Since the beginning of Andean agriculture, seeds have been associated with reproduction and femininity. The Incas believed the moon conferred fertility on women and moved Pachamama (Mother Earth) to germinate and offer up her potatoes (known as Mama Acxo) at harvest time. Men deposited the seeds and women received them, to harbour and nurse. In the Andes today, and in many other parts of the developing world, potato growing is still highly labour-intensive. Rural women provide most of the labour in both small- and large-scale potato production – from conservation and seed selection to planting, harvesting, storing and marketing.

China: Increasing gender awareness
In China, most potatoes are grown in mountain areas of Inner Mongolia and Shaanxi provinces, both as a staple food and as a cash crop. Research in Wuchuan County, Inner Mongolia, shows how the labour-intensive nature of potato production, coupled with strong gender inequalities, can pose a threat to the sustainability of local livelihoods.

Says Zhang Ailian, a woman farmer: “Potato growing is very tiring, especially at harvest time, and the burden of household tasks is already very heavy. The Agriculture and Animal Husbandry Bureau provides technical training in potato production, but heads of the village usually tell men to attend. Women make up fewer than 10 percent of total participants.”

A project in Wuchuan is working to ease the burden of potato production on women by supplementing agricultural training with gender-sensitive materials. The project uses participatory approaches such as “farmer field schools”, and brings gender issues into potato development policies. It advocates a more equitable division of labour and financial decision making powers for women, and facilitates their access to extension services and training.

Peru: Women as conservationists
In the high-altitude Peruvian Andes, the genetic diversity found in hundreds of native potato varieties guarantees rural communities’ food security. Over centuries, Andean farmers and the descendants of ayllu family groups, primarily women, have selected countless varieties of potato to preserve and enhance plant diversity, allowing them to cultivate in different agro-ecological zones and cope with pests, diseases and climatic changes. The “bitter potato”, for example, is the result of crossing with frost-resistant varieties adapted to the freezing temperatures of the Puna agro-ecological zone.

Male migration to urban centres has left women farmers responsible for almost 70 percent of family farm work. In the Chetilla community in Cajamarca, the
tasks of seed selection and storage are exclusively women’s. Their participation in seed fairs is invaluable in preserving Andean potato biodiversity. Surveys have found that women attending fairs are able to identify up to 56 different varieties. However, the heavy burden placed on women in potato production highlights the need for a more equitable division of labour to ensure the conservation of agro-biodiversity.

Uganda: Enabling rural innovation
Potatoes have become an important staple and cash crop in sub-Saharan Africa’s highland zones, and Uganda is a major potato producer in the region. Virtually all households in southwestern Uganda grow potatoes, harvesting over 60 percent of the national crop. Most tubers are grown in highland areas of Kabale and Kisoro as a staple food and as the main source of income.

“Enabling rural innovation” is a gender-sensitive strategy being used in various development programmes. The idea is to empower both men and women farmers and rural communities to develop market opportunities. In Kabale, for example, farmer field school training covered integrated potato pest and disease management. It also helped the Nyabyumba United Farmers group to establish an enterprise that now supplies potatoes for french fries at fast-food restaurants in Kampala.

Gender roles in agriculture
FAO’s Gender Plan of Action underscores the need for rural and agricultural development policies that acknowledge the roles of both men and women in achieving food security. The Plan aims at promoting gender equality in access to food, in the control over and management of natural resources and agricultural support services, in policy- and decision-making processes at all levels in the agricultural and rural sector, and in opportunities for on- and off-farm rural employment.

About IYP 2008
The International Year of the Potato, to be celebrated throughout 2008, aims at raising global awareness of the potato’s key role in agriculture, the economy and world food security.

www.potato2008.org

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