

DIMITRA Relaunch Workshop– 23 October 2002
At the Directorate-General for International Cooperation (DGIC)

Speech of Ms Martine VAN DOOREN
General Adviser DGIC

Dear colleagues and friends,

I am happy to welcome you here today and I would particularly like to thank the Dimitra partners and our colleagues at the FAO as well as Eliane Najros and her team for having accepted to share their knowledge and experience in the area of information and communication in rural areas.

Since 1998, the Belgian Cooperation has financed the Dimitra project in the framework of its partnership with FAO. This year Dimitra entered a new three-year phase. We are all convinced of the crucial importance for rural women's organisations to network in order to fight poverty and in a broader perspective to meet the Millennium goals and we would like to congratulate you on the work accomplished so far.

In the light of the World Information Society Summit, the Dimitra project holds a particular place, as access to information should be considered as a universal right and information technology an essential tool for sustainable development.

Recently the president of IFAD reminded us that of the 1.2 billion people living in extreme poverty, around three-quarters, i.e. 900 million live in rural areas and depend on agriculture, markets and services for their subsistence. Among these are farmers, stockbreeders and especially women, who are the principal food producers and who nonetheless have limited access to resources. However, even if international attention focuses on poverty reduction and sustainable development, support to agriculture and to rural areas has drastically diminished over recent years. If we want to meet the Millennium Development Goals we must concentrate our efforts on these zones and strengthen the capacity of civil society (especially women's organisations) so that they can influence the political agenda and the allocation of resources according to needs and expectations.

As a recent DAC report attests, poverty is multi-dimensional¹. It conveys the impossibility of reaching adequate living standards and covers the essential domains in which men and women experience deprivation. This is expressed in economic, human, political, and socio-cultural terms but especially by a feeling of powerlessness and of exclusion, especially amongst women. Taking gender into consideration is therefore essential for fighting poverty in all its dimensions. Women's access to information and communication and their ownership as well as networking, act as a powerful lever to help women make their voices and interests heard so they can claim their rights including those to land and strengthen their capacities in the interests of their families, their communities and their country.

DIMITRA is an innovative project that is looking to the future and we are happy to support it. Its impact can be felt as much in the South as in the North. Colleagues from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, from the DGIC (Directorate General for International Cooperation) and from the BTC (Belgian Technical Cooperation) can attest to this. Just recently a DGIC mission to Morocco called on the Dimitra network to enable them to meet women's organisations and benefit from their experiences and advice. This project also highlights the importance of the culture of knowledge sharing. This should inspire us to draw inspiration from the organisations in which we work.

¹ DAC guidelines - The reduction of poverty, OECD, 2001

So what outlook for the future? In Africa the network is limited for the moment to a certain number of countries. Those in the Great Lake Region are not part of it for the moment. This divide should be bridged in order to bring rural women out of their isolation and give them the means to play a more active role in decisions taken at local, national or international levels.

Thank you.