



Supporting women producers to respond to the challenges of food insecurity

A paper presented by FAO, WOCAN and the Huairou Commission to the CSW Beijing +15

Introduction

According to the Overseas Development Institute, “there are 1.2 billion people who cannot meet their most basic needs for sufficient food every day. Of these, the largest segment are the 800 million poor women, men and children ... They often occupy marginal lands and depend heavily on rain-fed production systems that are particularly susceptible to droughts, floods and shifts in markets and prices.”¹

Global food insecurity has garnered increasing attention from policy-makers, advocacy institutions and other actors around the world. This attention was heightened in the past two years when a “Global Food Crisis” was declared due to increasing food prices that seemed to leave the poor unable to buy food, and poor producers unable to earn for their products. According to USAID,² between March 2007 and March 2008 global food prices increased an average of 43 percent.”²

When food insecurity was seen as an issue directly related to one factor, such as extreme poverty, corrupt governments, or natural disasters, humanitarian intervention was the extent of the world’s response to a starving nation or population. But today, the causes and effects of food insecurity and hunger are understood as a manifestation of a complex interplay of factors such as climate change, poor market access, the industrialization of agriculture, modernization, international trade policies, failed states, unequal access to natural resources such as land and water, and poverty, to name but a few. It is understood that combinations of these factors have produced today’s global food crisis, threatening communities’ ability to lead healthy lives and build and sustain resilient communities. It is a cyclical process – once threatened with food insecurity, communities only grow weaker, and their vulnerabilities are deepened and often perpetuated.

Grassroots women at the community level intimately experience food insecurity. Women who are generally the primary caregivers in families are at the center of food production, purchase and preparation. When food is scarce or food prices rise, women are often responsible for taking on increased workloads and often sacrifice their own nutrition first to ensure their children and families can eat. Women also work together to develop innovative coping strategies to mitigate the effects of and build resilience against food crises, such as collective farming and income-generation, adopting and reviving traditional technologies. Women work together to organize solutions which are often the only force that allow communities to cope with the extreme hardships that food insecurity can bring.

Because of this central role in keeping together households and communities, grassroots women possess a wealth of knowledge on the causes and effects of food insecurity. Yet the significance of this vital contribution is rarely given due recognition by policy and decision makers of governments, donor and international organisations and even NGOs and civil society groups.

¹ <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/3148.pdf>

² www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/foodcrisis/

To make visible the experiences and coping strategies of women farmers, and to ground the global dialogue on food security, FAO and WOCAN partnered with the Huairou Commission - a global coalition of women's networks - to consult with grassroots women on the impact of food insecurity on women and communities and assess coping strategies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The study, run entirely by grassroots organizations themselves, focused on gaining insights into food insecurity's impact on women and their communities; the various perceived causal factors of food insecurity; grassroots women's diverse coping strategies; and their recommendations for supportive actions by stakeholders and policymakers

The Huairou Commission conducted this research on food insecurity and its impact on women through a series of consultations with grassroots women from 24 organizations in 23 countries: Argentina, Bangladesh, Benin, Bolivia, Brazil, Cameroon, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Jamaica, Kenya, Nepal, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Philippines, Peru, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia.³ During the consultations women were asked to respond to a series of questions under three main headings: their perceptions of the causes of food insecurity, how food insecurity impacted them and their communities, and what were their coping strategies. While the findings differed slightly from region to region due to cultural, political and economic contexts, grassroots women consistently described how the burden of food insecurity affected them intimately. It also became clear that in order to ensure food security, women, farmers and indigenous groups need to organize to challenge mainstream agricultural practices, and policy makers need to strategize alternative pro-poor and pro-farmer agricultural policies.

This research was presented to FAO, WOCAN and a group of women attending the Civil Society Forum and World Food Summit, in November 2009, at which time small groups met to come up with six key messages, presented in Section IV, Recommendations.

I. Impacts on women producers and their perceptions of causal factors of food insecurity

Though the statistics are imprecise, women produce and process an average of half the food the world consumes—an estimated 80% in Africa, 50% in Asia and 30-40% in Latin America. This includes women farmers, fisherwomen, livestock keepers and pastoralists. Due to differences in cultures, policies and economic conditions, women producers experience the effects and causes of food insecurity differently, in Africa, Asia and Latin America/Caribbean, as described below.

Effects of Food Insecurity

As a result of food insecurity, several patterns have emerged across all of the countries involved in this report. Women are increasingly becoming heads of households and therefore primarily responsible for the acquisition of food for the entire family, and so they bear the brunt of the effects of food insecurity. Reduced incomes, increased poverty and malnutrition are experienced due to decreased food consumption at the household level, which further perpetuates these vulnerabilities. The impact of the crisis is stronger on women because they oversee food production and during times of crises, they innovate coping strategies with decreasing resources. This leads to more stress for women as they internalize and feel the pressure of increased responsibility more than men do.

When the availability of food severely declines, it is women who are both bearers of the burden and saviors of stability. Widespread male migration from rural communities to large scale farms in search of income adds to this burden, as women's roles are multiplied. In addition to being mother, wife, and sister, they must also incorporate planting, harvesting, petty trading, income generating

³ Huairou Commission, 2010. *Grassroots Women's Perspectives on Food Security in Africa, Asia and Latin America-Caribbean*.

initiatives, manual labor and selective budgeting into their daily routines to ensure the family has food to eat. The overall work load of women has increased considerably; they spend more time on the farms trying to ensure that vegetable crops grow and that livestock are tended.

Women are physically and emotionally strained but continue to work even when seriously ill because they feel that their health is of less importance than the need to earn money for their families' well being. In the words of one farmer: "the family responsibility lies on women so that she distributes all available food for her children, husband, and other family members. If some food items [is] left she will have it, if not she suffers from hunger."

Young girls are being forced into early marriages because their families cannot afford to feed them. Prostitution among women across the age spectrum has increased. In some cases, women engage in high-risk sexual behavior in exchange for food or money in order to survive, increasing their vulnerability to STDs and HIV infection.

The issue of women's disinheritance from land and property is another serious issue that arose in the focus group discussions. Forced off their land by landgrabbing and male-biased inheritance practices, women and children are at risk of homelessness, acute food insecurity and poverty. Women noted that lack of access to land made them unable to secure safe housing quarters, unable to grow food, and unable to procure loans to start or grow their business since land or property is required and used as collateral.

Social structures are also breaking down. Whereas before communities reported helping each other in times of hardship, families now are unable to care for their neighbors because they themselves are struggling to put food on the table. This has created a feeling of "for each his own".

Causes of Food Insecurity

In **Africa**, it is apparent that food insecurity is considered a crisis across the region, and that its causes are complex, attributed to multiple, and often intertwined factors. The primary concerns are the impacts of soaring food prices, climate change, loss of subsistence and traditional food crops to cash crops, and privatization of land. Additionally, all of the African focus groups addressed the impacts and affects of women's lack of access to, and ownership of, land and property. Rampant food shortages are attributed to failed crops, floods and conflict.

Food insecurity is an issue across **Asia**, and its causes are attributed by grassroots women to various, often interlinked factors, including erratic climate, price increases, loss of local foods due to the growth of cash crop agriculture and foreign subsidies which force imports that compete with local prices. While these have been identified as causal factors contributing to food insecurity, they are also regarded as *effects* of political-economic policies at both the national and international level. Climate change is seen as a major factor affecting women's abilities to maintain their farming practices using existing knowledge and crops. Major concerns in Asia are on poverty and issues related to trade and commerce— how the lack of access to favorable markets, as well as competition with foreign food stuffs causes extensive problems in accessing, promoting and securing local agricultural-based livelihoods.

In **Latin America and the Caribbean** region, women producers perceive local food insecurity as a result of an array of complex and often interrelated global issues such as the increase in oil prices, climate change and increased competition from imported produce in international trade. High unemployment in rural areas for local and migrant laborers is clearly brought about by the dual nature of the financial and food crises. At the local and national levels, rural women see immediate ways in which the destruction of natural resources in their communities and the changing climate affects their ability to sustain local food production. They also describe how the inequalities in access to resources and the different farming methods between women small

holder farmers and large agribusiness contribute to their food insecurity. Finally, the changing landscape of markets and the continued marginalization of women contribute greatly to their food insecurity.

Perceptions that are common to all regions are:

- Lack of access to capital and productive resources such as land is one of the major causes of poverty and disempowerment of women and communities, leading to food insecurity
- Lack of rights to land , further affected by privatization, particularly by multinational corporations, is seen as a major causal factor of food insecurity regionally

Lack of recognition for the value women and smallholder farmers bring to society has resulted in the poor provision of extension services, and poor access to new farming knowledge and technologies

II. Coping responses at the local level

Grassroots women's organizations have developed innovative practices such as collective farming, seed banks, alternative income generation and ways of accessing markets.

To cope with the increase in food prices and resultant food scarcity in **Africa**, several communities have found innovative ways to manage food insecurity. Savings groups, joint business ventures, food banks and a return to traditional and collective farming have proven practical alternatives to food insecurity.

Common throughout the discussions across **Asia** was the way that women were compelled to build their own support networks in order to reduce community vulnerability to food crises. Common successful coping strategies identified include the formation of collectives, cooperatives, and savings and credit groups; acquiring new skills on crop management and diversification using local seeds, and storing of rations for emergencies. Through processes of organizing and women-led advocacy, women are ensuring that products are first produced for local consumption and then for village sales prior to selling to larger markets. They are also negotiating to get public distribution systems back into the hands of the locals, empowering community members to directly purchase from the farmers, process it in the women groups and redistribute it to consumers. This helps reduce the cost of food and generate employment for village women and raise purchasing power. Food grain banks are becoming popular, using this traditional bartering system to exchange seeds and traditional knowledge. The bank also provides support and training on improved technologies related to seed storage, food processing, marketing, and eco friendly packaging. Water harvesting projects have improved and made irrigation systems more accessible, and many farmers have been taught how to harvest water, and also to grow crops with less water to reduce vulnerability to drought.

In the **Latin America/Caribbean** region, grassroots women appear to be increasing their reliance on their ongoing strategies such as organizing in self-help groups and communal banks to make ends meet. In that sense, women appear to be recognizing the need to rely on themselves and the other women in their communities to develop survival strategies. They are organizing together in cooperatives, women's associations or other kinds of self-help groups as a first step to collectively articulate problems and work toward solutions to food insecurity. Some are strategising and advocating with banks and governments to acquire and maintain land access and ownership, as land is fundamental to the struggle for small scale farmers to produce food and feed their families.

Women are organizing to meet practical as well as political aims. The ongoing grassroots strategy of communal kitchens in Peru is ongoing local effort toward food security that becomes more visible as a viable strategy in times of food crisis. Their ongoing practices of small scale farming are in fact a sustainable strategy for food security, the value of which is even more visible at this time of food crisis. In contrast with large scale industrial farming, small scale farming uses irrigation technologies that waste less water and use fewer chemical inputs for farming, thus preserving the land and the environment.

III. Challenges of women at the national and global levels

Through these consultations it was shown that contemporary food insecurity in Africa is a multifaceted issue that requires intervention from multiple stakeholders, locally, nationally and internationally, who are willing and capable of designing and promoting gender equitable sustainable agriculture and culturally appropriate mechanisms to secure access to food.

Women producers in Africa and elsewhere have had positive experiences with organizing and building solidarity groups and wish to communicate with and establish stronger relationships with other women's groups both in their region and abroad to learn what tools and strategies other women are using to combat food insecurity. Many are also interested to link to women's support NGOs at the national and international levels, to assist them to with capacity building, leadership development, research, technical assistance and linking to global level policy processes.

Yet these same women's NGOs are themselves facing challenges. Women's organisations at all levels need financial support and public recognition of their value to enable them to facilitate the participation and leadership development of women producers in policy and decision making processes, through a process of federation and scaling up.

Leaders of male-dominated farmer and civil society groups have also not enabled women's participation in key national, regional and global structures and events that influence the food security policy processes. In response to this obstacle, WOCAN and the International Alliance of Women (IAW) – two international women-led NGOs with recognised status within the Committee on Food Security (CFS) and FAO respectively, organised a *ad hoc* women's constituency, a *Coalition for Women in Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry and Livestock* to jointly invite and facilitate participation of women's groups from these sectors at the parallel event to the World Food Summit, the Civil Society Forum. The framework for this coalition - developed jointly with participants of the women producers attending the meeting – was built on a recognition of the value of a partnership that combined both the technical expertise from professional women (WOCAN) and the rights-based approach by international women's organizations working on economic and social issues (IAW) to act as supporters to women producers. This group prepared a statement to the Civil Society Steering Committee that outlined their demands to the Civil Society organizers as follows:

1. Ensure 50% gender balance and regional balance representation within supported delegations and observers;
2. Ensure a reasonable allocation of funding for travel and per diem for women representing women's issues during the CSO Forum who will be leading the women's events;
3. Ensure that farmers, indigenous, youth, NGOs (and other constituencies) will have women in their delegation who will represent women's issues and also join women's events. Their funding should come from the allocation of their own constituencies.
4. Ensure a space for women's daily caucus throughout the CSO Forum.

IV. Recommendations to policy makers, international organizations and CSOs/NGOs

The following are the six key messages developed by women meeting in Rome in November 2009 for audiences of agriculture ministers, permanent representatives to Rome-based UN agencies, donors, NGOs, civil society and the media:

1. Because of the individual and collective knowledge and experience of women's organizations and networks, they should be equal partners with men in program development and implementation.
2. Governments must support and protect the use of traditional knowledge in production, conservation and distribution of food, and return the power over this production process to the rural sector. This includes recognizing farmers' choice to use farming techniques that are environmentally sound and sustainable.
3. Women must have equal representation in policy and decision-making in addressing agriculture and food security. Their involvement must be considered as a high priority, and their concerns must be reflected in new policies on food security.
4. The use of GMO seeds creates dependency. It has also proven destructive to the environment, and runs counter to women's indigenous and traditional knowledge of farming practices. Thus we urge governments and development agencies to promote the use of local and traditional varieties by setting up national seed-banking systems and other sustainable production mechanisms that support biodiversity; women must participate in the management, development implementation and monitoring and evaluation of such mechanisms.
5. Ensure and enforce women's rights over seeds as well as to provide resources such as land, water, and training on innovative and sustainable farming approaches based on both scientific and indigenous knowledge.
6. Recognize the impact of climate change on women producers and the value of their contributions to enhancing resilience, ensure an equitable allocation of resources and benefits from climate change mitigation and adaptation mechanisms.

Additional recommendations to governments and donors developed by members of the Coalition and WOCAN include the following:

1. Provide local level funding schemes for programmes specifically for small scale women farmers;
2. Support the development of women's leadership capacities, and the roles of rural women producers to participate in policy and decision-making processes at all levels;
3. Support the development of partnerships amongst women's networks at various levels, facilitating synergistic and strategic partnerships, such as are demonstrated by the Coalition for Women in Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry and Livestock, the Network of Women Ministers and Leaders⁴, and others that include regional networks (i.e. Asian Farmers' Association), the Huairou Commission and GROOTS, and WOCAN.

⁴ Coordinated by WOCAN

V. Conclusion

Through the results of the research conducted with the women producers in Africa, Asia and Latin America/Caribbean, and the recommendations produced by the Coalition for Women in Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry and Livestock, and WOCAN, it is clear that grassroots women producers – in partnership with women’s NGOs and organizations - are now in a position to voice their concerns and participate in policy and resource allocation decisions at national, regional and global levels.

Specific processes and instruments of FAO provide opportunities for this engagement; women are able to lobby their governments for programme support for seed bank schemes, for example, through the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources. They can use the Voluntary Guidelines on Land and Guidelines on Right to Food to advocate for women’s land rights, and the Committee on Food Security (CFS) to lobby for equitable governance and monitoring of food security policies. All of this will require financial and organizational support, however, to build the capacities of the coordinating mechanisms, such as the Coalition for Women in Agriculture, which currently is *an ad hoc* group without status within the CFS. Once such support can be provided, FAO and other international agencies that aim to increase the participation of and support to women producers will find willing partners, ready to enhance the effectiveness of policies and programmes to achieve global food security.