

DIMITRA Relaunch Workshop – 24 October 2002
King Baudouin Foundation, Brussels

**Closing Speech by Ms Betty Minne, Gender adviser,
Cabinet of the Secretary of State for Development Cooperation**

Ladies and Gentlemen, colleagues and friends

It is an honour for me to be amongst you to close the 2nd Dimitra project workshop with the Dimitra partners. I'm sorry to have to pass on the apologies of the Secretary of State, Mr. Boutmans who is not able to be here with you today. He asked me to represent him and to tell you how supportive he is of the Dimitra project. I myself am a gender adviser in his Cabinet.

I find myself standing here in front of development, communication and information and gender experts, who know better than I do the importance, as well as the evolution, of the theme at international level, thanks precisely to their access to the appropriate information and communication methods.

Therefore in the midst of such an audience, I am not going to venture into a discussion of all the themes linked to the subject and which have been, or will be the subject of many reports (I quote the 2001 UNDP Human Development Report) and conferences such as the recent Know-How Conference in Kampala as well as the large preparatory conferences for the World Information Society Summit which will be held in Geneva in December 2003 and in Tunis in 2005.

Nevertheless I would like to underline some points in which the Belgian Cooperation takes a particular interest:

1. The importance of information in all its forms

As regards the importance of information I will begin by summarising a conversation which took place a little over 3 years ago between myself, as a former civil servant at the Development Cooperation after two months of working for the present Secretary of State, and a Cabinet Adviser in from the previous term of office who had just joined the administration. She asked what I considered to be the most important aspect of my current work. I thought carefully and then listed off some advantages of working in politics. She interrupted me in a very resolute and determined way and said « for me the biggest motivation was the access to information. Thanks to this ongoing and global access I felt equipped to do my work with the correct tools». It took me perhaps several days more to realise just how true her words were. This short anecdote serves to demonstrate how convinced I am of the importance of information in all its aspects. And if it is true that for ourselves, professionals in the North, this access is crucial at a professional level, then what about those people, rural men and women whose survival can depend on whether or not they have access to information?

I would like to add two points on this subject:

- Any discussion on the theme must depart from the principle that information is an universal right and an essential means to fight poverty. A fight against poverty which is the task of everyone who has adopted the Millennium Declaration and who is pursuing the Millennium Goals. In fact, Goal 18 mentions the need to give everyone access to new technologies in particular information and communication technologies.
- And if access to traditional information is characterised by inequalities between North and South, between men and women, between towns and rural areas, between people in power and populations; access to new information and communication technologies is all the more (the famous digital divide). The 2001 United Nations report tells us that « *Without innovative public policy, these technologies could become a source of exclusion, not a tool*

of progress ». There is therefore a task for you, for your countries and governments, but also for us, Belgian Government representatives in charge of development cooperation.

2. The necessity of a partnership for development on this subject

Having said this, I reach my second point, which is the necessity for a real partnership for development, building on the reality and needs of men and women in the South.

As described in our policy paper «Quality in Solidarity», the Belgian Development Cooperation is above all an instrument, a specific domain at the service of the country and people of the South and not at the service of our country..

During the African Regional Conference in Bamako in preparation for the 2003 World Summit, Mr. Walter Fust, President of Global Knowledge Partnership and General Director of the Swiss Development and Cooperation Agency stressed this aspect, saying « *it seems very important to me that the Africans lead the debate about their vision of an information society* ». He went on « *Yes, it is true, there is a digital divide, not only between the north and the south, but in almost all the countries of the world, in all societies, etc. But, bridging this divide by facilitating access to the internet may create a new divide, for example, if the countries of the south simply become consumers of the information offered by the north... Development is therefore, not a transfer of knowledge but rather a transformation of it*”.

There are again specific tasks there for you, representatives of the African continent and for us so that we are in a position to support your efforts to develop your own vision of the information society and moreover the application of this vision.

3. The place of the Dimitra project and its partners

Without women’s voices in the African vision of the information society, this vision will by definition be wobbly, incomplete and invalid. Therefore the question arises as to how to introduce, listen to, diffuse, visualise women’s voices.

And there, as I am sure you imagine, I reach my third point: the place of the Dimitra project and its partners in the theme.

The Dimitra project has – amongst other things- helped to raise women’s voices and especially rural women’s voices by networking these organisations so that these voices carry more weight, gain more visibility and more power. The project’s participatory and decentralised approach is innovative and meets the criteria of a true partnership which ensures the sustainability and longevity of the initiatives undertaken. By seeking a careful balance between the diverse traditional and modern communication and information techniques the project can be seen to be truly embedded in the African reality while avoiding a false reasoning which theoretically excludes this continent from improved access to new information technologies. Also the search for social and technological solutions in order to benefit rural women – for example with information shops in Burkina Faso – and approaching women as actors for change in their own lives and as models for society proves that the adopted approach works.

On behalf of the Secretary of State I would like to congratulate the Dimitra project on its results and its working method: firstly, I congratulate those who are absent, the rural women, then the Dimitra partners and their representatives, and of course the coordination team in Brussels and the FAO for their commitment, their enthusiasm and their know-how. The Belgian Cooperation supports this initiative – together with the King Baudouin Foundation and the FAO – which through its international work concentrates on changing a theoretical pessimism into an optimistic pragmatism amongst others thanks to the inclusion of rural women’s voices.

We know that you know that like ourselves you are privileged in having access to and being a partner in this network of solidarity that Dimitra is. And we dare to hope that this partnership

will be sustainable and will continue by consolidating the experiences and enhancing them by extending to other countries and other rural women.

I repeat once again the congratulations of the Secretary of State and will not forget to pass on to him the results and recommendations of this workshop.

I will already tell him what a representative of Africa said this morning when defining the concept of 'poverty'. 'Poor' she said is someone who has no people around them'. So I think, no I am convinced that you, you are rich. And us..... for you to judge.

I congratulate you on your wealth.

Thank you for your attention.