



DIMITRA Relaunch Workshop– 24 October 2002

Speech of Ms. Sissel Ekaas  
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(FAO), Rome  
delivered at the King Baudouin Foundation, Brussels,

**“Gender and information for rural development: Building on the Dimitra experience “**

Secretary of State at the Development Cooperation,  
Ladies and Gentlemen representatives of governmental institutions of Belgium,  
Dear friends, partners of Dimitra,

It is a real pleasure to be here with you today on the official United Nations and World Information Day, surrounded by those people without whom the Dimitra project could never have seen the light. I would especially like to thank the Belgian Government, and in particular the Direction of the International Cooperation of the Federal Public Service for Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, The King Baudouin Foundation, our partners in the field, the coordination team in Brussels and our colleagues at the FAO in Rome and Accra.

Information is a crucial tool in the fight against hunger and poverty. Information is power. But too often women do not have access to it, particularly in rural areas. Rural women have limited access to the new information and communication technologies. FAO denounced this situation during the Know How Conference 2002 on information for women which was held in Kampala last July.

The limited access of rural population's, and particularly women, to information can be explained by insufficient infrastructures and financial resources, high levels of illiteracy amongst rural women, lack of training in the use of technologies and the low percentage of women working in the media.

Yet new information technologies offer a unique opportunity for women from developing countries to speak out, be more visible and less isolated. Moreover they help broaden political, social and economic participation because they promote access to and sharing of knowledge, the creation of networks and strengthening of decision-making processes.

New information technologies are not a luxury but an essential instrument for sustainable development. It is necessary to implement adapted and sustainable telecommunication infrastructures and to develop messages meeting the needs identified by the rural communities themselves, while respecting the social and cultural diversity of these communities.

The ability to dispose of appropriate information technologies, both modern (computer, Internet, e-mail) as well as traditional (rural radio, printed press, posters, etc.) and to think up creative messages are essential conditions for successful communication strategies.

We are confronted by the problem of a digital divide in the campaigns, but to bridge it, it is not enough to have the technology and to provide more computers, radios or mobile phones. Making information more accessible demands political determination, education and funds.



The Dimitra project has been working for several years towards resolving these problems. I would like to recapitulate with you some events, which were highlights of the last workshop in October 2000, the evolution of the project and its role within FAO. They demonstrate to what extent Dimitra has progressed.

## Dimitra

Dimitra's first phase gave us good information and communication products: Dimitra guidebooks on Europe, Africa and Near East, the online database, the self-evaluation reports, the newsletters and numerous exchanges, which have shown that Dimitra was unique and should continue its activities. The success of the guidebooks can be measured by the number of requests received for such data on organisations, projects and publications concerning rural women to also extend to other parts of the world.

Moreover, the project evaluation has confirmed the results obtained during the self-evaluation in October 2000 and led Dimitra to strengthen the network. It is in this spirit that the second phase of the project was built. Beginning in January 2002 this new three-year phase allows the former project partners to come together, but also welcomes newcomers who, over the last days have shown to what extent their expertise were complementary. I am thinking in particular of Women'sNet and SANGONeT, in South Africa who use information to ease the work of civil society organisations and thus aim to bridge the digital divide. ONG VIE, Volunteers for educational integration in Niger which is fighting poverty through literacy, ONE, Office National de l'Environnement (National Environment Office), in Madagascar, which brings its expertise in the gender approach in environment and in natural resource management. AMSED, l'Association Marocaine de Solidarité et de Développement (the Moroccan association solidarity and development), which strengthens the management capacity of Moroccan associations.

Our previous partners have also been very efficient. I would like to quote the example of Enda-Pronat which has acted as a relay for rural Senegalese women so that they made their voices heard on Internet during the online conference on rural women's access to new information technologies.

It is also Enda-Pronat who next February will organise a meeting in Senegal on the theme of «Women and access to land». This conference will enable the follow-up of the debate launched by the FAO in 1999 already during the high-level consultation on information and rural women, and during the seminar last March on the occasion of International Women's Day. The technical fact sheet on women and land rights is in fact available in this room and an article on this subject can be found in the last Dimitra newsletter.

CREDIF, in Tunisia, has enabled the integration of Dimitra into the National Plan of Action for rural women, drawn up with the support of the FAO.

The Dimitra network collects, diffuses and shares information. It is growing, transforming, acting as a catalyst and as a facilitator so that rural women may be truly recognised as stakeholders in rural development and in a sustainable manner. Dimitra has advanced matters in quite a unique way, to quote Ms Randriamamonjy, FAO representative at the workshop in 2000. In fact, Dimitra remains unique, because at FAO, it is the only network of this extent to deal with the role of women in food security and rural development. Unique also, because it has promoted an interface between three partners: NGOs, rural women and governmental institutions. Unique, finally, because it has allowed the «obscure actors» in development to be pushed to the front of the development stage. «Partnership» and «participation» are two key words which have enabled Dimitra to highlight the grassroots organisations which conceive and carry out the projects. The use of this proactive method has therefore helped secure visibility at national, regional and international level for all the participating organisations, even the most modest.



FAO recognises the positive evolution of the project and has been promoting it on numerous occasions. As for example in October 2001 during the World Food Day and conjointly at the celebration of World Rural Women's Day, FAO presented Queen Fabiola with the CERES medal for her work for rural women and her support for the Dimitra project.

Also during the FAO conference in November, a conference which I should like to stress, FAO has ratified the Gender and Development Action Plan. This plan takes up the Millennium Goals of the United Nations on the importance of gender equality and of women's empowerment, and the action plan on the role of information. During the Conference, our Division has organised an information session for representatives to present the new gender action plan and to highlight projects promoting equal opportunities such as Dimitra.

'The World Food Summit, five years later', in June this year was the opportunity to repeat the commitment of all to fighting against world hunger. It helped draw attention to the fact that rural women are essential actors in the food sector from production to the table. They are crucial partners in the fight against hunger and poverty. The message from rural women 'from Rome to Johannesburg', which linked the two summits: for food and for sustainable development, underlined the importance of building partnerships and using networks. A copy of this message is also available on our site and in this room.

Dimitra was once more quoted as an example this month in Madrid, during the Third World Congress on rural women in my opening presentation entitled «Rural women and globalisation - from Rome to Johannesburg and beyond». The complete text of this presentation can currently be found on the website of the Sustainable Development department. The Dimitra database was a mine of information for the host country, Spain, in order to identify the representatives of rural associations.

If the FAO likes to promote Dimitra, at an international level, the project also aids cooperation between the services of the FAO. As you will have heard at yesterday's presentation by my colleague from the FAO's communication group, the FAO has been working with rural radio for more than 30 years. For billions of inhabitants in rural areas, where illiteracy rates are high and there is a lack of electricity, telephone and Internet access, the radio remains the most accessible, economical and widespread means of communication. Dimitra, as an information and communication project, sees to it that all media are used to attain rural women and make their voices heard. Rural radio is a totally appropriate medium, together with other technologies whether new or traditional.

Yesterday, and also in July in Kampala, cooperation between the services enabled FAO's work on gender and new information and communication technologies to be presented.

Increased and ongoing cooperation with the world agricultural information centre (WAICENT), last month during the Consultation on Agricultural Information Management (COAIM). This second two-yearly meeting brought together high level representatives from the Member Countries of the FAO. The main goal of this year's meeting was to promote more active efforts from the countries to bridge the digital divide. It is also important to encourage international organisations to work together on this problem. During the COAIM, a seminar was organised on gender and information where the Dimitra project was once more presented as a concrete example of information exchange and networking. The main message from Kampala was echoed there. Information is a universal right and an essential means with which to fight poverty. Technologies are at the service of the people and not vice versa. New and traditional technologies must be combined. The content must be easily accessible and in local languages. Alone we will not make it, that is why we are counting on our partnerships and networks to strengthen the different interdependent levels, the macro, the meso and the micro, in other words, the policies, the decision-makers, the institutions and rural populations.

Dimitra is also a mine of information for the FAO's decentralised offices. Notably in the



case of multi-party talks, where NGOs and civil society organisations meet and discuss regional problems with the FAO. It is important that these consultations should be as representative for women as for men. Thanks to its database and contacts, Dimitra can help to identify organisations which are most representative of gender-specific interests of rural populations.

In its reports to the United Nations Committee for the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (and more specifically Article 14 concerning rural women), FAO relays the information available in the Dimitra database as often as possible. Therefore Dimitra is becoming known and used by all as a research tool.

As far as future perspectives and directions are concerned, at FAO we envisage many more roles that Dimitra could play. We think particularly of Dimitra for identifying beneficiaries and partners for distance learning in order to reproduce in other regions our experiences in Latin America on gender analysis.

We would also like to work more closely with the Special Programme for Food Security so that the gender angle may be taken more into account and the organisations listed in Dimitra can work with FAO and that those who work already with FAO may be included in the Dimitra database.

As you know, FAO is not a financing agency, however «Telefood » funds exist which generally support small projects implemented by grassroots organisations 40% of which are women's organisations. Dimitra can diffuse information related to this small fund as well as guidelines to follow in order to submit requests.

We also envisage the possibility of strengthening links with civil society and with other organisations which participate in other projects within the Gender and Population Division such as LinKS. This project deals with local and traditional knowledge on agrobiodiversity in a gender perspective in East and South Africa.

Finally, I would like to add that Dimitra has certainly a role to play in the preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society which will take place in two parts in 2003 and 2005. FAO and other agencies are making sure that gender questions are at the centre of the debate. Dimitra and its partners are working in the same direction and it is joining our forces that change can come about.

Your Excellence, ladies, gentlemen,

Dimitra can offer a wide experience on which it is still necessary to build. Dimitra is certainly an essential tool to enable questions of gender, information and communication to be integral parts of development policies and strategies. All the same, I would like to conclude by reminding you that making information more accessible is not only a question of technology but a political question

At FAO, we use technology but we put the emphasis mainly on content and how to make it useful for farmers, and other actors in rural areas, as well as for the decision-makers in our Member Countries. Information exchange is essential for everyone, and more accessible information signifies broader participation and better decision making at every level.

I am counting on your continued support and on the best exchanges possible to reach our common goals.

Thank you