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Mabika Dakeini Phuna

FAO-RDC

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO (DRC)

Mabika Dakeini Phuna, communicator for development, is communication officer at FAO in the DRC. He has worked at the National Congolese Radio & Television (RTNC) from 1976 to 2000 as producer, and as a trainer at the Congolese Institute for Audiovisuals. FAO, concerned with the setting up of local radios in order to bring farmers closer and to respond to their needs and questions with regard to food security, supports the emergence of local community radios in the DRC. Phuna is specialised in the development, establishment and organisation of empowerment strategies for community radios.

“Communication ultimately means listening to others, in order to work together for progress”.



Information and communication strategies to fight gender inequalities in access to land in Africa – the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo

In Africa, and in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in particular, women have an important position, even if this is not always recognised in the rights that they are granted. Gender issues are an important concern of the ruling power. The creation of a ministry for gender, the family and children within the DRC's national and provincial governments is proof of this.

From a social point of view, women have a crucial role, especially given the current situation. In many urban households, it is women who ensure their families' survival via small-scale commercial activities, as their husbands do not have paid employment or their wages are irregular or inadequate.

In the rural areas of the DRC, the situation of women is rather precarious. The poverty they suffer is not only financial – it is also due to undernourishment, a shortage of primary healthcare, illiteracy and a lack of access to land.

Access to land should not only be viewed as a temporary means of relief; it is also a guarantee of security in the long term. In rural environments, land ownership indicates how rich or poor a farmer is. A farmer who does not own land must work for others and usually earns a very low wage, which leads to poverty.

It is beyond doubt that women are at a disadvantage as regards land access. Although 70 to 85% of the agricultural workforce is female, as are 75% of workers in agricultural production, women only have indirect access to land. This type of access is connected to their families – they can access land through their fathers, brothers, sons, uncles, nephews or husbands, any of whom may be landowners. This is a cultural phenomenon, since in Bantu culture (and 80% of the population in the DRC is Bantu) women are viewed as being inferior to men. As it is generally men who hold power, women end up in a position of dependence.

Given that Bantu culture is primarily based on agriculture, land is the most important production factor in rural

areas. Access to land is therefore a key element in the fight to reduce poverty. Anyone who owns a plot of land can develop it, work it and sell the agricultural products it bears. On the other hand, farmers who do not own land are forced to work for others. This way, women are often in a situation of dependence.

It can, therefore, be said that there is a direct connection between poverty and securing the right to benefit from the land. Secure access to land is the sine qua non of investments in any given space. Land access often favours the most affluent and excludes poor farmers. Women cannot control or access land, so they do not make long-term investments in their land or become involved in promising projects. It goes without saying that this situation has a considerable impact on the food security of individual households and the country as a whole.

It is widely acknowledged that women are responsible for the food chain from the production stage right up to the meals on our tables. This is why we say that “women feed the world”.

Consequences on people's lives

In Bantu society, land used to be the property of the community. It was collective property that belonged to a clan, a tribe, a bloodline or a kingdom. It was very rarely the property of an individual.

Now, however, land is a commodity that must be negotiated for. With the complicity of some greedy civil servants and chiefs, wealthy people are able to buy up huge areas of land by expropriating poor farmers, who are powerless to stop them. The worst thing about this situation is that the rich buyers do not exploit or develop their land. They only want it to prove their position in society. The result of this is that vast expanses of land have been given over to nature, while farmers need the land to survive.

In the DRC, land that is not allocated by the state within





the framework of industrial, forestry or agricultural leases and is not on a nature reserve, is governed according customary rules. The law on land ownership asserts that it has unified all land rights systems in the DRC. It stipulates that all land, whether above or below ground, is the exclusive, undeniable and inalienable property of the state. It appears that the main conflict has arisen from the co-existence of customary rules and official law. This conflict is also manifest in the lack of a rural code, the marginalisation of vulnerable people (such as women and young people) and the absence of a map indicating land use. As a result, good land is becoming a rare commodity.

We could say that two diametrically opposed ways of thinking are applied. On the one hand, from a legal point of view, the land ownership system is based on the law governing land ownership. On the other hand, from a practical point of view, land is subject to customary law. This means it is up to the chief to allocate land to farmers for a certain price. This is the case in Kasai, Maniema, Katanga as well as other provinces.

It is clear that this contradiction between law and practice makes it even more difficult for farmers to have access to land. Women in particular do not have the necessary assets to invest in the agricultural sector in rural areas. The two levels of authority make accessing land even more complex, since the process must be started with traditional authorities and concluded with administrative formalities.

The concept of gender or gender equality

Rather than the traditional division of tasks, which set out who did what tasks based on sex alone, it is now important to work in terms of complementarity and gender equality, using competence as the sole criterion and leaving behind any prejudices, complexes and taboos.

The standards applied in traditional societies dictate that women should be viewed as completely separate, along with all the discriminations, taboos and restrictions that this entails. Unmarried women live under the supervision of their parents or the chief of their clan until they marry, depending on whether it concerns a patrilineal or matrilineal system. Women therefore never own property as individuals. Married women merely work their husbands' land without laying claim to any property whatsoever. Because of this, they are wary about making any long-term investments in the land. Modern law also requires that women ask their husbands' permission before performing any type of activity, which weakens their position even further.

Information and communication strategies

Living conditions in Africa, and in the DRC in particular, are difficult. And yet the DRC is home to the second-largest forest in the world, after the Amazonian rainforest! But while the Amazon rainforest is over-exploited, the DRC's forests are still unimaginably rich in natural resources.

To escape from this paradox, all farmers, both male and female, must be considered equal, that is, gender-based discrimination between farmers must be eradicated. Since these inequalities are rooted in culture, raising awareness of





the current situation's disastrous consequences and the benefits of granting women access to land is, in our opinion, the only way to transform mentalities as regards land access.

One strategy that could be useful in doing this is the organisation of awareness-raising campaigns in rural areas. This could be done by holding information and awareness-raising workshops in villages aimed at traditional chiefs, politicians and even legal authorities. The workshop's modules will concentrate on the need to change mentalities as regards rural women's access to land, on civic education and on strategies for fighting poverty. The aim is to change the mentalities of those responsible for allocating land. At the end of the session, participants should cast off their age-old, irrational prejudices.

Another possible strategy, which follows on from the first one, is to support farmers' initiatives. It will be necessary to identify village leaders (both male and female) as relay points for this, as they are able to communicate and persuade people. They will have a key role in passing on the messages they receive. It will be important to also design a follow-up programme to ensure that the relevant provisions for granting women access to land are being applied in practice.

Another way of fighting gender inequality consists in encouraging rural people to listen to rural community radio stations on a regular basis. The schedules of these stations should include programmes on eliminating prejudices and stereotypes about women, thus promoting equality between men and women.