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Experience in Communication for rural women in the Niayes area in Senegal

The importance of circulating information and knowledge throughout society has long been recognised. The communication process of sharing information is often called the web of society because it unites the different individuals, groups and institutions which make it up.

Communication is a huge social process incorporating several essential roles: informing, persuading, teaching and entertaining. This is the definition given by the communication scientists.

It is a definition that is wholly shared in rural communities and some local proverbs illustrate this:

1. « Rero amoul, niak waxtan mo am »: there is no conflict, only a lack of communication;
2. Once upon a time, an old man wanted to test how intelligent his son was. He gave him some money and told him - go and buy me the best product on the market. The son left and brought back only tongues. He shouted at him saying: "I asked you to buy me the best produce on the market, you bring me back only tongues, now go and buy me the worst you can find". The son came back again with tongues. The father screamed and the son replied to him: "Father, everything that goes well in the world is due to good tongues and everything that destroys the world is also due to tongues, but bad tongues".

The important role of communication is acknowledged and traditionally practised in different ways and is progressively evolving in parallel to socio-economic development in the different regions.

Communication is relevant to the development of all societies but we feel that this is especially the case for women, bearing in mind their role in household economics, as mother/educator, and as the guardians of culture and traditions. Their position has enabled them to develop several communication methods tailored to meet these different targets. Some women involved in the National Rural Women Network of Senegal have worked on this issue extensively during the day of reflection on "Rural women and access to information" that was organised on 27 May 2002 with the support of Enda PRONAT, as it will be developed below. This meeting was organised in order to allow rural women to participate in an online conference on rural women's access to information.

RURAL WOMEN'S ACCESS TO INFORMATION

*** Rural information centres: description/content. What are the dissemination networks for information. Aims/objectives of the setting up of information centres. Size of the target audience of the information centres. Methods used to sustain equipment:**

I. Traditional communication places: methods

Place/method	Objectives	Targets
* Town Crier, child messenger	Receive, disseminate information (griot)	families, communities
* Horse (according to its colour, its speed)	Diffuse information(to initiated people)	Surroundings in the same area/from the same culture
* Instruments (tam-tam, bell, flute/whistle, deer horn, long marrow, mortar and pestle) according to the notes played	Receive, transmit/diffuse information	The community/initiated people
* Hairstyles/appearance (shaving, tresses, jewellery) *signals, fire	Idem	Community belonging to the same culture
* Ceremonies (marriage, baptism, death, fights)	Inform	Idem
*Public places (market, discussion tree , wells, fields, health centres,	Idem	Villagers (women, men)
*Social groups (Women's association , healer's association)	Idem	Idem

DIFFICULTIES/CHALLENGES:

- A- Ignorance, lack of openness, slavery. Retention and distortion of information. Useful information is not often shared with vulnerable groups (women, youth). Information is partial and confined to a particular area. Inaccessibility of women to decision-making.
- B- Strengthening inter-village solidarity; internal conflict management.

II. Modern communication places

Place/method	Objective	Target
Public place, field, well, market, daara, health centre, mosque, church, sacred wood, village bank.	Receive and diffuse	Villagers (women, men)
Social groups, association headquarters, community centre, rural council, village library, literacy centre, rural family home, school, support organisation, network, group president	Diffuse, enlarge, empower/train	The community (men, women, children)
Tam-tam, mortar and pestle, flute, horse	Receive, transmit/diffuse	The community
Letter, fax, telephone (fixed line, portable)	Idem	The community, the country
Seminar, exchange visit, oral presentation, poster, newspapers, slide show, film, radio, television, computer, information network, savings and credit bank, technical service, internet	Popularise, raise awareness, educate, receive information, empower, broaden contacts	Idem

DIFFICULTIES/challenges:

- C- Holding back information, difficulties in accessing the mass media, high installation costs, isolation, transport means, socio-cultural constraints, work overload, non-involvement of women in decision-making.

II Methods used to supply equipment:

Wood fire, candle, oil lamp, electricity, solar energy, battery, generator.

Personnel

Reward, volunteer service, compensation, service purchase (telecentre, cyber café)

The evolution of communication systems in rural areas

Since independence progress has been made with these different communication systems. It should nevertheless be borne in mind that certain practices still persist.

Therefore after independence the government drew up development programmes for the rural world with planning and popularisation systems aimed both at women and men. All the training and information programmes on agriculture targeted men, although women are core to the carrying out of these tasks (from seeding to harvesting), while all the health and family finance programmes were aimed at women. The State had implemented a rural expansion centre (Centre d'Expansion Rurale, CERPR) in each district composed of a multi-disciplinary team within each of which there was a family finances monitor responsible for promoting training and information activities for women. There have also been educational broadcasts in local languages on national radio with backing from the regional channels.

A weekly broadcast, called rural education « disso ak beyka yi ak samakay » which means: 'dialogue with farmers, breeders and fishermen', caught our attention.

The producers went out into the field and asked questions at every level. However, not every family had a radio and moreover in certain areas their geographical position means they did not have access to all the broadcasts.

Stretching beyond the CERPR trainers are a multitude of local and international NGO initiatives and of farmers' associations where the gender dimension is largely taken into account. These NGOs, and even the State, are now well aware that women not only need training in home economics and household health, but that they are holding the balance of the nation in every way. As a result, several sectors of training and information activities were opened to women, i.e. literacy, agriculture, cattle rearing and savings and credit. In order to rise to this challenge, the women, who were organised by age traditionally in each village, strengthened their organisational systems by integrating all the women into one group and by forming federations at the rural community, area, county and regional levels.

It is within this framework that our programme, PRONAT, which works with farmers' organisations to promote healthy and sustainable agriculture by cutting down on pesticide use, was approached by the Maison Familiale Rurale (MFR) of Bayakh situated in the Niayes area where pesticides are widely used on market vegetable land. Two associations (men and women) cohabit within this MFR, with the aim of training youth and adults to improve their living conditions. PRONAT therefore held its first workshop on the dangers of pesticides in the area. The female trainers were immediately excluded from the information on the pretext that pesticides are used in agriculture and as it is a male activity it was not their concern. In spite of everything, women provided all the basic information on local practices, which helped with the preparation of pesticides.

All of this is justified by the fact that women support the actions of the MFR and are always more available and more receptive to innovations between monitors at the time. They are also much more affected by the pesticide problem. The following true stories clearly demonstrate this:

«In the Potou zone of the Louga region, a woman killed her daughter using thimul 35 to kill her daughter's head lice. Within the same zone, two children died from drinking parathion contained in a bottle that their father had hidden in his field following pest treatment. »

« In Kaffrine, 19 people died. A woman bought oil and put it in a bottle, which had contained parathion and had not been washed. After the meal 18 people who had eaten were dead. The woman had not eaten but she felt so responsible for the drama that she committed suicide. »

This is one of the main reasons for my presence at Enda and I continued developing awareness and information workshops with the PRONAT team at national and international level on the dangers of pesticides. Of course, now women are present at these workshops on an equal footing with men.

It was in 1986 that we tried out alternatives to chemical products. Once again, the women were the first to take the plunge to test such a theory with ENDA PRONAT, while the men said, « Better go to sleep rather than try to cultivate in the Niayes area without using chemical fertilisers and pesticides ». These are the experiments on pesticide alternatives with women from Bayakh, Mbaouane, and from Sinthiou Dara that were initiated by research activities in the rural commune of Kayar and the rural community of Diender. Today, 24 villages have now a farmer federation where women and men share equitably power and responsibility for better land management through the promotion of healthy and sustainable agriculture centred on three main axes:

1. Strengthening technical capacity of male and female producers by relying on local knowledge to create harmony between local knowledge and scientific knowledge based on the actual situations and needs of the local people.
2. Strengthening organisational capacity and the empowerment of the populations. It is also necessary at this level that people can organise their land within the community, to be able to better manage their resources (land, water, trees, etc.) which justify their existence in this land inherited from their ancestors. All the consequences of resource degradation concern women.
3. Capacity building in communication skills means that the two first axes can only be effective, regardless of the pertinence of the training, if the actors manage to develop equal exchange at family level, amongst themselves in their own area with policy-makers.

ENDA PRONAT therefore leads four programmes on promoting sustainable development in three ecological zones of Senegal. Communication is a cross-disciplinary axis.

Among these programmes is the Dimitra project, which is also coordinated by PRONAT. At the end of its first phase, the support organisations and the grassroots organisations held an evaluation meeting. One of the outcomes of this evaluation was the need to implement a National Rural Women Network of Senegal which today groups together around 150 women associations from grassroots organisations, NGOs and other associations with a total of more than 2000 members spread across the national territory.

This network has several objectives:

- **General objectives**

- To strengthen the status and the living conditions for the rural and peri-urban women.
- To capitalise on the skills and experiences of these women.
- To highlight the contribution of rural and peri-urban women as an actor in human development.

- **Specific objectives**

- To empower grassroots female organisations by training and information.
- To value local skills and knowledge by re-visiting history and tradition, by exchange visits (information and methodology and procedural exchanges experienced through the organisations and the women's projects).
- To help promote information exchange between grassroots organisations, NGOs, and all development actors in general.
- To strengthen the networking of the organisations and promote exchanges, solidarity and partnership.
- To set up and strengthen the projects integrated by support to income generating activities.

In the first instance several meetings were organised to discuss how to implement an action plan. The main preoccupation of the network is to strengthen contacts at grassroots level and to develop a concrete programme for empowering women in terms of communication as well as to capitalise on women's experiences with the support organisations.

This communication will be based on themes representing women's problems at the levels of agriculture, decentralisation policies, education and health.

In fact it is in this line of thought that an international workshop will be organised on rural women's access to natural resources, notably land, in February 2003. These issues will be the subject of a training and information workshop animated by rural women themselves with the help of support organisations and of resource people.

The problem blocking the evolution of rural women today is the lack of information as well as a lack of follow-up at the initiative level. The commitment, the desire and the associative movements are already there.

In reality this means that in most of their surroundings, women can evolve in terms of communication and can really benefit from the new Information and Communication Technologies (ITCs).

The organisational framework to enable this already exists. Today in the majority of the groups or federations most of the women are literate in the local language. Increasingly there is quite a high level of school drop-outs who return to the village and who have a lot of potential value.

Rural electrification is taking on more and more importance. All of this means that beyond the traditional communication systems, women can use mobile telephones, the internet and other audio-visual tools to become better informed and participate fully in the whole development processes.