in the area, Dimitra became an FAO project with the mission of raising awareness of gender issues and gathering and disseminating information on the vital role rural women play in development. These themes are still at the heart of the network's activities and interests.

With a view to performing its mission, Dimitra set up strategies and tools enabling it to listen to the populations concerned. Links with NGOs, workshops and study sessions and Dimitra's publications are the foundation of the network's activities. Its partners in the field get valuable feedback on their initiatives and achievements, among others thanks to the Dimitra newsletter – a publication to which they are the main contributors.

The newsletter, the workshop brochures, the on-line database that has just been published on CD-ROM for the third time and the revised website are tools that are available to everyone. These information and communication tools are also a vital way to raise the profile of rural women at all levels of intervention.

## Dimitra, a network based on partnership and participation

Dimitra is not only concerned with informing rural populations, but also with ensuring that they can participate in the projects aiming to support them. This wish for involvement reflects the participative character of the network which aims to give rural women a voice.

In the beginning, information collected from rural populations emphasised the involvement of women in health projects and the creation of income-generating activities. But it quickly became obvious that

rural women, once they had more information, were prepared to perform activities for promoting literacy, organising and structuring their groups, developing networks, creating synergies and increasing knowledge of their rights.

The advent of the Internet has certainly made a major contribution to Dimitra's development, but its expansion is primarily due to networking, sharing and the involvement of its partners. The first factor that springs to mind is local actors who work in grassroots organisations at local level and who have a direct line to the rural populations. Partnerships are mainly with intermediary-level organisations, which are a vital link to the grassroots level when it comes to collecting and disseminating information. These partnerships make it possible to develop an approach based on participatory communication.

### Strengthening the network and creating synergies

The Dimitra network is becoming larger and stronger, relationships are being formed and synergies are being created. A clear example of this is the Round Table organised in Mbour, Senegal, in June 2008 (for more information, consult [www.fao.org/dimitra](http://www.fao.org/dimitra)). In this case, Dimitra's partner organisations ENDA-Pronat from Senegal and RECIF/ONG-BF in Burkina Faso, joined the Dimitra team and cooperated with the



International Development Research Centre (IDRC, Canada) on the topic of women's access to land in Africa. This cooperation is set to continue in the form of an action-oriented research project led by these partners.

It is also necessary to mention the renewed confidence of the bilateral and multilateral organisations in some countries. These organisations continue to support the fulfilment of the network's objectives and work more frequently with Dimitra to set up new projects. One example of this would be GTZ-Health's activities in the DRC, where it is working with SAMWAKI, one of Dimitra's partners, to create radio listeners' clubs on HIV/AIDS and the fight against sexual violence in South Kivu in a project financed by the King Baudouin Foundation. Other examples include the urban and peri-urban horticulture (HUP) projects being carried out by FAO in Burundi and the DRC and the literacy projects in Niger, which are being executed by ONG-VIE with the support of the Swiss, Canadian and Belgian development cooperation agencies.

Here is another example: within the framework of FAO's new programme, 'Knowledge management and gender', which is being financed by Belgium, Dimitra will be involved in cross-sectoral support as regards gender issues and dissemination of information in the Sahel on topics such as input stalls, rural credit, literacy, etc.

Synergies have also been boosted within FAO – there is now increased cooperation with various technical departments, as shown by the presence of colleagues from other divisions at this year's workshop.

## Many challenges ahead

Over the past ten years or so, there has been considerable progress when it comes to taking account of gender in development actions. This has had a real impact on the appreciation and promotion of women's roles. However, there is still a lot of work to be done and many challenges lie ahead. The 2008 workshop allowed us to discuss the fight against gender inequality in land access in Africa, and the discussions showed that this issue is linked to a wide range of problems: access to information, education, securing land, food security... – all factors that contribute to engendering poverty.

Poverty is neither trivial nor inevitable. It is a challenge that involves everyone, men and women at all levels, from households right up to decision-makers, for the survival of communities and countries. As far as its means permit and in the framework of the collaboration with its African network, Dimitra wants to take up this challenge by highlighting the fundamental role of agriculture and of its producers, the large majority of whom are women.

