From Dialogue to Action - the Empowerment of Rural Women in Agriculture

Huairou Commission co-organizes lunch dialogue with FAO, IFAD, WFP, during ECOSOC High Level Segment 2010

June 29, 2010, New York City

“As long as women are seen as submissive, there will be a large agricultural production gap. Women's agriculture is diversified, dynamic and sustainable, utilizing all the resources available in the environment. When women sit at the table to make decisions, priorities take a different shape”

Nereide Segala Coelho
President, Ser do Sertão and founder, Rede Pintadas, Brazil

Panelists at the luncheon from FAO, the US Department of State, the government of Liberia, the World Food Program (WFP) in Haiti and a farmer's cooperative in Brazil were in agreement: women produce the majority of the world's food, take leadership in feeding their families and communities, innovate solutions to ensure sustainable, environmentally friendly food production, and yet are regularly left out of policy-making and funding discussions. They severely lack access to productive inputs that would help them to ensure food security for their families, communities and nations.

The Huairou Commission, FAO, IFAD, WFP, WOCAN, UNIFEM, the Hunger Project and the World Bank co-convened a luncheon on June 29th to explore practical actions being taken by national governments, UN agencies, donors and civil society to close the large gap that exists between the leadership and productive work of grassroots women farmers, and food policy and funding.
Nereide Segala Coelho represented the Huairou Commission, from member network GROOTS International, sharing specific examples of how she and other women farmers are succeeding at improving food security for their communities, through women's empowerment in rural Brazil: "I'm a small holder agricultural producer and a leader of a cooperative in Pintadas, a municipality in Northeast Brazil.

Agriculture is production,
Production is power,
and power is ownership.

. . . What kind of agriculture do we have and do we want?

As long as women are seen as submissive, there will be a large agricultural production gap. Women's agriculture is diversified, dynamic and sustainable, utilizing all the resources available in the environment. When women sit at the table to make decisions, priorities take a different shape. For example, when a woman was elected mayor in Pintadas, she had a consultative process with the community which led to a process where we built cisterns and artificial lakes in each house, ensuring access to water in a semi-arid region suffering from drought.

Not long ago, a colleague asked me sadly - when will I be able to abandon the watering pot? She is in a condition close to a life of slavery. She can't participate in other activities because she needs to stay at home to water all day."

Ms. Segala Coelho went on to describe how her women's farming cooperative developed the technological capacity to take their production to the next level. With technical support from other organizations, began to use drip irrigation for the first time ever. They developed the capacity to sell 80 tons of milk daily to the government for use in the schools. They took their fruit, and with appropriate technology and cooperative work, they began to produce fruit pulp. Rede Pintadas and Ser Asertao have been able to improve the lives of their families and communities, and are now sharing their experience with other organizations in Latin America and globally as members of GROOTS International.

Also on the panel of speakers, Florence Chenowith, Minister of Agriculture for Liberia, shared her impressive and innovative policies and results in supporting women farmers in Liberia, such as enumerating women farmers to ensure they are counted and recognized in national statistics, providing training in new technologies for women, and earmarking productive assets such as seeds specifically to women farmers. She said that Liberia is aiming for a 6% increase in agricultural production, and so is aiming 95% of its resources directly at women farmers. Ms. Chenowith also
highlighted the 11 recommendations that emerged from the meeting of the Network of Women Ministers which WOCAN organized and the Huairou Commission also participated in, during the November 2009 World Summit on Food Security in Rome.

**Patricia Haslach from the US Department of State** emphasized the enormous value of investing in women farmers. She quoted Hillary Clinton, “if you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day; if you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a year; and if you teach a woman to fish, she’ll feed her entire village”. Ms. Haslach shared that the State Department is working to expand the participation of women in all levels of decision making, and ensuring that women have access to all levels of inputs, and to savings and credit. She also emphasized the need for strong and clear property rights for women and men, in law and in practice, which she called the hallmark of truly sustainable development.

**Myrta Kalard, Director of the World Food Program (WFP) in Haiti**, shared some of the ways WFP, FAO and IFAD have worked to include women in their programs before and since that country’s devastating earthquake, such as setting minimum quotas for female participation in program participation, and providing short and medium term employment programs with 50% women minimum involvement. She called attention to the fact that women farmers were the first to provide food to their neighbors after the earthquake, and that they have continued to do so to this day, 5 months later, a fact that makes support from partners such as WFP so vital. Taken as a whole, it is clear that if the global community wants to see results, they must invest in cost-effective, sustainable, bottom-up, community and women-driven initiatives such as those described by Ms. Segala Coelho. She demonstrated that when women farmers are organized, what might have been seen as overwhelming or too expensive becomes entirely possible.

The co-sponsors of this luncheon were: FAO, IFAD, the World Food Program in affiliation with the Huairou Commission, WOCAN, UNIFEM, the Hunger Project and the World Bank.

The panelists were:
- Mr. Jim Butler, Deputy Director-General, FAO, Chair
- The Honorable Ms. Florence Chenoweth, Minister of Agriculture
- Ambassador Patricia Haslach, Deputy Coordinator for Diplomacy, Global Hunger and Food Security Initiative, US Department of State
- Ms. Myrta Kalard, Country Director for Haiti, WFP
- Ms. Nereide Segala Coelho, grassroots leader and woman farmer, Rede Pintadas, Brazil, GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission
- Ms. Cheryl Morden, Director, North American Liaison Office, IFAD