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Dimitra Newsletter

GENDER, RURAL WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT



SPECIAL EDITION

Dimitra Clubs in action





DIMITRA CLUBS IN ACTION

Special Edition of the Dimitra Newsletter



Editorial	3
Interview with the Coordinator of the Dimitra Clubs' Programme	4
Dimitra Clubs, what impact?	6
1. FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION	
Senegal and Niger - Joint management of cereal stocks to ensure year-round food supplies	10
DR Congo and Niger - Any food that can be eaten by a man can also be eaten by a woman	12
The Dimitra Clubs stimulate a varied and balanced diet	14
2. GENDER AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP	
Women leaders emerging from the Dimitra Clubs	18
Gender roles and relations change visibly	20
Testimony. Senegal - "I managed to overcome my shyness and speak in public"	21
DR Congo. Dialogue as a tool to fight gender-based violence	22
Niger. 16 days of activism against gender-based violence	23
3. COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION	
Niger. The village of Rigar Djerma breaks out its isolation	26
DR Congo. Bamboo washbasins to combat diseases	28
Central African Republic - Women's leadership for sustaining peace	29
Testimony. DR Congo - Learning to read and write	29
Burundi – Niger. Water, a source of community mobilization	30
4. SOCIAL COHESION AND PEACE	
DR Congo. The Twa and Bantus learn to live together	34
Niger. Together we are stronger	36
Senegal. Solidarity renewed through the clubs	37
Mali. Communication and reconciliation	38
5. ADAPTATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE	
Senegal. Saré Boubou, a united community facing climate change	42
Mali. The village of Kedou fights against erosion	43
Niger. Mobilizing energies to meet the environmental challenges	44
6. RURAL ORGANIZATIONS	
DR Congo. From "Bosasele" to a savings and credit cooperative	48
A self-development approach to galvanize rural organizations	50
Niger. A women's organization supporting food security	51
7. SHARING INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE	
Community radio, Dimitra Clubs' natural partner	54
Dimitra Clubs use ICTs as enablers for sustainable development	56
South-South cooperation – sharing of experiences between the clubs of Niger, Mali and Senegal	57
8. THE VOICE OF YOUTH	
Youth Dimitra Clubs: a driver for local governance	60
Niger. Getting married: which choice for young people?	62
Testimony. Reducing early marriage	63
DR Congo – Youth club of Yanonge, an example of self-determination	64
Acknowledgements	65

Editorial

Dear Readers,

This Dimitra newsletter that you are holding in your hands or reading on your screen is a special one. Special, in that it focuses exclusively on the Dimitra Clubs, an empowerment approach launched by FAO 10 years ago and which over time has established itself as one of the Organization's good practices in terms of community mobilization, gender equality and empowerment.

But above all, 'special' in that it offers a direct link between several challenges affecting rural areas and some of the remarkable results obtained by the Dimitra Clubs in the villages of Burundi, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Mali, Niger, and Senegal. These results and success stories have been grouped into eight impact areas of the clubs, which were identified by a field survey, followed by an impact study conducted in 2017: food security and nutrition, gender and women's leadership, community mobilization, social cohesion and peace, climate change adaptation, rural organizations, access to information and sharing of knowledge and the voice of the youth.

Following an interview with the Dimitra Clubs' Programme Coordinator, this issue opens with a look at the main results of two studies on the club's approach. Readers will then be able to browse between one impact area and another, going through stories and testimonies that narrate the changes generated by the Dimitra Clubs in rural communities.

Thanks to the Dimitra Clubs, individual and collective action is at the heart of development interventions, supported by dialogue and appropriate information and communication technologies. In this way, women and men of all ages are investing in themselves and in the community, and making their voices heard so as to improve livelihoods and gender equality, without leaving anyone behind.

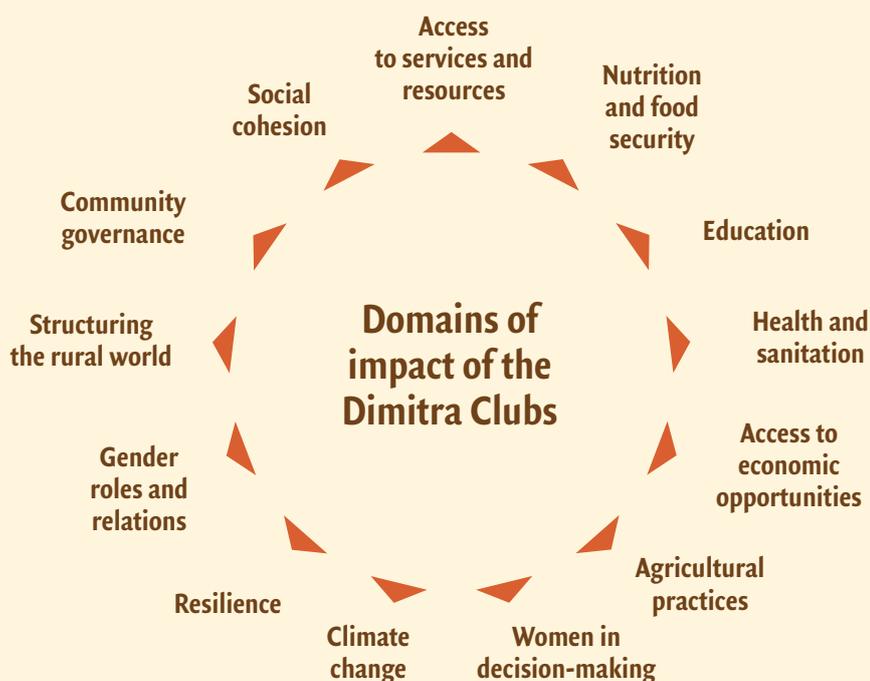
This area of FAO work is not just important in helping to effectively fight poverty, but also for its contribution to achieve other FAO strategic objectives, such as eradicating hunger and enhancing resilience, as well as several of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda. This is evidenced by the many different themes addressed in this issue.

It is crucial to continue engaging in this area, paying particular attention to women, youth and groups with restricted access to productive resources, and whose active participation in rural organizations and community life is limited. This can be seen clearly in rural development projects and programmes: innovative and flexible development models, such as the Dimitra Clubs, are essential because they bring about genuine changes. Essential also because they build on the human and social capital, and on inclusive and sustainable development

I would like to thank all those who have contributed to this newsletter – often partners in the field – who have done their best, each in his or her own way, to illustrate the variety of results obtained by the clubs, demonstrating the potential of this approach in all sectors of development.

I hope you enjoy reading the newsletter!

Junko Sazaki
Director
Social Policies and Rural Institutions (ESP) Division



What is a Dimitra Club?

A Dimitra Club is a group of men, women, or both, who have decided to join together on a voluntary basis to pursue a common goal: find solutions to their common problems in the community and solve them using local resources. One of the first activities for any club is to draw up a list of problems to be addressed. Since the majority of Africa's rural population depends on agriculture for livelihoods, this theme always features high on the list of priorities. Other issues also figure prominently: nutrition, climate change, women's status, solidarity, and matters related to everyday life: health, education, infrastructure, peace.

A Dimitra Club is therefore an informal space for discussion and action, which enables communities to influence their environment, through communication, inclusive participation and community mobilization.

Thanks to local radio stations, the impact of these clubs multiplies: they can learn from each others and share their experiences and achievements to the benefit of the whole community.

Interview with the Coordinator of the Dimitra Clubs' Programme

“Taking their future into their own hands”



Christiane Monsieur, Coordinator of the Dimitra Clubs' Programme, has worked for several years on issues of rural community participation and the role of communication in development, especially on the FAO Dimitra Clubs' approach, which is central to this issue of the newsletter. Together with the Dimitra team, she works continuously in the areas of technical support, capitalization, and advocacy for the clubs, and campaigns for the systematic use in development projects of self-help approaches based on participation, community mobilization, and gender equality.

What is really special about the Dimitra Clubs' approach?

There are a number of features that make the clubs special. First is the fact that they are self-managed. No one is brought in from outside to moderate the discussions or shape their direction. Basically, the clubs receive support that enables them to better manage the group dynamic, as well as to examine the various problems addressed, hold discussions and engage in collective action. All this occurs in line with the values and philosophy of the Dimitra Clubs, whose members will gradually take on board – for example, the participation of all, men and women. No one is excluded from these groups.

Another striking characteristic of the clubs is the fact that they are not based on one single theme. It is the club members who choose the issues that they will explore, which are those of daily life in often remote villages where everything is lacking. So the clubs don't just discuss agricultural production, nutrition or even health, but any common topic that is a common cause for concern. That may be women's heavy workload, girls' education, or the village's isolation.

So it's an approach based on participation?

Absolutely, but it's important to understand that these clubs represent the very highest level of participation. It's not a case of opinions aired by the community on a given theme, nor of a participatory planning exercise. The clubs facilitate a real process of empowerment in a space that they have carved for themselves, where the members decide what to discuss, how to address their challenges, how to make the club work... It is the club members who

decide, and each one has the same voice and the same right to participate.

Unlike other approaches or development projects, the clubs enable people who are generally excluded to participate fully in community initiatives. These are often the most vulnerable, the poorest, women, young people, or groups from different ethnic backgrounds who are left behind.

What are the other principles that define the Dimitra Clubs' approach?

Communication is another critical component of the approach, in the sense of being able to express oneself and communicate, but also to have access to information and knowledge, especially through radio, the media and other appropriate technologies. It is important to encourage dialogue, for that does not happen of its own accord. Often, people don't have the opportunity to participate, because they don't have the space or the capacities, or rather they think that they don't have them.

Obviously, gender relations and issues are central to this approach, which frees up the voice of women and highlights the different needs and perspectives of men and women. This dynamic of discussion and community mobilization on issues that are of interest to everyone also enables the community to call into question certain norms and behaviors that are detrimental to women's well-being, and prevent them to become full citizens, with the same rights as men. Of course, this is just a start. You can't remove such deeply entrenched practices after a single club discussion or activity, but as the club members themselves often say: "it's an awakening of the consciousness".

All these principles are directly related to community mobilization, which makes the link between the clubs and their context: the community. This mobilization enables the community to become engaged too, strengthen its collective capacity of analysis and action, or simply join the insights of the clubs' analysis in the form of actions that are socially accepted, since they have been discussed and endorsed in a consultative manner by the traditional authorities. This leads to a transformation of rural society that is driven by the community. As a result, the relations between women and men, and their roles, undergo change, the idea being that this change benefits the community as a whole.

How does this approach open the way to sustainable development initiatives?

The clubs are often used to kickstart or coordinate project activities at local level, but they also help to support projects that are already being implemented, to strengthen their achievements and their sustainability. This is in a general manner, since the decisions are taken by the community, and belong to it, so their added value continues in the long term. The clubs carry on functioning after projects have ended, because they are self-sufficient and do not receive any external material or financial help. In Niger, we have recently seen cases of clubs set up eight years ago, which have received no support for years. Nearly 80% of them are still operating!

What is the role of the Dimitra team that you coordinate?

The Dimitra team consists of people based at FAO headquarters, but also in Niger and DR Congo. It plays an important role in terms of advocacy, information,

Dimitra Clubs: 4 Focus Areas

Participation

- Inclusion of the most marginalized, women and youth
- Involvement of all actors
- Ownership

Gender

- Strong emphasis on gender in all phases
- Men's engagement
- Women's voice and leadership



Community mobilization

- Organizational capacities
- Community dynamics
- Collective action

Communication

- Access to information
- Dialogue and networking
- Community radio, mobile phone and ICTs

methodology, monitoring and evaluation and capitalizing on the results obtained. Today it is still necessary to show the extent to which this type of approach is important for rural development. Also, given that it is a very flexible approach, coordination plays a crucial role in supporting project implementation. It is critical to be able to draw lessons from the experience of project implementation and offer methodological support to guarantee the quality of interventions, based on the principles of the approach.

Following these years of the development and success of the approach, it also seems increasingly clear that we need to follow two distinct strategies: developing national expertise capable of responding to the many requests we receive to launch Dimitra Clubs while fully respecting the basic principles, and a stronger commitment to ensuring that the approach is integrated into the actions of governments and their partners. This is an important point, since the clubs represent a “different” way of looking at development.

Partnership seems to be an important feature of the approach. Why is this?

The approach is based on the principle that strengthening human capital and collective action is critical in order to obtain positive change in rural areas. An inherent feature of each club is to look for collaborations – within the club itself, in the community, with producer organizations, local institutions, in fact with all development actors. It is clear that the clubs cannot do everything to resolve the problems that they face, especially with the few resources at their disposal.

In practical terms, the clubs promote dialogue, negotiating skills, self-confidence and the search for partnerships with all development actors present in the region and at national level, starting with government services (municipal and provincial). On this issue, and in the same vein, I would like to point out that, by its very nature, a club is never alone. FAO tries to encourage club networking, but some clubs don't wait for us to begin working together! It is important for them to rise above the purely local level.

What do you hope your readers will take away from this special issue of the newsletter?

As Coordinator, I would like to speak on behalf of the entire Dimitra team, and also the partners, who have given so much to ensure that Dimitra Clubs should flourish. All of us wish to see this model broadly applied to every development project. That's because we see on a daily basis the many remarkable results that the clubs can have on rural women, young people, and also men.

The stories and achievements presented here illustrate different impact areas of the clubs, and through them this newsletter aims to highlight the wealth and potential of rural women and men and their communities, who were the source of the material featured. Indeed, we must stop talking of project “beneficiaries”, since these men and women are the fully fledged actors – citizens who work for themselves and their community! One solution is to invest in these people, and together build development that is both sustainable and more equitable. ■

A flexible and innovative methodology

The Dimitra Clubs' methodology has been developed gradually, building on experiences in several countries, where it has worked in a flexible and organic manner. It is based on three types of activities that enable clubs to be set in place: awareness-raising, training and support, under the supervision of local organizations charged with monitoring the long-term process, with support from FAO. It is estimated that this process enables clubs to become autonomous within two years.

1 **During awareness-raising**, the partner organization presents the Dimitra Clubs' approach and its philosophy to all members of the community. Particular efforts are made to involve the most marginalized groups, such as women and youth. Awareness-raising is also conducted among the administrative and customary authorities and state services. This process leads to community ownership, and the first individual commitments.

2 **During the first year**, a series of training sessions are organized for club members and the radio stations. They focus on: the functioning of the clubs, problem analysis, gender equality, participatory communication, and the production of radio programmes. Other technical training is organized according to needs and opportunities.

3 **Close support** is provided by the partner organization. Its facilitators offer a regular presence in the communities and assist the clubs by providing FAO Dimitra methodological support. The aim is for the clubs to respect and adopt the principles of the approach. Specifically, these are: the participation of everyone, effective and inclusive communication, gender mainstreaming, networking between clubs, action as a systematic outcome of discussions, and the adoption of the approach by communities.



Dimitra Clubs, what impact?

A decade after FAO first launched the Dimitra Clubs, it is time to take stock. Many results have been seen, driven by both club members and the communities in which the clubs have been created. They have been reported on a regular basis in the Dimitra newsletter: the building of infrastructures, changes in the lives of men, women and their families, in the agriculture sector, in dietary habits, partnerships with the authorities and with others... the list goes on. Apart from these initiatives, the impact of the Dimitra Clubs has been deep reaching and lasting. Research conducted in 2017-2018 has allowed a clearer insight into how the approach works, and the wide range of results obtained.

Today, there are more than 3,000 Dimitra Clubs in sub-Saharan Africa (Burundi, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Mali, Niger and Senegal), bringing together some 90,000 members and direct beneficiaries, of whom one-third are women. It is estimated that the clubs have had a positive impact on about at least two million people who have benefited from the changes ushered in by the clubs, and the community dynamics that they generate. So how do the clubs work, what are their achievements, and what impact have they had at community level, in terms of gender equality, self-development and improvement in the quality of life? Two surveys have attempted to provide answers to these questions, giving a say to clubs' members in the first case, and to various actors from the rural sector in the second.

Mains areas of intervention

The main areas of Dimitra Clubs' intervention identified were very diverse: hygiene, sanitation, better access and improvement of the rural environment (23%); rethinking harmful cultural practices, such as early marriage and gender-based violence or food taboos (16%); solidarity and social cohesion (9%), education (8%), health (7%) and strengthening agricultural technical capacities (6%).

Almost all clubs have a radio set and listen to broadcasts about the Dimitra Clubs. The survey showed that in more than half of all cases, listening to these broadcasts takes place collectively. The most active clubs are those that listen to the radio, suggesting that the link between community mobilization and access to information plays a decisive role in supporting the decision-making process for rural communities.

The research team identified a series of profound changes brought about as a result of Dimitra Clubs, which can be summarized as follows:

Food security and resilience

The presence of Dimitra Clubs strengthens the development of mechanisms for economic resilience and food security. The majority of clubs engage in activities that enable them to access foodstuffs, or make their supply more stable. They often move into horticulture production on collective-community fields (30%). Excess production is offered for sale or stored in cereal banks for the lean season, with wide variations between countries. In Niger, for example, where 86% of clubs' agricultural production is not sold, the output is shared between club members (30%) or placed in mini-cereal banks (41%) in preparation for the lean season.

In the women's clubs, credit rotation groups or savings and credit systems are set in place. According to the survey, club members frequently discuss agricultural production and consumption. Compared with other villages, those with clubs invest greater sums in community initiatives, and women participate to a greater extent in agricultural activities.

For clubs that sell their output, the benefits generated are directly invested in club activities (purchase of seed, farming tools, etc.), or used to top up communal savings funds for some other purpose. More rarely, the profits are paid into a formal credit system.

Overall results show that 72% of the clubs surveyed organize members to make regular contributions to a communal fund; a percentage of those resources, which reaches nearly 100% in the case of DRC, is mainly used to help club members in need, or invested in income generating activities.

Participatory and inclusive decision-making

The process of choosing and discussing issues to be addressed by the clubs allows everyone's interests to be taken on board.

Public discussion based on the work carried out by each club lends weight to the viewpoints and needs of both men and women, even when these are difficult, encouraging dialogue to be continued within households. Mutual respect and social cohesion are strengthened as a result.

Local governance

A number of examples attest to the crucial role played by clubs in community governance, together with local authorities, who go so far as to seek clubs' contribution for municipal planning and in defining priorities. These good relations are a source of pride for the clubs (there is a marked difference here between villages with clubs and those without). The vast majority of the clubs are recognized as an important point of reference, enabling the community to cooperate and commit to development projects with any partner.

Dialogue and social cohesion

The emphasis placed by the clubs on dialogue and oral communication, especially through a strong partnership with community radio stations, leads to a sense of trust in a safe space, where sometimes intimate experiences are shared. A number of clubs indicate that their activities contribute to improving household life. Everywhere, club members consider that communication strengthens relations between people, as well as social cohesion. This dialogue, and the trust between groups who did not talk or did not talk anymore to one another, enables solutions to be found to local disagreements.

Community mobilization

The process of community mobilization carried out by the clubs leads to self-organization and transformation in the environment, which is not channeled through external aid (inputs or funding). In all the villages surveyed, this has given rise to concrete achievements that have

Impact study of the Dimitra Clubs (Niger)

The impact study was developed in Niger by a team of researchers of CESA0-Niger (Centre d'études et d'expérimentations sociales et économiques d'Afrique de l'Ouest) under the guidance of an international consultant using a qualitative research methodology. The study was carried out in 2017-2018 in 8 villages (with 50 Dimitra Clubs) in three regions of Niger, and in 2 control villages without Dimitra Clubs, to enable comparisons between similar villages with and without clubs. The team of researchers gathered data in a participatory manner, so as to evaluate the clubs' contribution in terms of gender equality and women's leadership, as well as resilience and community welfare.

Survey of the Dimitra Clubs (DR Congo, Niger and Senegal)

The study covered three countries: and was conducted in 2017 based on a series of questions asked to members of the Dimitra Clubs. The questions were discussed, and consensual answers given. The specific objective was to highlight the dynamics of the clubs and how they work, focusing on five major themes: agriculture, savings and credit, access to information, clubs' main achievements, and the level of women's participation in community decisions. A total of 310 Dimitra Clubs (9300 members), randomly chosen, took part in the survey: 233 in Niger, 62 in DRC and 15 in Senegal, the equivalent of 25 percent of the clubs operating at the time.



benefited the entire community. Made on a voluntary basis, the personal and direct investment of members in improved surroundings explains the high level of mobilization on the part of clubs and villages.

Gender and women's leadership

Nearly half the issues addressed by the clubs are linked to the situation and status of women, together with socio-cultural practices. Gradually, as a result of discussions on these themes and the collective action that results from them, these topics are gaining legitimacy in public debate, validated by the village assemblies.

The format of the clubs gives visibility to women's contribution and leadership, and promotes their recognition within communities. It has also been observed that the clubs bring about many specific transformations, stimulating positive values and practices in communities (solidarity, roles of traditional leaders).

Rural organizations

Being more proactive than most rural actors, the clubs have developed strong linkages at village and municipal levels. These institutions often consult them and take account of the issues raised when organiz-

ing territorial planning. Many clubs exhibit a high level of confidence in the dialogue with rural institutions. This achievement is clearly due to the clubs themselves, since it is rare that development initiatives focus on local governance and community participation beyond village level. ■

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Food Security and Nutrition





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Nearly one out of every nine people worldwide, suffer from undernourishment. The figures emerge from the latest FAO report on the state of food security and nutrition in the world (2018). Sub-Saharan Africa ranks as the region where the prevalence of undernourishment is highest, with an alarming 23.2 percent of the population subject to malnutrition, with slightly higher rates for women. Particularly women.

In the sub region, women produce up to 80 percent of foodstuffs for home consumption and assure household food security. Women also take care of dietary diversity and child health. They are responsible for subsistence farming and the processing of agricultural products sold at local markets, generating additional income for their families.

Yet, African women have to face the constant challenge posed by discriminatory socio-cultural norms that restrict their access to large numbers of assets, products and services, as well as to a complete and healthy diet. As a result, any intervention seeking to combat hunger and malnutrition will require a rural development approach that takes into account the gender differences. It is also crucial to involve men in matters of nutrition, which has traditionally been considered the exclusive domain of women.

The Dimitra Clubs' approach has proved its effectiveness in engaging both men and women to improve the livelihoods of rural communities, the empowerment of rural people, especially women, including in relation with the food systems.

Conserving and promoting biodiversity, improving nutritional education, facilitating equal access for women and men to information, resources, services, credit, rural organizations and decision-making processes are all crucial interventions for increasing agricultural production and ensuring food security.

Club discussions and dialogue within households and communities on the essential issues of everyday life have led the clubs and rural communities to change behaviours, not just in terms of diet, but also in agricultural practices and crop choices, often getting organized for the lean season and for supporting the most vulnerable.



Joint management of cereal stocks to ensure year-round food supplies



In Niger and Senegal, cereal banks are a strategy used by rural communities to ensure the availability and affordability of cereals and seeds during the lean period. Generally managed by organizations of men and women producers, these banks play a key role in the fight against food insecurity. As a result, they also hold a prominent place in the priority plans of a number of Dimitra Clubs.

In the Sahelian countries, agricultural production is often inadequate to cover the population's needs year-round. The period that precedes the first heavy rains in May-June is the most difficult time: alongside the depletion of stocks and the risk of food shortages, there is the challenge of obtaining seeds for the upcoming winter planting. In some years, during what is known as the 'lean period', large numbers of households are forced to consume their stock of seeds, to provide for the immediate food needs of the family.

In such circumstances, cereal banks offer an effective mechanism for rural communities, enabling people to have access to cereals at affordable prices, while ensuring the stability of supplies and costs for the whole community. The cereal stocks are set aside at the time of harvest, to be preserved and stored before being later sold to members of the group that manages the reserves at a competitive price, when cereals are becoming scarce and expensive on the national market.

Solutions in Niger

In the villages of Gamdou, Angoul Kourna and Badaraka, located in Niger's Zinder region, the Dimitra Clubs decided that the system of cereal banks could also be a valuable mechanism for the social protection of the most vulnerable groups. As a result, they have succeeded in setting up a system for storing and preserving seeds which, as well as providing these people with food during the lean period, also offers support to club members and other villagers who find themselves in difficulty at this time of the year. With each passing year, thanks to the good collective management set in place by their members, the clubs have seen their seeds' stocks grow.

In Saidou Goula, another village in Niger in the region of Maradi, a poor farming season led Dimitra Clubs to the conclusion that there were likely to be food shortages during the lean period. To avert this danger, the village assembly decided to set up a fund to buy millet, so as to build stocks for a cereal bank. The 135 beneficiaries of the initiative all agreed to donate part of their income to top up the clubs' funds. The money from the funds enabled one hundred 50 kg sacks of millet to be purchased. During the winter planting season, the most difficult period for ensuring supplies of foodstuffs, this stock was sold to villagers at an affordable price, producing a total of 1,700,000 CFA francs (about €USD 2,600). Part of this sum was deposited in an account belonging to the clubs, with the idea that it would be used to buy millet and cowpeas to supplement the cereal bank. The clubs also used the profits from this exercise to rent a 5 hectare (ha) field for the cultivation of millet and cowpeas, as part of their plan to develop the capacities of the cereal bank.

Following the same principle, the Dimitra Clubs in the village of Farin Rouwa, in the region of Zinder, have chosen to build up stocks of beans, in order to help people through the lean period. Some 440 units of beans have been packaged to ensure better preservation, prior to being sold to club members at competitive prices, between May and June, before the onset of the winter planting season. The system allows for sale on credit and reimbursement in kind, with a small surcharge as interest. Each club has a committee of five people, to manage the amounts intended for its members.

With far fewer resources, the Dimitra Clubs in the village of Badawa, in the same region, have set up a mini cereal bank (with a stock



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of fifteen 50 kg sacks of millet and ten sacks of Nalta jute (*Corchorus olitorius*), as well as a fund amassed from members' contributions and the sale of braided ropes. Through this initiative, club members are hoping not just to ensure food security, but also to provide social protection to poorer people, or those in precarious conditions during this lean period. The beneficiaries of this community support can feed themselves with dignity, and access seeds to plant during the winter season. In this way, they will be able to use their harvests, together with other contributions from relatives, to play their own role in increasing the annual stock of the cereal bank.

Senegal

In order to increase the storage capacity of the cereal banks, the village communities are exploring various solutions, depending on their agricultural potential and the means at their disposal. The village of Pont Gendarme, in Senegal, has 200 ha under irrigation, enabling it to double its output of rice. In the absence of a tractor for cultivation operations, and a thresher for after the harvest, the village had no resources for commercializing this double crop. At the request of the village assembly, the three local Dimitra Clubs appealed to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Equipment and the Directorate-General of National Extension

Service, both gave their favorable response. The village now has a large warehouse to store its produce after harvest.

The management of cereal banks, in particular, reflects the skills of these community members in preventing risks, as well as in designing and planning social protection and community development activities so that no one is left behind.

Aside from their positive and concrete results, these examples highlight the capacities of communities to search for and find common solutions to improve their livelihoods. ■



Any food that can be eaten by a man can also be eaten by a woman



In sub-Saharan Africa, one of the many causes of nutritional deficiencies, especially for women and young people, is the persistence of food bans and restrictions linked to strict socio-cultural norms. A number of Dimitra Clubs, from DR Congo to Niger, have discussed the issue of dietary taboos and the malnutrition that goes with them.



In several parts of Tshopo Province, DR Congo, there are as many as thirty dietary restrictions in place, mainly targeting rural women. At all stages of their lives, women are deprived of several categories of food: meat, fish, poultry, caterpillars, fruit or mushrooms. “These bans go back several generations, and have never been challenged. And women, who are the main people affected by these customary rules, have always lived in fear of transgressing the taboos,” explains Etienne Lifenya, member of a local Dimitra Club.

According to custom, women who consume a forbidden food expose themselves to various diseases, the most oft cited one being one known as Ilombo: “Tradition forbade us from eating catfish. We were told that we would become vulnerable to disorders such as hair discolouration, excessive weight loss, itching, skin complaints, diarrhoea or haemorrhages,” said Adama Bonoma, a member of another club.

Transgression also involves reparation. To be cured of one of these diseases, the price to be paid is an offering to the traditional leaders, who stand to benefit from the situation. “Some people think that the traditional leaders are casting spells over the people. All things considered, what proof is there that it’s eating taboo food that causes illness?” asks Etienne Lifenya, who belongs to the Bwenga Baimoli club, in the village of Yabaondo. In a sense, this question marks the starting point of a long debate on the issue, which has been conducted for the past three years by local Dimitra Clubs. In August 2014, a nutrition expert invited by a community radio station at the request of the clubs provided decisive insight when he explained that “any food that can be eaten by a man can also be eaten by a woman. In other words, food that one of them can eat presents no danger whatsoever to the health of the other.”

This is an argument that carries considerable weight, and which Dimitra Club leaders and facilitators have been careful to highlight in their awareness-raising campaigns (especially those directed at the traditional authorities), through training workshops or Dimitra Club programmes on community radio, using the testimony of women and men and the opinions of health experts.

As a result of awareness-raising initiatives on the nutritional value of forbidden foods, together with the involvement of traditional authorities, and the subsequent discussions held in both clubs and households, women have started eating these foodstuffs, without fearing for their health. Etienne Lifenya explains that after “being made aware of issues of nutrition and food security, we have understood that there was no justification for depriving women of nutritional foodstuffs that could improve their health and that of their children.” And he reveals that some traditional leaders have started to question their own beliefs about dietary taboos and have authorized their wives to eat what they like.

A Dimitra Club self-evaluation workshop, conducted in June 2017 in Kisangani, detected a significant positive trend regarding eating habits. Of the 28 dietary restrictions listed in 2014, more than 20 have been set aside. The Dimitra Clubs are continuing to work on lifting taboos on the consumption of other highly nutritious foods, such as snakes and turtles.

An assortment of banned foods to mark the occasion

These days, Adama Bonoma, like other women in her community, cooks and eats all sorts of fish, which is an important source of protein. This undoubtedly represents a step forward for gender equality, not least because men too have been involved in the nutrition debate.

To mark the occasion, in March 2016, in Isangi and Bengamisa, located in DR Congo’s Tshopo Province, the ending of the Women’s Month provided an opportunity to offer participants an assortment of foods including catfish, meat from ruminants, pork and other products that were previously forbidden for women.

In DR Congo, as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, the Dimitra Clubs are making a difference through various initiatives aimed at informing rural communities on the matter of nutrition. A case in point is in Danja,



a village in Niger’s Maradi region, where a tradition banned pregnant and breastfeeding women from eating braised corn and eggs.

As part of a nutritional education process, the village’s Dimitra Clubs proposed that the community should address the issue of dietary taboos. The discussions highlighted the lack of solid and objective arguments that could justify these food bans. In addition, various nutritional education sessions showed that eggs are a complete and affordable foodstuff, with beneficial nutritional properties.

Meanwhile, throughout all regions of DR Congo, as part of the fight against malnutrition and food insecurity, local Dimitra Club initiatives are resulting in growing numbers of traditional leaders and nutrition experts agreeing that dietary taboos should be lifted. ■

“Before, my family and my husband forbade me from eating pork, catfish and even eggs while I was breastfeeding. Since I became a member of a Dimitra Club, I have taken part in various awareness-raising activities. I’ve talked about this at home. My husband and my family have understood that it was unfair and useless. These days I eat everything, like the men. And I am in good health!”

FRANCINE LIFETA BASOKO, MODERATOR OF THE LAMUKA TOSALA MISALA DIMITRA CLUB, IN THE VILLAGE OF IMBOLO, TSHOPO PROVINCE.

The Dimitra Clubs stimulate a varied and balanced diet



Initiatives seeking to ensure a healthy and balanced diet often meet with resistance due to eating habits and deep-rooted socio-cultural norms. Through the Dimitra Clubs, many communities have decided to include nutritional education among their priorities and activities, leading to a range of successful experiences in Burundi, DR Congo, Niger and Senegal.



voandzou (Bambara groundnuts), highly nutritious ingredients available locally, which, when packaged and preserved, can be consumed year-round – a good basis for preparing a pap enriched with cowpeas or a puree of cowpeas mixed with squash as a dietary supplement for children over six months. This experience has not only led to a significant improvement in the nutritional intake of affected communities. It has also redefined gender roles and relations in the area of nutrition, as a result of the active participation of men, who have traditionally been excluded from these initiatives.

Another place, another experience, this time that of horticultural producers in eastern Senegal, in a village where people ate few vegetables. Following discussions on dietary diversification, men and women from the three local Dimitra Clubs decided to grow varieties that were not usually found in the area, on a quarter hectare of land made available by the village chief, and managed by women. Since April 2017, the first harvests of tomatoes and okra have been helping to vary and improve the community's diet. By selling part of the harvest, women have an opportunity to increase their incomes.

Pyramid Kitchen Gardens

Similar community dynamics can be seen in a village in the province of Ngozi, in northern Burundi. Local Dimitra Club members have decided to invest in horticultural crops and have used the kitchen garden approach as their model. These plots supply vegetables with high nutritional values throughout most of the year, close to the household since they are situated on family land. Initially launched as a tentative effort, the kitchen garden experience has slowly developed into one of the most powerful resources available to the local community for combating child malnutrition.

Meanwhile, in Idiofa Territory, DR Congo, Dimitra Clubs have set up a fishpond to

Millet paste and a sauce made of dried baobab leaves, served with groundnut paste seasoned with 'gabou' (dried onion powder); millet couscous served with cowpeas and squash, and seasoned with gabou; millet couscous mixed with green cassava, cowpea, squash and cabbage leaves and seasoned with oil... These three recipes are varied and balanced and have been created from local products that are rich in protein, carbohydrates and fats. They are not recipes taken from restaurant menus, but featured prominently during cooking demonstrations organized on 15 October 2016 by Dimitra Clubs in Niger's Dosso region, as part of the Joint Programme Accelerating Progress Towards Economic Empowerment of Rural Women (RWEE).

This programme, set up by four United Nations agencies (FAO, IFAD, UN Women and WFP) in various countries, including Niger, aims to improve the livelihoods of rural women through sustainable development. Among FAO's contributions to the initiative is the promotion of food secu-

rity through a programme for nutritional education at community level.

Women and Men

When FAO selected local NGO Kundji Fondo (Women United Against Malnutrition) to conduct nutritional education sessions, the choice of beneficiaries naturally fell on the Dimitra Clubs. Offering a unique mechanism to promote participation, access to information, transparency, inclusion and gender equality, the Dimitra Clubs were chosen as the point of entry for RWEE in Niger, overseeing the coordination of activities at village level and promoting local governance.

Prior to attending the nutritional education sessions, the Dimitra Club members – both men and women – had the opportunity to spend five months becoming familiar with the basic concepts of nutrition, in particular nutritional deficiencies, which mainly affect children under two and women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. In this way, participants learned about cowpeas and



enable local people to consume different species of fish that were previously hard to find. This has made a significant contribution to meeting the nutritional needs of the local community, especially women and young people. Moreover, the entire community is receiving an additional benefit from the initiative, as a share of the fish is sold by the clubs at local markets.

Although generally a collective undertaking, nutritional education can be beneficial at individual level. An egg producer who lives on Burenge hill in Burundi used to sell his entire output, without paying attention to the malnourished state of his children. When they heard about the situation, Dimitra Club members from the local Club Kerebuka decided to pass on some of the basic principles of nutrition that they had learned during a nutritional education session at their club. As a result of this laudable initiative, the man eventually understood the importance of a varied diet for his health and that of his family, and he now sets aside some of the eggs for his children.

Positive changes

Back in Niger, in the region of Dosso, in May 2016 FAO conducted a survey on changes in eating habits among the population, following nutritional education initiatives organized through the Dimitra Clubs. The results of this study clearly show that households whose members belong to these clubs have gradually adopted new dietary practices, adding different ingredients to make up a varied and balanced diet. The same survey highlighted the impact that this experience has had on other clubs and villages in the same region.

One example is Falwel, where nutritional education sessions, demonstrations and discussions conducted within Dimitra Clubs and the village assembly have spurred positive changes in the choice of foodstuffs produced, and the way that they are consumed. “Access to information on the nutritional value of our farm produce has completely changed our eating habits. We have significantly enriched and increased cultivation of cash crops such as cowpeas, moringa,

squash and sesame, due to their high nutritional value. We are also producing more of them, so we can be sure of having a better balance in our diet,” says Hadiza Seyni, a club member in the village of Falwel.

These nutritional education initiatives, organized through the intervention of Dimitra Clubs, have led to increased knowledge about the importance of nutritional intake, but they have the added advantage of encouraging the consumption of new foods prepared with innovative recipes. It is a gastronomic pleasure that Maimouna Adamou, a Dimitra Club leader in Mallan Koira, Niger, is keen to embrace. “All the women cooks in our village are now competing to produce the best squash-based recipe,” she says. “Our eating habits have been radically changed. There can be no doubt that the nutritional education offered through the clubs has enabled us to discover the full nutritional value of squash.” ■

Gender and women's leadership





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Rural women and girls make essential contributions to agriculture, rural economy and households' food security. Yet, compared to men they have less access to and control over resources, services, information, education, training and technology. Their socio-economic opportunities are limited by persistent gender inequalities and discrimination. Rural women also suffer from greater work burden and limited participation, decision-making power, representation and leadership in rural organizations. This situation poses a major obstacle to improved livelihoods, and contributes to perpetuate rural poverty.

In this context, specific interventions are needed to improve the technical, economic and financial services provided to the most vulnerable, often women and youth. However, this is not enough. A strong focus is necessary on developing social capital, promote human development and overcome the root causes of social inequalities that maintain 821 million people worldwide chronically undernourished.

This focus is addressed through the Dimitra Clubs. Gender equality and empowerment of smallholder farmers – both women and men, are at the heart of this FAO approach. The clubs, as a community-based transformative approach, give a voice to the most excluded and foster community mobilization, dialogue and collective action. They trigger processes of change that gradually transform behaviours and social norms that are a widely recognized barrier to gender equality.

All members of the community, regardless their sex and social standing, participate in this inclusive process: the very nature of the approach leads to better consideration of the specificities, needs and aspirations of both men and women. This way, the Dimitra Clubs turn out to be a gender-transformative approach that facilitates, among others, community discussions about sensitive subjects, such as child marriage and gender-based violence, once considered taboos or treated as 'women's issues'.



Women leaders emerging from the Dimitra Clubs



The clubs' approach lies mainly in fostering the commitment of everyone – men and women, young and old – to work towards the development of their community. Since their launch, the clubs have made it a priority to take account of gender and the meaningful participation of women in decision-making. This resulted in the emergence of women's leadership, as illustrated by the stories of four women from different countries, whose lives have changed thanks to the Dimitra Clubs.

Djamila

Djamila Hassan never went to school. She lives in Gasseda, a small village in Niger, and is married to a religious leader, a man who is very well known in the community. As with many families, her husband is the head of household; by tradition, it is he who takes the decisions that affect household life, without consultation.

Djamila never had a chance to make her voice heard, give her opinion or make suggestions. For her, that would have been unthinkable: "Before the Dimitra Clubs were set up, I had no idea of my capacities to organize my ideas and speak in public. I lacked self-confidence. I was incapable of facing my husband and propose subjects

to discuss. These days, I have no hesitation in sharing with him the knowledge I have acquired from the club."

Djamila is currently the club moderator, playing a leading role and taking part in all discussions and decision-making. She could have lived out her life in the shadow of her husband, basking in his good reputation and respectability. Instead, she has chosen to commit herself to the development of her community, and it is with pride that she carries out this role.

The example of Djamila is not unique in Gasseda, a village that is well advanced in mainstreaming gender into all aspects of community life.

Souweyba

Souweyba is leader of another women's club in Gasseda. It was partly as a result of her determination that in 2012 the village received a multifunctional platform supplied by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The dynamism and forcefulness shown by Souweyba and other members of the village's Dimitra Clubs led to a strong case being drawn up; enabling the village to be selected for this multifunctional platform, which today is entirely managed by women: "It is thanks to the clubs that we have become well organized and benefited from the platform. We have learned to think carefully about what we want, then argue our case and convince the people we have to speak to."



DJAMILA



SOUWEYBA



MAGUY



MYRIAM

The platform, a mechanical tool that serves as a husker, grinder and battery charger, also supplies the villagers with electricity. Using the time saved from their daily work burden, village women are better able to invest in other income generating activities, such as horticulture.

Maguy

Thousands of kilometres from Gassed, another women leader is mapping out a path that is similar to that trodden by Souweyba. Maguy, a young mother of two children, lives in Yanonge, in the province of Tshopo in DR Congo. Born into a modest rural family, Maguy is Chair of the Agricultural Producer Organization and Vice Chair of the Producer Organization of Yanonge. At first sight, she makes a strong impression due to her determination and self-assurance. Highly versatile, Maguy is studying agriculture, while also involved in supporting fifteen Dimitra Clubs in the region.

Her main source of income is agriculture. Maguy knows all there is to know about growing cowpeas, groundnuts and palm nuts. She is proud of doing a tough job, and doing it as well as any man: "I attended an agricultural technical school, I'm an agronomist and so I work just like men do. I

respect spacing and crop conditions. That's what makes the difference between my field and others."

Maguy describes herself as an "agriwoman", a term she coined herself to redefine the position of women who do a job that was once the exclusive preserve of men.

Myriam

At Itenge, also in DR Congo, the setting up of Dimitra Clubs has had a significant impact on the life of Myriam, in terms of individual experiences and personal development. Her involvement and commitment to the cause of the community quickly resulted in Myriam being appointed facilitator of her village club: "Since I became facilitator, we have renovated the club premises. It was me who got everyone interested in the idea. Then I suggested that we buy the medicines ourselves for our health centre."

As a result of awareness-raising activities conducted under Myriam's guidance, the village rallied to organize a complete renovation of the health centre, which had fallen into disrepair since 2003. A nurse was appointed, club members paid contributions to purchase medicines, and everyone is working together to address the health

problems. From now on, sick people and pregnant women will no longer have to travel several kilometres on foot or by bike to reach the nearest hospital. Myriam sees the general commitment in favour of this cause as a personal success.

Like Myriam, Maguy, Souweyba and Djamila, growing numbers of other rural women are emerging as actors – or actresses – of development for their communities. The strengthening of their capacities for reflection, organization, action and making proposals has revealed their massive potential for helping to transform the rural environment and improve livelihoods for village communities. This leadership has been made available to them through the Dimitra Clubs. ■



Gender roles and relations change visibly

The arrival of the Dimitra Clubs in rural areas of Niger, Senegal and DR Congo has reinforced the bonds of friendship and marriage in the communities. Improved dialogue and respect between women and men are bringing changes in gender roles and relations, and substantial gains for the progress and social development of rural communities.

Improved dialogue and communication between women and men is a deep societal transformation that is visible in all villages where there are Dimitra Clubs.

Today, both women and men's Dimitra Clubs are used to tackle subjects once considered taboos or "only women's issues", from family planning and women's work burden to girls' education and domestic violence. Gradually, these themes have captured men's attention and become subjects of discussion at community level.

Even the girl members of the clubs of Tassaoou-Haoussa, in Niger, insist on this transformation, saying that their club is a special place to talk about the status of women: "We often talk about forced and early marriage, violence against women in the home. We also discuss girls' school enrolment, pre and post-natal consultations, and so on. We participate in decision-making and our opinions matter a lot even at village meetings in presence of the village chief."

Both women and men are given equal opportunities to participate in the Dimitra Clubs. Throughout the process, they develop ability to express themselves, communicate, solve problems collectively and gain leadership skills. They express better their needs and concerns, make informed choices and influence local decisions.

Equal participation is not a mere principle but is concretely applied, contributing to women's empowerment and progress for all. As put by a member of a men-only Dimitra Club from Tambacounda, Senegal, "Before, no one allowed women to attend village meetings. Today, all men have understood that if their wives participate in meetings, it is an advantage for the whole community and for the future of our children."

Stakeholders who traditionally hold power in rural areas such as traditional and

religious leaders and local authorities also engage actively in this process, which is key for promoting sociocultural changes.

Hamadou Sidikou, village chief of Gassedou, Niger, describes how the Dimitra Clubs trigger changes in behaviours and practices at community level: "If someone dares telling you that in our village there are no Dimitra Clubs, you will not believe it: you can feel their presence! The clubs brought social cohesion, dialogue and peace to our village. Before I had to settle at least two disputes a week, this is over today! Even violence against women has decreased significantly. I invite everyone to join the Dimitra Clubs!"

Reduction of domestic violence and joint management of household incomes

between men and women is a leitmotiv in most villages. This was also flagged by midwives of Kwadarawa, Niger, who said "the truth is that violence has decreased in the homes. It's rare now to see things like beating or verbal abuses happening in the village. All women are fighting for something. Moreover, women are more in business than men, they spend all the time doing income-generating activities. The most important change we have noticed is that men and women get on well now, fighting together for household's well-being."

The changes reported also concern household's chores. Men are starting to carry out some tasks previously under the responsibility of women and girls only (e.g. dressing and cleaning the children, preparing food,



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fetching water, etc.). Likewise, it is now accepted for women to undertake certain tasks that were previously attributed to men only.

The Club of the fishing village of Isangi in the Tshopo Province, in the northeast of the Democratic Republic of Congo, provides a remarkable example of how a redefinition of gender roles has improved food security and nutrition. On this huge territory, fishing is a key economic activity that is traditionally controlled by men. Therefore, to increase household food security and incomes, why not allow women to fish? This question was raised during the discussions of the local Dimitra Club.

Henri Esenge Ngezi has been a member of the Dimitra Club for five years and has taken part in the discussions about fishing: "Men-women equality and the gender division of labour were discussed in our Dimitra Club for the first time. We have realized that women can also play a proactive role in fishing activities."

The decision to let women fish has brought many positive results, including better nutrition, increased households' incomes and enhanced women's status. ■



TESTIMONY SENEGAL

"I managed to overcome my shyness and speak in public"

Bineta Diao, woman leader of a Dimitra Club in Sinthiou Elhadji (Koussanar), Senegal

I am twenty-seven years old and the mother of four children – three girls and a boy. Married at the age of fifteen, I left my village in 2005 to live in my marital home in Sinthiou Elhadji.

I was in my last year of primary school when my older sister died, leaving a newborn baby. My mother had herself just given birth and couldn't take care of two babies on her own at the same time. It was then that my family decided to end my schooling so that I could look after my sister's child. I never had the chance to return to my studies.

When I moved to the marital home in Sinthiou Elhadji in 2005, I immediately joined the village women's group, so as to take part in their activities and help me settle in to this new environment. For twelve years I remained a simple group member, reserved, quiet and extremely shy, no doubt due to my previous experiences. Evaluation meetings held for the women group's tontine did nothing to change my character, or to help me overcome my shyness.

In January 2017, the Dimitra Clubs were launched in my village and, very reluctantly, I found myself being chosen as leader of the women's club. I was seized by panic at the very thought of letting down the people who had appointed me to represent them.

It was thanks to training and to taking the floor during village assemblies and other club meetings that I gradually managed to overcome my shyness and speak in public with a calm, clear voice. These days I am able to develop and express my ideas in public without a trace of fear and with a great deal of confidence and control, whether or not the audience is made up exclusively of women, or whether men are also present, as is sometimes the case.

My greatest source of pride is the way that the villagers, and especially the women, consult me on a regular basis, seeking my opinion on issues that concern them and



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put me in the forefront when a community decision needs to be taken. The esteem and trust shown towards me by both men and women mean that my standing has now risen considerably within the village. And that has brought out leadership qualities in me that I never dreamed I had. With all that I have been through in my life, this development of my personality comes as a reward and a great comfort, which I owe to the Dimitra Clubs. ■

Dialogue as a tool to fight gender-based violence



In DR Congo, as in many countries, gender-based violence has devastating consequences for agriculture and food security. The Dimitra Clubs tackle these issues in their own way, notably through dialogue.

Gender-based violence is the most extreme manifestation of gender inequality. Not only is it an offence to personal dignity and a violation of human rights, it also limits women's freedom, their ability to take action or voice their opinion, and restricts their access to services, information and resources. The Dimitra Clubs' approach has proved to be highly effective in improving social cohesion and dialogue between men and women within communities and households. The approach has had also a significant impact on reducing gender-based violence, even in difficult contexts affected by conflict and violence at different levels.

Rural women in developing countries frequently play a fundamental role in the agriculture sector. In sub-Saharan Africa, they traditionally carry out most of the work linked to food production and are responsible for the nutrition of their families. As a result, gender-based violence (GBV) against women can have devastating effects on agriculture and food security.

This is one of the reasons why development approaches that focus on empowering people, as well as on gender equality and women's access to information, leadership, services and resources, have an important role to play in combating GBV.

As a participatory approach towards empowerment that seeks to involve men as much as women in development related issues, the Dimitra Clubs have achieved significant results at community level, including in terms of social cohesion and peace-building. That has been particularly reflected in a tangible decline in violence, especially against women.

In Kaniola, eastern DR Congo, during the period between 1996 and 2012, the presence of armed gangs gave rise to a number of cases of extreme violence, whose main victims were women and girls from the village. Many of them were forcefully taken to the forest, where they remained for several months, carrying weapons and used as sex slaves. The consequences for women were disastrous,

not to mention the violation of their human rights and their dignity: a surge in sexually transmitted diseases, high HIV/AIDS rates, early and/or unwanted pregnancies, marginalization of women who were abducted and/or raped, fragmented families and a growing number of orphans.

Following discussions, the four Dimitra Clubs in Kaniola decided to take concrete action to address this dramatic situation. Awareness-raising sessions were organized by the clubs to put an end to the exclusion of women and girls who had been abducted or raped by the armed gangs, and meanwhile these women were given counselling and encouraged to attend local health centres for appropriate examination and care.

The results of these initiatives soon became evident. A number of husbands who had previously repudiated their wives reconsidered their decisions, and many of the women who had been raped underwent vocational training in various sectors, such as dressmaking, agriculture, soap-making, fruit juice production, etc. In addition, several young women have been able to continue their studies, which had been interrupted by their tragic experience.

In DR Congo, where some 43% of girls are married before the age of 18, child marriage is a widespread form of violence, and a major obstacle to all development efforts: "Before, child marriage was a taboo subject for we Yansi people. No one talked about it, yet this practice had so many repercussions. It was a real constraint for development," says Mimi Mungiele, member of a Dimitra Club in Bulungu, located in Kwilu province, several hundred kilometres from Kinshasa.

The Dimitra Clubs were launched in the region as part of a joint project with UNICEF, called, which specifically targets gender-based violence. One of the project's objectives was to reduce women's work burden within households, calling into question the division of labour and thereby contributing to a fairer distribution of this workload and

of the economic power between men and women. "Through the Dimitra Clubs we have learned many things about gender equality. The clubs have given us the opportunity to say no to the practice that prevented our daughters from going to school and forced them to stay at home to help with household and farm chores. This is a struggle that must continue, and we are certain that we will succeed in reducing this phenomenon to a large extent" adds Mungiele. ■

Testimony

Françoise, woman leader of a Dimitra Club in Kenge, Kwango province:

"My husband had repudiated me and turned me out of the house, due to an infection which, he said, affected my femininity (a sexually transmitted infection). He told my family that I had contracted the infection because I had worked as a prostitute. I felt humiliated before both our families.

At the time, we did not know that the infection was caused by the very basic and dirty toilets that we used.

Several days later, my husband joined the Dimitra Club in the village of Manzau, whose members were following awareness-raising sessions on the negative consequences of using dirty latrines, and the infections that they can cause.

As a result of these discussions, my husband understood that I had contracted the infection due to our ignorance. We are now reconciled, I too belong to a Dimitra Club and we are working together to combat poor sanitation, so that no one ever has to go through what I endured."

NIGER



16 days of activism against gender-based violence

As part of the 2017 global campaign “16 days of activism against gender-based violence”, organized each year from 25 November to 10 December, the Dimitra Clubs have launched a dialogue on this theme in a number of villages, laying the foundations for a discussion on the elimination of violence against women.

In Niger, as in many other countries, gender-based violence is common and takes many different forms. The extent of early marriage is particularly worrying in a country where the rate of this practice is the highest in the world. One out of every four girls is married before the age of 15. Here, customs and traditions are deeply entrenched and determine the behaviour of the vast majority of people, especially in rural areas. To combat this harmful practice, and gender-based violence in general, FAO and the national NGOs AEDL and APEBA (implementing partners of the Dimitra Clubs' approach in Niger) have decided to mobilize the clubs on this crucial issue in 16 partner municipalities in the regions of Tillabéry, Dosso, Maradi, Tahoua and Zinder.

Freeing women's voice

In these villages the Dimitra Clubs have launched a process that is leading to the recognition of the existence of gender-based violence against women and girls. Following the awareness-raising campaign conducted by the partner NGOs, each Dimitra Club identified the various forms of violence against women and discussed the most common forms in order to find solutions together. Subsequently, during community events clubs' representatives have illustrated the commitments undertaken and the transformations sought, in the presence of local authorities (village chief and mayor of the municipality).

Several forms of violence

Among the forms of violence identified, the most frequently cited were the following:

- Early and forced marriages
- Unequal distribution of household tasks, including when sick or pregnant
- Lack of control by women over household budgets, whose revenues they themselves generate
- Withdrawing girls from school to make them do household tasks or get married
- Lack of dialogue in households and scant participation by women in household decision-making
- Prohibition to participate in public activities
- Physical violence at household's level
- Sexual assault and rape of girls

– Prolonged absence of husbands who migrate and give no news

Such types of violence against women are now among the issues addressed by the clubs and communities, opening the door to discussions in the months that follow and implementation of local solutions.

The engagement of the authorities was remarkable during the campaign. In Zinder, the Governor played an active role in the clubs' feedback sessions, while in the region of Tillabéri, in Banizoumbou, Mr Amani Abdou, Minister for Community Development and

Territorial Planning, closed the campaign and reiterated the Government's commitment to grassroots development initiatives.

“The Dimitra Club initiative is closely aligned with our primary development objectives. The clubs play a role in raising awareness, setting in place development initiatives and social mobilization. We must support women if we want to solve the problem at its root. Women who are fighting to make a contribution to the development of Niger do not deserve such treatment. That's why violence against women has to stop.” ■



Community mobilization





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The Dimitra Clubs are first and foremost about participation and community mobilization, hence about a process of development and change that is entirely managed by the community, with the impetus of the clubs' members, and with no outside intervention.

All inhabitants of a rural community – whatever their sex, age or ethnic origin – can become club members. These spaces enable them to strengthen their capacities to identify and analyze common priorities and challenges for the village, and to seek solutions using local resources. It also offers an opportunity to all members to participate in the life of their village or neighborhood, as well as in local governance and decisions about the development of their environment.

The subjects chosen for discussion by the clubs, and the proposals for solutions, reflect each person's real needs and interests, as well as the concerns of the community. In many cases, the solutions adopted are implemented together with the traditional authorities and the rest of the community. The most striking examples, presented in this section, show the engagement of the entire community to improve people's livelihoods. Whether discussions address the issues of roads, health centres or accommodation for teachers, the community rallies and takes action, men and women together. Sustainability and ownership are no obstacle, since it is the clubs and the whole community that take control of their own development and improve their standard of living, becoming active citizens in their own right.

Although the examples given here mainly present cases of mobilization linked to physical achievements, all the other sections of this newsletter are also examples of community mobilization. Changes in gender roles and relations, youth involvement, women's leadership, social cohesion, climate change – there could be no deep-reaching transformation in these areas if the communities were not organizing themselves and making efforts to resolve common problems by working together, with the agreement of traditional and administrative authorities.



NIGER

The village of Rigar Djerma breaks out its isolation



Remoteness often features among the primary obstacles to development identified by the Dimitra Clubs. In Rigar Djerma, the entire village has rallied to build a road aimed at improving local livelihoods.

Rigar Djerma is a village situated in the municipality of Koléram in the region of Zinder. Its proximity to the towns of Mirriah and Zinder has favoured the electrification of the village and the provision of safe drinking water through a mini water supply system. The village is approximately 1.5 km from the national asphalt road. To reach that road, you have to take a small, very sandy track. Travelling along this in a cart is a torment for villagers needing to make urgent journeys, whether it be for a medical emergency, to have a baby or to go shopping at the market.

Concerned by this problem, the Dimitra youth club started discussions on the need to undertake work to pave this stretch, which links the village to the national road. The village assembly was unanimous in

its decision to accept the proposal by all the Dimitra Clubs to build a paved road from the village to the national road. Men, women, young people and village dignitaries pledged to make this common initiative a success. No sooner said than done, the activities were planned and action got underway. The first stage, at the beginning of May 2016, involved setting up a committee charged of negotiating with landowners to decide on the boundaries for the width of the road.

Support from the authorities

The committee also undertook to convey information to the traditional and municipal, departmental and regional administrative authorities. In addition, the technical services for public works were approached, to request the free provision

of some gravel left unused after work finished to upgrade an old national road. After deciding on the boundaries of the road, the community, under the supervision of the committee, started to work on removing the sand from a stretch of about 1 km of the unpaved track.

Before starting the major work, the village assembly was careful to clarify several points, which were presented to the community in the form of directives: participation of villagers would be on a voluntary basis, with the exception of the carters and volunteers working in the gravel pit, who would receive 500 FCFA to feed their animals or buy water. The committee also fixed a monthly sum of 1 000 FCFA to be contributed by each household, during May and June 2016. The clubs informed and launched an appeal to





all former inhabitants of the village who had since moved away, and to all those of good will, for a contribution to the works.

The women's club immediately offered its support, in the form of sacks of bran as compensation for the carters. Several weeks after the work started, the villagers' physical, financial and material investment, under the impetus of the Dimitra Clubs, had paid off with the application of the first layers of laterite.

One week after works began, the committee sent a delegation to the Mayor of the municipality of Koléram, to inform him of progress on the plan of action drawn up by the Dimitra Clubs. Convinced by the commitment and determination of the village of Rigar Djerma, the municipality allocated a sum of 100 000 FCFA to the committee as a contribution to the works. In total, more than 1 million CFA were mobilized as part of efforts to build this

trunk road. These funds, amassed thanks to the Dimitra Clubs, enabled a second layer of laterite to be applied to the entire length of the road, shortly before the onset of the winter season.

The new road, a common good

The road is now operational and open to traffic, to the great relief of the village chief. "The new road has already been used by the first vehicles to transport passengers and merchandise, at exceptional prices," he says, adding that there are rules that must be respected in order to ensure that the road lasts for a long time. In particular, carters are prohibited from using the entire width of the road, since the animals' hooves risk damaging the road surface. They are however allowed to travel on the shoulders of the road. As a common good, it is important that this new road should be preserved, says the village chief, who expresses his heartfelt thanks to the "Dimitra Clubs which increase our strength".

In response to young people from a neighbouring village, who claimed in a mocking tone that it was up to the State or international projects to build paved roads or surface tracks with laterite, Ibrahim Moutari, one of the leaders of the Dimitra youth Club in Rigar Djerma, gave this apposite reply: "carrying out an undertaking of this scale requires will and organization".

Aside from building this road – and always under the impetus of the Dimitra Clubs – the village of Rigar Djerma has undertaken a number of other initiatives for the development of the community: horticulture and collective fields to strengthen food security, replanting trees in the school and fields to restore and protect the environment, setting up small funds to facilitate community works and help vulnerable people, maintenance work on public assets, public health measures to ensure hygiene in the village, etc. ■

Bamboo washbasins to combat diseases

The Dimitra Club of Idiofa, in the Province of Kwilu (DRC), identified the lack of hygiene as a crucial issue to address for fighting diseases transmitted by unwashed hands. Local solutions were found and implemented by the club to tackle the problem.

At Idiofa, people have to go to enormous health care expenses for diseases that could easily be avoided. A little more hygiene in their daily lives could save a great deal of money. That is the verdict of the Dimitra Club EBAA, whose moderator Madame Moseka observes that “most communities aren’t in the habit of washing their hands before meals or breastfeeding or after going to the toilet, and very rarely do they do it before preparing food”. This explains the spread of diseases linked to dirty hands, such as cholera or typhoid fever. “It was during a visit to club members to talk about a delay in paying subscriptions when I realized that behind these financial worries were hiding some serious health problems”, she adds.

Given the seriousness of the situation, from a health but also an economic and social perspective, she decided to alert the members of the local Dimitra Club about the urgency of taking measures to address the problem. “The club members began to discuss possible solutions that they could put in place using their own resources. They went to the health centre, where they were advised that hands should be washed on a systematic basis and rules of hygiene respected, and it was recommended that they buy, for USD 10 each, washbasins being popularized by UNICEF”, continues the club moderator.

Washbasins out of bamboo

Since the selling price of this system was beyond the means of households with modest incomes, members of the EBAA Dimitra Club decided to make washbasins out of bamboo.

With the support of health care staff, the club members then launched a campaign to raise awareness about use of the bamboo pump, which sold for USD 0.2 and was made available free of charge to those unable to afford the cost. Door-to-door visits, neighbourhood gatherings and



meetings at the local health centre enabled the clubs to highlight the importance of performing this simple gesture using soap to protect against disease spread by dirty hands, thereby saving the cost of needless medical expenses. “Washing your hands means savings in medical care” was the campaign slogan chosen by the club.

The message was well received by the community, and the Dimitra Club members quickly began to see a clear improvement in respect for rules of hygiene and their effects on health.

A drop in the cases of disease

The progress was confirmed by Marie, chief nurse at a medical centre, who says that following “the distribution of washbasins to almost 500 households, we saw a distinct drop in the number of cases of disease spread by dirty hands in the community. We are now seeing 13 cases per week, compared with 72 before the initiative was launched by the Dimitra Club, making a decline of 80.5%”.

This is a good thing for household budgets, given that it costs 28 000 Congolese francs (about USD 28) to treat a child infected with

typhoid fever. That is the equivalent of the sales price of a sack of maize – money that families could use to meet other expenses.

Through the channel of community radio stations such as Radio Nsemo, other villages began raising awareness in their communities about using bamboo washbasins and respecting rules of hygiene. Handwashing has gradually become common practice in households, making the Dimitra Clubs an example in the fight to combat disease spread by dirty hands. “We have received recognition from an official at the Ministry of Children, Women and Families, and the producer of Radio Nsemo, who have told us that they consider the Dimitra Clubs to be a model for many communities,” says a community leader and moderator of the Etum-Y-Nzal Dimitra Club. ■

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Women's leadership for sustaining peace

Simone lives in Bossangoa, nearly 300 km away from Bangui, the capital of Central African Republic (CAR). She never went to school and yet she is the moderator of the Club Dimitra "City of Peace" of the third district. As an elected moderator of the club, she facilitates the discussions on the problems identified by the club's members while ensuring the full participation of all.

"Thanks to the Dimitra Club, I became aware of my ability to speak up in public and even to local authorities, to express myself without any problem," she recalls.

A personal satisfaction that goes beyond the club because "City of Peace" was chosen, in an advisory capacity, to echo the women's voice to the Municipality of Bossangoa. This reflects the interest of the district authorities in the initiative and in the Dimitra Clubs approach, as a driver for community mobilization and a means to amplify the voice of both women and men.

Over 60 Dimitra Clubs were created in 2018 in several areas of the country (Bossangoa, Bambari, Kaga Bandoro and Bangui) as part of the project "Promotion of Women's

Political Participation and Leadership in Peace Consolidation. This project is funded by the Peace Building Fund and implemented by UNDP, UN Women and FAO. It is a response to women and girls' low participation in local development issues and peace processes and a strategy to improve their access to decision-making and governance. It also aims to enhance the leadership of women of all ages in order to enable them to participate in recovery and peace consolidation in Central African Republic.

Problem-solving, collective action, better access to information, participation of all, including women and girls, have been at the core of the Dimitra Clubs efforts, together with community mobilization. This has enabled women and men in rural communi-



ties to improve dialogue and act as agents of change. The clubs are also working to improve the well-being of rural communities and neighborhoods, which is essential for women and men to take up together the great challenges of consolidating peace in the country. ■

TESTIMONY DR CONGO

Learning to read and write

Nyabadeux Lukombo, who lives in the village of Irongo in Sud Kivu, is married with seven children. She has been a Dimitra Club member for two years. She describes how her village club enabled her to learn to read and write.

"My story is that of a woman who has never been to school and who therefore did not know how to read or write. When our club took the initiative to organize literacy courses I spoke about it to my husband, who at the time was not yet a member. He had no hesitation in encouraging me to sign up, explaining how tired he was of being unable to communicate with me by written message when we was away.

Convinced and highly motivated, I was one of the first people to follow the accelerated programme. After six months, during which there were three sessions a week, we finished the learning cycle. No one

can imagine the joy I felt when, for the first time in my life, I sent an SMS to my husband, showing him that I could now read and write. Writing short texts on my telephone has become a child's game.

All my children are proud of me and say, teasingly, that I am now up-to-date. All their friends know about this change in my life. This skill has opened up a new phase in my existence, and I am well aware of the fact that I would have missed out on tremendous opportunities if I had not had the chance to follow this literacy course organized by my Dimitra Club.

Two of my female neighbours, one of them

a very young mother who did not have a chance to go to school, have decided to follow my example and sign up for the next course. The whole village finds satisfaction in the achievements of our Dimitra Club, and we enrol new members at each weekly meeting. Currently, the club has sixty members. Given this number, FAO has advised us to set up a new club. We are thinking about it. Such has been the success of the Dimitra Clubs that the village of Nyarubuye, on the hill opposite to us, has followed our example and launched its own club a few months ago." ■

Water, a source of community mobilization



In each country where Dimitra Clubs have been set up, ensuring access to water has often been a core concern. Here are three examples of community mobilization triggered by clubs in Niger and Burundi.

Village of Marafa Koira, Dosso region, Niger

In Marafa Koira, the sole source of water was an ancient well with a depth of 60 metres. Over a period of ten years, the collapse of the well forced the villagers, especially women, to take on the chore of fetching water from villages situated a dozen miles away. Then came the launch of the Dimitra Clubs, and the mobilization of all local actors.

For the well to be repaired, the village had initially appealed with no success to the technical services at municipal, departmental and even regional levels. There were no funds specifically allocated to the restoration of the well in Marafa Koira.

It was during meetings of the newly launched Dimitra Clubs that the villagers began to examine the extent of the problem, and evaluate the resources needed to restore the well. After several meetings of the village assembly, the clubs set themselves the challenge of community mobilization to resolve the problem of ensuring water supply to the village.

A financial contribution for each household was established, enabling more than 800 000 FCFA (about USD 1,400) to be amassed after just two months.

The clubs also engaged the village chief, asking him to find a technician to repair the well. Following negotiations on the cost, the technician chosen accepted a figure of 600 000 FCFA (about USD 1,000), on condition that the manpower be supplied by the village. The remainder of the budget was used to buy cement. The fund proved insufficient to cover the entire restoration, so during the works the clubs again rallied to appeal to people's good will. This time, the community spirit enabled 180 000 FCA (USD 300) to be collected, a figure that allowed the repairs to the well to be completed, three months after the works had first started.

Mamoudou Arzika, village chief of Marafa Koira, one foot on the lip of the well and his

stick firmly planted in the ground, makes no effort to conceal his pride and gratitude. "The Dimitra Clubs have enabled us to work with dignity. They have supported us, kept us informed and they offer us guidance both individually and collectively. They are ceaselessly expanding and illuminating our horizon", he declares solemnly. Today, in Marafa Koira, water flows in abundance.

Colline Hill, north of Bujumbura, Burundi

The inhabitants of the hill also suffered from problems of inadequate water supply. Rural dwellers had to travel long distances to reach the sole public tap, which served nine streets and some 3 000 inhabitants. Due to the number of people wanting to use the tap, people had to queue for several hours to fetch their daily supply of water. This forced users, especially women, to get up at 3 o'clock in the morning so as to be among the first.

The issue was discussed by the Dimitra Club, which made it a priority among matters needing to be addressed. Information about this important issue was shared through a community radio station. Hearing of the grievances voiced by the Dimitra Club, the municipal authorities gave a positive reaction and promised to take immediate action. The promise was maintained, since soon afterwards the administration started work to build eight public taps.

Majambere Zabron, a local municipal councillor, recognized the crucial role played by the Dimitra Club of Carama Hill, whose lobbying led to implementation of the project, with a positive outcome for the local community. Today, access to water is much easier as each street has its own public tap. The time once wasted on fetching water is now spent on other development activities.

Village of Ko-Lamba, Niger

Several decades ago, during the times of plenty, the village pond in Ko-Lamba was full of fish, which people could catch and eat in abundance throughout the year. Households had a resource at their disposal,

which supplied them with a balanced foodstuff and a source of good nutrition for children, who used to eat soup from fish dried in the sun. Some people even managed to secure additional revenue, through fishing and sale of the fish.

Things have changed in the last years and the pond's resources have dwindled significantly,



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due to climate conditions that have brought about silting. This has been compounded by lawless overfishing by villagers, who no longer respected the traditional rules.

In 2012, after analysing the community's nutritional status, the Dimitra Clubs highlighted the nutritional properties of fish and the importance of consuming it on a regular basis. As a result, rehabilitation of the pond was identified as a potential solution to the challenge of increasing fish consumption. Three measures were adopted: desilting the pond, restocking it, and managing resources.

Since 2014, fishing has gradually resumed, with new rules imposed by the community.

The purchase of fingerling is funded by the school management committee, individual fishing is prohibited, and a period of six months must elapse before fishing is allowed, which can only take place once fish have reached maturity.

In order to avoid the regular disagreements that previously caused deep divisions between the community and families, all fish products must be sold at a moderate price and without discrimination. Priority for the revenue goes to covering school expenses, after deductions have been made for the cost of paying the designated fishers. Each year, use of the pond earns approximately 700 000 F CFA (about US 1 200), of

which 500 000 (USD 860) are used to cover school expenses. The rest is reinvested in maintenance of the pond and Dimitra Clubs' operations. This system has now been working for nearly four years, to the satisfaction of the entire community. Among them is the headmaster, who acknowledges that his "school has survived in large part due to use of the village pond. Each year, we now have quality school supplies and textbooks in sufficient quantity to cover the needs of all our pupils. This explains why we are seeing fewer and fewer cases of children dropping out, either at the start or during the school year." ■



Social cohesion and peace





Wherever they are launched, the Dimitra Clubs generate a strong community dynamic, together with results and behaviour changes in a range of sectors, including agriculture, nutrition, health, gender roles and relations, and improvements in access to information and socio-economic opportunities.

There is also another less obvious area in which the Dimitra Clubs are having an impact that is practically guaranteed: social cohesion. Social relations between members of the community change as a result of improved dialogue at different levels – households, organizations and community, as well as wider participation in the village life by men and women.

What is more, these relations become more intense as members of the clubs and the community agree to unite in order to tackle problems in their area. They are driven by collective efforts that are supported by a common vision of the village and the challenges faced there, as well as the search for and setting in place of collective solutions. In this way, the social capital is strengthened, in parallel with community governance, collective action, and the dynamics of social inclusion and joint responsibility.

The Dimitra Clubs promote this community dialogue and the notion of living together in harmony. Indeed, this is often one of the main features highlighted by traditional leaders and other people questioned about the changes triggered by the clubs in their village. They speak of greater understanding, especially between different ethnic groups, of peace, the resolution of recurrent conflicts and the inclusion of all members of the community, even the most marginalized.

In its own way, each of the examples of this section illustrates how the Dimitra Clubs are also and above all an approach, based on the key principles of justice, humanity, equality and solidarity, with due regard for freedom to speak, listen and take action. Enabling different groups within the community to participate in a meaningful way is a major precondition for the adoption of sustainable changes, and of social cohesion.



The Twa and Bantus learn to live together

Once badly affected by serious interethnic violence, which resulted in many people becoming displaced, tensions in the province of Tanganyika are beginning to subside. Since 2017, the towns of Nyunzu and Kabalo have welcomed the Dimitra Clubs. The clubs were created in the framework of a joint programme (FAO-WFP) in which each agency brings its added value. WFP implements its Purchase for Progress (P4P) approach to support small-scale producers in making their products more competitive on agricultural markets. FAO runs its Caisses de résilience (CdR) approach to strengthen the financial, productive and social capacities of smallholder farmers, including through the Dimitra Clubs.

For a long time, relations have been strained between the Pygmies and Bantus in DR Congo. In the former province of Katanga, in the east of the country, the conflict between the Twa (the name of the Pygmy community in DR Congo) and the Bantus (“humans” in Kikongo) reached a peak in 2016. In order to address the calamitous humanitarian situation, and taking advantage of the relatively calm situation observed, the World Food Programme (WFP) and FAO launched a joint programme to boost agricultural production, strengthen livelihoods, promote access to basic markets and support peace. Funded by the Kingdom of Sweden, the programme was officially launched in June 2017 with a two-pronged objective: increase smallholder farmer’s incomes and build resilient livelihoods; and promoting social cohesion, gender equality, peace and reconciliation between communities throughout the project area.

The community support framework set in place includes a number of approaches: Farmer Field Schools (FAO), strengthening infrastructures (WFP) for the food security component; and literacy centres (WFP) and Dimitra Clubs (FAO) for the social cohesion component. Local Peace Committees were also set up in the villages by the international NGO Search for Common Ground (SFCG), which works to prevent conflicts.

Clubs as an entry point for social cohesion in Kabalo and Nyunzu

Since the start of the project, 169 clubs have been launched in these two towns (43 in Kabalo and 126 in Nyunzu). They have swiftly yielded tangible results, which have contributed to peace and reconciliation. At the time, dozens of villages had been abandoned by communities, who left to seek shelter in the forest or in the city of Kalemie, where they hoped to find safety. The economic situation was very fraught: the price of staple products

and telecom SIM cards soared, and transfer payments were no longer possible. Today, community tensions have calmed and the violence has ceased, enabling displaced people to return.

In this respect, the Dimitra Clubs play a central role in a process that promotes dialogue between the Twa and the Bantus, and which strengthens the resilience of rural communities.

Re-establish dialogue

In practical terms, as soon as the violence stopped, awareness-raising sessions and the first workshops held by FAO and partner organizations (CREFE and Le Zébreaux) worked to re-establish dialogue between the two former enemies.

In the target areas, clubs made up of Bantus, Twa or members of both groups were set up, according to the presence and wishes of local communities. As always with Dimitra Clubs, gender roles were a special focus of attention. FAO’s partner organizations took care to ensure that women were sufficiently represented, and that they took part in decision-making within the clubs.

Although this involved greater logistical organization, regular exchange visits have been organized by area/road axis to establish dialogue between the Twa and Bantu clubs whose members did not live in the same villages. These meetings are important, as they allow experiences to be shared between the Bantu, Twa and mixed clubs, exploring challenges and solutions through collective action.

An example of the village of ‘Monde’ in Kabalo

In the territory of Kabalo, the village of Monde and its outskirts has several Dimitra Clubs: one club made up exclusively of Twa

members, and four mixed clubs. The joint efforts of the Le Zébreaux organization, FAO, SFCG and WFP have enabled trust to be re-established and people’s livelihoods to be improved.

Since 2017, the first awareness-raising initiatives have been conducted regarding the setting up of the clubs, highlighting the importance of working together to combat poverty. Following the launch of the clubs, SFCG has supported the process by creating Local Peace Committees, and FAO has carried out activities to strengthen capacities through its Farmer Field Schools in the same communities. WFP has provided support to the Territorial Rural Development Service in the area of infrastructure (repairing bridges and agricultural access roads), and has set up literacy centres. These common and coordinated efforts have led to an increase in production, and a rebuilding of trust in communities.

Specifically, the situation of the Twa has improved. The Twa are traditionally involved in hunter-gathering activities and very little in farming. However, with the support of partners, the Dimitra Club in the village of Monde has started cultivating sweet potato, which has a better prospect of increasing revenues for this community. Following exchanges with other clubs in the area, and among its own members, the club decided to try the experience. Its members have succeeded in cultivating a two hectare plot, entirely given over to the production of sweet potato, working together with local producer organizations and with technical support from FAO.

Nyunzu starts by structuring POs

In the absence of long-lasting producer organizations (PO) in the territory of Nyunzu, FAO first had to conduct activities to set these in place, so as to ensure the efficacy



of subsequent interventions. Following the same integrated methodology as that used in the territory of Kabalo, the clubs served as a point of entry at community level, with the support of partner organization CREFE.

In the village of Kabeya Mayi, for example, where Twa and Bantus live side-by-side, joint participation – decided by the clubs – in building various facilities (a school, a straw hut, and bamboo handwash basins

and urinals) allowed links to be forged and trust to be restored, as well as enabling the communities to benefit from these constructions.

For these achievements to happen, several factors, such as the composition and the way of functioning of the Dimitra Clubs, played a critical role. All club members, whatever their sex and social standing, have the chance to make their voice heard.

Special attention is paid to the inclusion of marginalized groups such as the Twa. For this reason, clubs made up exclusively of Twa members have been able to benefit from the discussions and expertise of other clubs. In the end, this has enabled the clubs (and their communities) to find appropriate solutions together, without damaging the interests of one group, or being based on misunderstandings.

Another important point has been the promotion of transparency in all actions undertaken by club members and their communities. As a result of improved local governance the social fabric is starting to be rewoven. In this region, where relations between the Twa and the Bantus were tinged with mistrust, communities have been able to restore spaces for effective dialogue.

Beyond that dialogue, the numerous club achievements have enabled these groups, who no longer spoke to each other, to work hand in hand for the benefit of everyone – women and men alike. The very fact that these people mix with each other, listen to each other, take each other's opinions into account and take action together has emerged as a powerful driver for social cohesion. ■

“We, the Twa, we live from hunting. And the Bantu from agriculture. With the clubs, we stopped believing that we must fight against the Bantu. On the contrary, we must progress together with them. We need schools to enable our children to become nurses, teachers, doctors, lawyers, agronomists. War does not benefit anyone ”

TWA LEADER,
MUKALAYI MOKE, MUKWAKA VILLAGE

Together we are stronger

Aïssa Hamadou, left her home village about twenty years ago and has lived since then in Gasseda, Niger. Last August, she took part in the village assembly organized on the occasion of a visit by a delegation of Dimitra Club members from Mali and Senegal, as part of the FAO South-South Cooperation programme in the Sahel. Asked to make a presentation on the activities of the club where she is a member, Aïssa was quick to seize the opportunity, highlighting the strength and dynamism of the clubs in addressing problems common to all women in Gasseda.

In a composed and confident voice, Aïssa begins her account. Her descriptions reveal the amazing achievements of the village's Dimitra Clubs, and the positive changes they have brought about for the entire community. Aïssa shares various experiences: the joint management of the multifunctional platform by the women's clubs which "helps the women of Gasseda in carrying out their daily chores and enables them to perform other income generating activities", the setting up of a cereal bank, the launch of a birth certificate register in Gasseda itself, and the drilling of a borehole topped by a water tower. An achievement of which she is especially proud of is the compulsory school enrolment for all children aged six and seven, including girls, "which has made it possible to limit the phenomenon of early marriage. Before 2014, all the girls in Gasseda were married before reaching the age of 18," she observes, before adding, "Today, you see them all around you, proud to be continuing their studies in town."

After a long sigh, to conceal a barely restrained emotion, Aïssa reveals to the assembly the dramas that have marked her life in recent years. In 2013, she lost her husband, shortly after the birth of their youngest child. From one day to the next, her life was turned upside down: she became a widow and the head of the household, with seven children, most of them of a young age. Normally, after giving birth, she asked the help of her parents who live in Tchida, the village where she was born, situated about forty kilometres from Gasseda. Her parents would find an assistant from within the extended family, who helped Aïssa with the household work and in looking after the children. But it wasn't as simple as it sounded. "What might be regarded as a help can quickly become a burden in financial terms," admits Aïssa. Taking charge of a person, feeding her and preparing for her return home at the end of her stay requires considerable financial resources, and may even involve getting into

debt. For Aïssa, "In such circumstances, far from savouring happy moments with one's newborn baby, a sense of anguish becomes part of daily life."

Nevertheless, thanks to the solidarity of the women in the village club she found the support that she needed. In the third year after its launch, the club set up a system of practical assistance and moral support for women who recently gave birth – one that avoids their having to spend money needlessly on organizing ceremonies. "Women with whom I had previously had little contact came to my home to help me with household tasks such as cleaning, fetching water and heating water for washing. Some of them just passed by to say hello and cheer me up through their physical presence," says Aïssa, who refers she has no idea how much all this would have cost in terms of repayment, if she had not benefited from

the community service. For her, this solidarity and community cohesion are priceless, intangible and invisible assets that "soothe the heart".

Aïssa continues her presentation by explaining that this system of solidarity is part of the Gasseda Dimitra Clubs' approach. Since 2009, the clubs have been debating the issue of daily working time, as well as how to reduce women's workload and introduce the sharing of tasks between men and women. If men take charge of fetching water and wood, that leaves time for women to provide the necessary assistance to other women who are pregnant, and to support them for forty days after they give birth. "I was the eighth women to benefit from this assistance", says Aïssa, who concludes her presentation by offering a short definition of solidarity: "a small effort made by each person, a fortune for whoever receives it". ■



SENEGAL

Solidarity renewed through the clubs



Situated in the department of Tambacounda, Senegal, the village of Saré Gueda has two hundred inhabitants, all of them Fulani people and related to each other. Since the recent launch of the Dimitra Clubs, people have again had an opportunity to exchange ideas and take joint action, strengthening social cohesion and leading to improvements in daily life. The village had no school, and the supply of drinking water did not cover all the village's needs, but today things have changed.



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Khady Diao, leader of the women's Dimitra Club, paints a picture of how Saré Gueda has altered, and the role of the clubs in this transformation.

"Before the Dimitra Clubs were set up, the way in which people lived together was harmonious, but monotonous, based solely on sociocultural, religious relationships inherited from their parents and grandparents. The village had no opportunities for dialogue that would bring together all the social groups (men, women, adults and young people) to discuss community problems. It was only during religious or cultural ceremonies that people had a chance to get together. For a number of years, the village suffered from a range of problems, some of which could have been easily resolved by the community. But everyone suffered in silence, and no one made a move to find solutions and change things.

Today, our quality of life has been transformed. Since the clubs were set up, social relations have become more friendly and supportive, and everyone plays an active and willing role in solving community problems, through collective action aimed at improving the livelihoods of people in the village."

These achievements include regular initiatives to clean the streets and the areas around the village, the launch and building of a Koranic school, so that children can learn without having to travel long distances, and the maintenance of wells to ensure that most village families have supplies of water.

In addition, at the start of the winter season club members have grouped together to cut and collect fuelwood for each household. In

this way, each family has an adequate store of wood for cooking purposes throughout the winter season, whereas previously, women were forced to devote a large amount of their time to looking for fuelwood. Naturally, this chore was in addition to their already heavy workload.

Aside from concrete achievements, the Dimitra Clubs have also set up a community fund, initially made up of members' contributions. "But we very quickly realized that the sums collected were not sufficient for us to deal with all the problems that needed solutions," said Khady Diao. "That's why we decided that the men's and women's clubs should each cultivate a field of sorghum, so as to cover the community's cash needs. These farm activities are working well, and we hope that the sale of the harvest will enable us to restore water to the well and sink a second one. If everything goes as planned, the community fund will also help us to buy cooking utensils that we can rent out and, maybe, to purchase a millet mill to offer as a user-fee service."

For several months now, a new dynamic has taken hold in the village of Saré Gueda. Each person is ready to work hard for the well-being of the community as a whole, and everyone agrees on the fact that, through the Dimitra Clubs, social cohesion has been transformed into a community action force. ■



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Communication and reconciliation

The village of Debenso Bambara is located in the region of Ségou in the centre of the country. For nearly 20 years, ever since the death of the village chief, tensions had been high in the village due to disagreement over the succession. In Sogolo, a dispute set the chiefdom against the town hall. Today, these actors are talking again. The Dimitra Clubs have enabled them to become reconciled, through joint actions conducted in an inclusive manner.

Following the death of the village chief in 2000, his son refused to take on the role, as tradition decreed. So the community chose a leading dignitary to head the village. But several years later, the son of the village chief changed his mind and decided to assume his responsibilities, removing the occupant from his place in a unilateral manner. This move created two opposing clans which, despite several attempts at mediation, refused to collaborate over a period lasting many years, to the detriment of all activities aimed at local development. On several occasions the village residents were unable to reach an agreement and seize development opportunities offered by external partners.

Since 2018, the launch of the Dimitra Clubs by NGO AMAPROS, with the support from FAO, has reversed this trend. From the first meetings, the theme of the discord within the village was identified and prioritized by the clubs. Under their impetus, activities of common interest were identified and implemented by the community, with striking success. For example, the clubs have mobilized the people of Debenso Bambara and Kononso Bambara and rebuilt the road between the two villages.

Since the outset, the clubs have brought women and men together throughout the community. The clubs have offered an opportunity for all the village residents to recreate a

bond, talk to each other and to finally find a solution to the disagreement over the chiefdom. It is through the impetus of the clubs that both parties have become reunited and have found a way of resolving this situation, which had proved damaging to all.

The two parties agreed to maintain the self-proclaimed village chief in his post, thereby removing all source of criticism and frustration.

The dignitary formally offered to cede his role to the son who staged the coup. This latter acknowledged that his behaviour had been the cause of the tensions, and asked to be forgiven. He was solemnly and



democratically sworn in last 20 July 2018, before the people of the village.

On the day of the investiture, a number of people acknowledged the leading role played by the clubs in resolving this conflict.

Sogolo, reforging links, rebuilding trust

In Sogolo, in the region of Mopti, the five newly launched clubs identified the problem of poor relations between the town hall and the traditional chiefdom as an impediment to development for the village. These tensions had repercussions throughout the village, between young people and between women. Communication broke down, mistrust set in. During village meetings set up by the clubs it emerged that the cause of the tension between the chiefdom and local councillors was a lack of clarity in the roles and responsibilities of both. A meeting was therefore called with the local councilors and the village chief, under the authority of the Deputy Prefect as representative of the State, and this clarified exactly what was expected of both parties.

As a result of this meeting and the creation of a framework for consultation, the clubs enabled the village to regain social cohesion. Mariam Diara, deputy mayor of the municipi-

ality of Sogolo, observes: “Today, the clubs have become tools in the hands of the community, which has enabled peace to be re-established. In some villages, people no longer spoke to each other and were suspicious of one another. The system of the clubs encourages people to speak to each other, act together and even to have fun together.”

This process of reconciliation was celebrated in July 2018, in the presence of the authorities and local radio stations.

Finding solutions between livestock keepers and crop farmers

Other examples of the clubs in Mali also illustrate how better communication at community level can help to find solutions to recurring tensions between livestock keepers and villagers. In Dimbala, in the region of Mopti, the clubs have joined forces, and the resulting exchanges have helped to alleviate the tension by re-establishing communication between these groups. They have reached an agreement over the farming calendar and diffused the information, so that livestock keepers can take care not to allow their animals to damage crops.

At Ambassa, conflict was mainly linked to use of a water source. The presence of live-



stock while the village women were doing the laundry or drawing water, led to tension because their utensils were broken, thier washing damaged, etc. The clubs enabled the livestock keepers and the villagers to draw up a plan of action together, with a precise timetable for the animals to be watered and the villagers to use the water source, each respecting the needs of the other. ■

In Niger, clubs are building peace between livestock keepers and crop farmers

The case of the Peuls (Fulani) in Niger, in the village of Gassedra, is emblematic. Here, the Dimitra Clubs have provided concrete solutions to the perennial conflict between livestock keepers and crop farmers. The traditionally nomadic Peuls have gradually begun to settle on the village outskirts. As livestock keepers, they need space to graze their animals. So they cross villagers' fields, destroying their crops in the process, which in the past has caused many disputes, sometimes even leading to deadly violence between the two communities.

The Dimitra Clubs have enabled the villagers and the Peuls to meet, share their views and find solutions. They now live together in peace. Adamou, a man Peul herder from Gassedra, explains: “It was dialogue that helped us to go to the village, get to know each other and accept one another. There isn't the same social cohesion and integration of Peuls

in the neighboring villages, where there are no Dimitra Clubs”.

Adiza Ali, a Peul woman herder, adds: “We are well integrated in the village, thanks to the Dimitra Clubs. Before, we never went to the village, and our children were afraid of the people there. Now, the villagers no longer see us as outsiders. During the club discussions, the issue was raised of the distance between our camp and the village, and the clubs decided to grant us advantages over the village women, for example, to give us priority at the mill, because they took into account the distance we had to travel to get home afterwards. We were also given explanations of the existence and advantage of portable telephones, and we have now bought some, so we can be kept informed of upcoming events in the village, such as meetings and gatherings to discuss village cleanliness”.



Adaptation to climate change





Climate change is one of the world's biggest challenges. The frequency of climate related disasters increased by 44% between 2000 and 2016. Climate variability and extreme weather events are threatening agriculture, livelihoods and infrastructures. Sectors linked to agriculture, forests and fisheries now face the challenge of ensuring food production and sustainable farming in a period of profound and rapid climate change.

Small-scale producers – both men and women – living in rural communities in many African countries depend directly on natural resources and climate conditions for their survival. They are the first to be affected by climate change. As a result, their capacity to adapt and their resilience are critical issues. Due to their role in food production, and managing natural resources and biodiversity, women risk paying the heaviest price.

The success of climate change adaptation (CCA) initiatives depends largely on collaboration between all relevant actors and the involvement of rural communities. In this sense, gender-sensitive participatory approaches like those adopted by FAO Dimitra Clubs have a crucial role to play.

In the Sahel, an area badly affected by climate change and desertification, the clubs' approach is being successfully implemented as part of FAO projects funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and together with the approach of the Farmer Field Schools (FFS). Strengthening the capacities to analyse the causes and consequences of climate change, and looking for options for CCA and potential local solutions, go hand in hand with the empowerment of communities and the development of women's leadership. Such efforts are essential to ensure real ownership of new agricultural technologies and practices and the sustainability of initiatives for climate change adaptation.



SENEGAL

Saré Boubou, a united community facing climate change



After one year of activities, the Dimitra Clubs of the village of Saré Boubou (region of Tambacounda) have changed their behaviours and triggered new social dynamics. Among numerous achievements, the population of the village set up stone barriers with the technical support of the Institut National de Pédologie (National Institute of Soil Science) to preserve arable land, an example of climate change adaptation (CCA).

Erosion has intensified over the past years around the village of Saré Boubou, resulting in collapsing roads, degradation of fertile top soil and gullied, barren croplands. Where once the community would have contracted workers to find quick fixes (retrace the road for instance) to advancing erosion processes, the Dimitra Clubs identified the need to address the problem in a more sustainable way.

The clubs' members reached out to the Institut National de Pédologie (INP) to discuss

suitable erosion control measures and a medium-long term restoration project. Villagers worked collectively and voluntarily under the supervision and guidance of an INP expert to build stone barriers. These erosion control measures have proven to be successful, demonstrating the added value of the Dimitra Clubs approach to help communities to take collective decisions and actions.

Developed by FAO, the Dimitra Clubs' approach is a good practice in terms of gen-

der, people's empowerment and community mobilization. The clubs are groups of women, men and young people – mixed or not – who decide to organize themselves so as to work together to bring about changes in their communities. They meet regularly to discuss the challenges they face in their daily lives, make decisions and take action to solve their problems.

In the Region of Tambacounda where Saré Boubou is located, the Dimitra Clubs are being set up as part of a climate resilience





project implemented by FAO together with the Government of Senegal, financed by the Global Fund Facility (GEF). The 'Mainstreaming ecosystem-based approaches to climate-resilient rural livelihoods in vulnerable rural areas through the Farmer Field School methodology' project aims at improving rural people's climate resilience. The project covers three eco-geographical areas that are particularly vulnerable to climate change: Ferlo, the groundnut basin and eastern Senegal. A total amount of 450 Dimitra Clubs are being created, accounting

for about 13,000 members (two thirds are women) and accompanied by FAO partner in Tambacounda, the National Cotton Producer Federation (FNPC).

The project activities revolve around mainstreaming climate change adaptation into policies and programmes, while also accompanying local stakeholders through a field-based, pragmatic community learning process that leads to an increased understanding, adaptation and wide-scale adoption of improved agricultural practices.

In this process, the Dimitra Clubs bring their added value in terms of gender, community mobilization and climate change adaptation.

In this project, a methodological alliance of two FAO flagship approaches – the Farmer Field Schools and the Dimitra Clubs – are used, to ensure a wide dissemination and ownership of CCA techniques, community mobilization and sustainability of the activities, in a strong gender perspective. ■

Mali: the village of Kedou fights against erosion

In central Mali, in the region of Mopti, the Dimitra Clubs in the village of Kedou have identified erosion as a key problem to address. Erosion poses a serious risk to the scant cultivable land available in an area where cliffs, caves and rocks account for some 90% of land, which is ill suited to growing crops. In order to protect land, the clubs have rallied and involved the villagers in building stone barriers. Under the impetus of the Dimitra Clubs, 30 hectares have been secured using this anti-erosion system, which consists of placing rows of stones along contour lines.

The clubs have also addressed the problem of silting of the village dam, exploring solutions to conserve the water reserves. The dam is a critical source of water for the sizeable production of shallots and other crops in the village. Here too, the clubs have secured 5 hectares of land on the bed of the dam, by creating stone barriers. In the village of Ofenso, in the region of Ségou, the clubs have developed a parcel of land measuring 16 hectares, where they have trapped water using stone barriers. They then planted a paddy

field, experimenting with an improved variety of rice seed. A warrantage system (an inventory credit system that allows producers to obtain a loan using their harvest as a collateral) was set in place so as to help those in need. The objective is threefold: improve agricultural production; combat food insecurity during the hungry season, even for the poorest, and sharing this good practice.

NIGER

Mobilizing energies to meet the environmental challenges



Kourki, one of the first villages to have set up Dimitra Clubs in Niger, in 2009, is situated in the municipality of Téra, in the heart of the Sahel, a region whose environment and climate are extremely hostile. In this area, rain and sandstorms are gradually eroding the soil, exacerbating gullying and at times making it difficult to reach the village. Mainly as a result of climate change, cultivated areas are becoming degraded and agricultural production is declining, with the long-term risk of food insecurity in the village.

To find solutions to this threat, the village community has the means to raise the alarm and mobilize forces in the form of the Dimitra Clubs, which Alassane Alzouma, leader of the club for young people, defines as “the key that opens the door to home.” On this occasion, the key has above all opened the door to dialogue between club members and the rest of the village, in an effort to bring together all the actors and resources needed to halt soil degradation and conserve the environment surrounding the village.

On a proposal from the Dimitra Clubs, the village assembly agreed on a series of measures, the most urgent of which involved setting up a fund to pay for the village dike. Since water is a rare and precious resource, all the households unreservedly opted to contribute to buying the cement needed to refurbish the dike.

A community fund to repair the dike

Once the fund had been set up and the cement purchased, the whole community united to carry out the work, according to clearly distributed tasks: the clubs for women and girls were tasked with fetching water to mix the cement, while the men and boys carried the sand and gravel. In this way, the work got under way, under the supervision of an official from the municipal rural engineering service.

With the mobilization of all the villagers, including women, men, girls and boys, club members and non-members, repairs to the dike were completed in record time, much to the satisfaction of everyone involved.

Tailored solutions

In parallel to the dike's reparation, the village assembly charged the clubs with



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contacting an NGO that specialized in building firewalls against bush fires and was also carrying out a project that involved digging half-moons to replenish the soil. To implement these two initiatives, two youth club members were appointed to undergo training in soil restoration, conservation and maintenance techniques (half-moons, zais and bunds, etc.).

Following the training, the two youths organized villagers to carry out the second phase

of implementing the measures agreed on for soil restoration. Skilfully applying the knowledge they had gained during the training, they directed two groups of men and women who had offered their services. One team was tasked with digging half-moons in the slopes of the fields and grazing areas. Another group was charged with collecting compost to distribute between the half-moons. According to Balkissa Boureima, member of the Bonkaney Club in Kourki, the works undertaken as part of this initiative “mobilized about 800 people, especially during the phase of treating the grazing areas, which were spread among several villages.”

Improved agricultural production

Such statements were echoed by Halhadey Amadou, village chief of neighbouring Balleykoira. “My field was on a slope, and I was unable to harvest even one bale of millet. I now harvest more than a hundred bales, thanks to the half-moons dug in my field. It’s like day and night,” he said. He listed the main concerns of people in his community, namely a wish to improve production in the fields, as well as access to water and the conservation of the environment, challenges to which “the Dimitra Clubs find local solutions, which is a major victory for the whole community in the face of climate change.”

Idrissa Yabilan, chief of the village of Kourki, paid tribute to the responsiveness of clubs in terms of social mobilization. He believes that the Dimitra Clubs have remarkable capacities. For him, their most important attribute is “that they break down social barriers and get organized on behalf of everyone, of both genders, in the village. They make no difference between me as chief and a vulnerable village member. They are at the service of the entire community. You can see that the work carried out by the clubs is an environmental masterpiece. The plant cover has been restored and the slopes treated have generated significantly increased agricultural output.”

As in Kourki, climate change adaptation has mobilized the Dimitra Clubs in Tinkinara, in the region of Tahoua, to treat eight hectares of sloping land belonging to Idrissa Moussa, who is a member of the club

for adults. Following this collective effort, the land produced eight hundred bales of millet, compared with one hundred and fifty the previous year, before the slope was treated. The success of this initiative has encouraged the community to undertake the treatment of other plots, and is offering increased opportunities for women to gain access to land.

Preservation of trees

Conservation of a grove of trees in Dogon Marké is another illustration of the importance of mobilizing the community for climate change adaptation. In the wake of intensive and uncontrolled felling of trees around the wood, the Dimitra Clubs of Dogon Marké organized awareness-raising sessions to help people understand the issues of climate change. As a result, women, men, youth and even children have been conducting surveillance, and were tasked with reporting anyone who will continue to cut down trees without authorization.

A final example is that of the village of Gassedra, in the region of Tillabéri, highlighted in the article on South-South cooperation. In August 2017, delegations from Senegal, Mali and villages of Niger celebrated Niger’s national holiday, along with national tree day. Together, the delegations immortalized the contributions of the clubs from all countries in their efforts for climate change adaptation by taking part in the planting of “the village wood of Gassedra” and the “grove for girls’ education”, an initiative launched by FAO. ■



Rural Organizations





Africa has a population of nearly 1.2 billion people, 60% of whom live in rural areas and depend mostly on agriculture and natural resources for their survival. In these settings, rural organizations often play a crucial role in strategies to combat poverty. They not only help to improve men and women farmers' access to natural resources, services, information and decision-making, they are also powerful vectors for capacity development and advocacy.

When men and women producers work together through small-scale farmers' organizations, natural resource user groups, women's and youth associations or other forms of rural organizations, they strengthen their capacities and benefit from improved social and economic opportunities. However, often the most vulnerable groups, especially women and young people, are marginalized and face insurmountable difficulties when it comes to joining and/or creating a rural organization.

In this sense, the Dimitra Clubs represent a unique opportunity for all socio-economic groups in rural communities. They enable everyone, including the poorest and most excluded segments of society, to take part in making decisions that affect the community, and develop their capacities for organization, analysis, expression and leadership, so that they can take collective action and improve their livelihoods.

The capacities and motivation of club members are strengthened by this process, which enables them to launch their own formal organizations or join existing ones in positions of leadership.



From “Bosasele” to a savings and credit cooperative



In the Isangi Territory (Orientale Province), women from the Dimitra Club of Yanonge have united to fight against “Bosasele”, an economic practice that has trapped a number of families in a spiral of debt. The Dimitra Clubs initiative has achieved significant results, in so doing attracting the interest of the Yanonge Producers’ Union, leading to the setting up of a savings and credit cooperative.



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The practice of “Bosasele” consists of purchasing goods considered to be “luxury” items on credit from travelling salesmen. Common purchases include mattresses, cooking utensils, cutlery and clothes. The credit period covers 3 to 4 months, the equivalent of a cropping season. One of the negative effects of this practice arises from the fact that the salesmen, who by now have become creditors, often return to collect payment several months later, resulting in interest rates that are considerably higher than those agreed at the outset. A number of families have been forced to sell their

entire agricultural output to pay back the loan, while others have had to go into even greater debt because they were unable to make the repayment.

Fighting against “Bosasele”

To address the problem, the forty women members of the Basi Liboso Dimitra Club (“Women step forward for your development”, in Lingala) decided to work together to fight this practice, which is impoverishing their households and families, and keeping them in a state of economic dependency.

Made up entirely of women, the Basi Liboso Club was launched in 2012 as part of the Dimitra Clubs gender-sensitive project to fight poverty and improve food security, implemented by FAO, with funding from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Government of DR Congo. Since its launch, women members have chosen to meet every Sunday to discuss problems affecting their community, find solutions and put these into practice. During these meetings, they decided that each of them should make a contribution of 500 Congolese francs (USD 0.50) to set

up a mutual fund. At the end of each month, after the discussions and deliberations, they would do the accounts and use the amount collected to fund the needs of members or to buy tools or other useful materials.

Previously, the only way to purchase such items had been through “Bosasele”. By setting up this tontine, women who still had debts to clear were able to repay them, and all the club members were able to buy basic goods without having to worry about what tomorrow might bring, or to make repayments at high interest rates. Less than one year after adopting this new strategy, the Dimitra Club moderator presented the results during a meeting called by the Union of Agricultural Producers’ Organizations (UOPA) targeting producers’ organizations. The participants quickly realized that it was time to seize this opportunity. So, after discussion it was decided to set up a permanent body to grant loans to anyone who wanted one. The Savings and Credit Cooperative of Yanonge (COOPECYA) was launched, with the specific goal of helping to empower rural communities.

A new entrepreneurial drive

Five producers’ organizations (PO), seven Dimitra Clubs (out of the nine set up in the Yanonge Eastern Production Basin), four community-based organizations (NGOs) and the Yanonge UOPA were the first to join the scheme. Since the amount provided by each of the cooperative members (legal persons) was a minimum of USD 300, the cooperative started with a capital of USD 8 000. Several awareness-raising sessions were then held, to inform people of this new entity set up by the community itself, through the Dimitra Club and the UOPA, in an effort to combat poverty.

The cooperative currently has 91 members, including 20 legal persons (OPA and clubs) and 71 natural persons (29 women and 42 men). In January 2014, the natural persons were authorized to open accounts with this new cooperative. Each of them paid membership fees of 2 700 Congolese francs (USD3). For the legal persons, such as religious denominations, school associations, etc., the fees were USD5 (4 500 Congolese francs). By the end of January 2014, the cooperative had a total of USD375 in its coffers.

In February 2014, the first loans were granted, to the benefit of five members. The cooperative members meet on the 13th of each month to decide who should be extended a loan – on the basis of a number



of criteria – as well as to collect repayments and evaluate the progress made by the cooperative. The criteria used are straightforward: you must have been a member of the cooperative for at least one month; the account to be used as collateral must contain 10% of the amount requested as a loan; the person (whether natural or legal) must sign an honour pledge; the repayment must be made after two months, at a rate of 97%, failing which, penalties are payable.

The Savings and Credit Cooperative of Yanonge saw its capital exceed 15 000 Congolese francs at the end of the first year. Jean-Pierre, manager and financial officer for the cooperative, acknowledges the importance of the tontine initiative set up by the Dimitra Club, and the fact that the Union was inspired by and adopted this model after evaluating its reliability and success. He proudly announces that the cooperative now has 75 members (29% are also members of producers’ organizations).

Widespread socio-economic impacts

The club dynamics have benefited the entire territory. “People have understood that they need to take control of their future, and think for tomorrow. They have under-

stood that they need to take control of their development.”

Said François Bassay, the former district inspector for agriculture (Tshopo): “People now know that the radio is for the whole community. Thanks to a broadcast by the Dimitra Clubs on groundnut production, buyers have come looking for us. The Union has brought seeds to the clubs, which have adopted new varieties and techniques. After that, club members joined the Union, the Union of Turumbu Producers’ Organizations - Lilanda, Yakpondi, Yayoli.” In the region, the Dimitra Clubs have also been behind other development initiatives, such as the building of a market and the setting up of a social club, with support from sisters of the Congregation of the Daughters of Wisdom.

Here, the Dimitra Club approach has shown itself to be a powerful catalyst to nurture energy, including that of local organizations and associations. ■

A self-development approach to galvanize rural organizations



The Dimitra Clubs enhance the voice and participation of rural women and men within rural organizations. They also create an enabling environment for local governance and collective action, and stimulate the setting-up of new organizations.

Dimitra Clubs are informal community organizations, set up by agricultural producers themselves on a voluntary basis and with support from FAO. One of their objectives is to improve members' sense of personal and collective efficacy, so that they can work together on strategies for self-development. This growing sense of efficacy will enable club members to have confidence in their capacities to find and apply solutions to community problems, and to realize their personal and collective aspirations.

In all cases, the clubs have the effect of creating new links between members and other clubs, of encouraging women and young people to participate and speak out, and of enabling women's leadership to emerge. In addition, their dynamism and spirit of initiative are contagious for the other rural communities – with sometimes unexpected results on both people and existing local organizations and associations.

As far as club members are concerned, there is a definite improvement in their capacities for analysis, expression and action, as a result of the process set in place. In particular, women and young people have been seen to grow in self-confidence, while improving their capacity to negotiate and become leaders, sometimes going so far as to take on decision-making roles in other organizations and federations of producer organizations (see page 16).

In the province of Tshopo, in DR Congo, collaborative relationships have developed between Dimitra Clubs and associations of producer organizations. There have been advantages for both: the clubs have benefited from agricultural innovations disseminated among farmers' organizations (FOs) by an IFAD project, and producer groups have offered advice to clubs and sold them improved seeds, thereby enabling these latter to move into the multiplication of seeds for improved varieties of rice, soya and maize.

Still in DR Congo, but this time in the province of Tanganyika, Dimitra Clubs have

been launched as part of a joint FAO-WFP project funded by the Swedish Cooperation, which aims to strengthen livelihoods, as well as food security, social cohesion and peace. The WFP has brought its Purchase for Progress approach and FAO the Caisses de resilience. Dimitra Clubs have been set up and their philosophy of self-determination has enabled the farmers' organizations to grasp the importance of self-development and the participation of women and youth, which is promoted by the clubs.

Paul, Chair of an FO in Luizi (Nyunzu territory) is keen to highlight the fact that as a result of the Dimitra Clubs' approach, the FOs in his area have started to realize that a wait-and-see attitude is not a solution, and that "self-determination leads to empowerment". He adds that "The Dimitra Clubs' approach is the pathway that we were looking for, to move forward and develop our environment, our community". Paul has now managed to instill

in his own FO, as well in others, the spirit of self-determination, and together with other members of the Dimitra Club and the FO that he oversees, he has launched aquaculture and small-scale livestock activities. Other FOs in the area have also begun to diversify their activities, and to follow the Dimitra Club example of making collective financial contributions, so as to satisfy the many requirements created by the process of achieving their vision.

In other cases, it is the clubs which, by creating an enabling environment based on local governance and collective action, have stimulated the setting up of new organizations. In Tshopo, Lilanda, an organization made up of around one hundred women farmers has been launched. Organization member Sansouci Toisisai explains: "We were inspired by the way the clubs work, and decided that we too could become involved in the development of our community. That is why we set up our organization". ■



NIGER

A women's organization supporting food security



In a small village in Niger, women found themselves excluded from management of the local cereal bank. Together, several of them decided to change the story and, using their organizational and advocacy capacities acquired in the Dimitra Clubs, they managed not just to set up a new women only producers' organization, but also to restore the cereal bank to its original purpose of serving as a food stock for the whole community.

Prior to the advent of the Dimitra Clubs in the village of Malam Koira, Niger, the local cereal bank was managed by a mixed formal grouping of men and women farmers. But as time went on, the balance within the association changed: a group of men took over the management of the bank.

Gradually, the bank deviated from its original role: that of enabling the community to deal with shortages of food products. The Madda Ben Union of Falwel, the umbrella organization to which the group belonged, and which had given support to the launch of the bank, decided to withdraw from the village, leading to the bank's definitive closure.

In the circumstances, the village women decided to unite in order to find a solution. Having examined the situation through their local Dimitra Clubs, to which many of them belonged, they moved to engage in open dialogue with the men, some of whom had been involved in the bank's poor management. The women eventually uncovered the process that had led to their exclusion, enabling the men to divert the cereal bank's entire funds.

A delegation visited the Madda Ben umbrella organization in Falwel to explain the latest events and obtain the union's support. Unfortunately, such was the degree of mistrust and disappointment on the part of the organization's managers that a solution could not be found.

At this point, the women's Dimitra Clubs in Malam Koira made an important decision: to leave the mixed group tasked with managing the bank and to set up a new women-only organization for the same purpose.

One of the clubs, the Anniya Dimitra Club, took on the task of registering this new organization at the Falwel town hall. The Sawki producers' organization (literally relief) was launched.

The Sawki producers' organization quickly moved to rejoin the Madda Ben Union. After several fruitful discussions, the Madda Ben Union agreed to support Sawki, enabling it to restore Malam Koira's cereal bank, under the direct management of the new women-only producers' organization.

Today, the Malam Koira cereal bank works extremely well, and the whole community benefits as a result. Says Maimouna Adamou, leader of one of the women's clubs involved: "Thanks to what we learned through the Dimitra Clubs, we have been able to inject a new impetus into the producers' organizations, especially in terms of governance. It's a real pleasure for us to be able to make our contribution to the food and nutrition security of the village, by putting the cereal bank back on its feet." Following this happy ending, Maimouna Adamou was able to take part in training organized by FAO on procedures for setting up and operating a producers' organization, according to the terms of the Organization for the Harmonisation of Business Law in Africa (OHADA). ■



It's a real pleasure for us to be able to make our contribution to the food and nutrition security of the village, by putting the cereal bank back on its feet.

MAIMOUNA ADAMOU,
LEADER OF ONE OF THE WOMEN'S
DIMITRA CLUBS

Sharing information and knowledge





Access to information is recognized as a fundamental and universal human right. Unfortunately, marginalized and geographically dispersed rural communities in developing countries face major constraints in accessing information and knowledge, to make informed and knowledgeable decisions and seize social and economic opportunities to improve their livelihoods.

Moreover, persistent gender inequalities are also found in accessing information. Rural women and men do not have access to the same kind of information and do not use the same communication tools. Gender inequality in accessing information contributes to hindering women's empowerment and participation in decision-making.

In the rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa where FAO Dimitra Clubs have been set up, both women and men's access to information is improving. During the clubs' process, they learn to analyse their common problems and identify key collective solutions to overcome their challenges. This way, they increase their problem-solving skills and expand their knowledge on crucial themes with local and external information.

In this process, ICTs (solar-powered rural radio sets, cell phones and mobile applications) act as a relay and a driver to access knowledge and facilitate communication among all actors, in a context where communities are often isolated.

The sharing of information, practices and knowledge does not happen only within the clubs. Networking between the Dimitra Clubs in the same countries and beyond frontiers is an important step. It reinforces the dynamism and strengths of all actors and promote solidarity and peace among sister countries. Exchanges among Dimitra Clubs from different countries take place in the framework of South-South Cooperation, enabling them to discuss common challenges and share common solutions in the fight against climate change, food insecurity, social inequalities or forced migration.



Community radio, Dimitra Clubs' natural partner



In each country where they are present, the Dimitra Clubs are working hand in hand with local radio stations. These record and broadcast programmes that give a voice to club members, sharing information about their achievements and stimulating links among the clubs. In so doing, the radio stations enable the Dimitra Clubs to operate as a network and communicate with entire communities. Here we present a portrait of this intense and fruitful partnership.

Radio is still a crucially important media channel in Africa. It has enjoyed unparalleled growth throughout the entire African continent since the 1960s, particularly due to its low production costs, the ease with which it can be used and broadcast, and its close fit with the oral-based culture and a high level of illiteracy in the population.

Benefiting from the liberalization of the airwaves in the 1990s, thousands of private radio stations were launched, joining the ranks of the state-owned radios set up in the immediate aftermath of independence.

Today, other technologies such as mobile telephones are becoming increasingly

popular in urban and rural areas, enabling access to the Internet in the most remote locations. Yet, radio remains the leading media channel in rural Africa, and the main source of information for communities.

A vital link

If the Dimitra Clubs and community radios are working together, that is because they have similar objectives: the former aim to improve living conditions and share knowledge and experiences for the benefit of all women and men, while the latter seek to contribute to development, by placing information at the service of communities.

The link between clubs and radios is both crucial and a source of challenges. The clubs use radio as a way of relaying information about their achievements, sharing their discussions and drawing inspiration from experiences. Radio gives a voice to people who normally do not have one, often women and young people, and enables individuals to gain self-confidence in their capacities and take control of their own development. The radios also benefit from this partnership, especially in terms of strengthening their technical capacities, but also because it enables them to exercise their mission of being at the service of rural communities.

The constraints facing community radios are well-known, whether they are related to equipment, technical and financial capacities or even access to electricity. In order to enable radio stations to operate more effectively together with communities, the process of setting up clubs involves supplying reporting material (reporting kits, including a digital recorder, external microphone, headphones, rechargeable batteries and memory cards). The radio stations also benefit from training, especially as part of the training module on Radios and the Dimitra Clubs implemented by FAO. This type of four-day session enables community



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radios to increase their capacity to use material distributed to them, conduct participatory and gender sensitive radio broadcasts and strengthen links between the radios and the clubs. Based on a flexible approach that makes strong use of practical exercises, this training methodology was developed to respond to the short-term needs of both radios and Dimitra Clubs. The training is now systematically included in all projects that involve the clubs, though it is always adapted to suit each particular context.

A targeted support for producing Dimitra Clubs' radio programmes

Often, partnership agreements are drawn up between clubs, clubs' networks and radios. In the provinces of Kwango and Sud Kivu, DR Congo, for example, several radio stations are producing and broadcasting Dimitra Clubs' programmes, which highlight clubs' experiences. Recorded summaries of the debates subsequently serve as a source of inspiration to both women and men listeners.

These special Dimitra Clubs' radio programmes exist in all countries. During a survey conducted in May 2017 among 310 Dimitra Clubs (out of a total 1 600 clubs) in Niger, DR Congo and Senegal, 80% of respondents said that they knew at least one community radio station that had a specific transmission on the Dimitra Clubs, and that 86 percent of clubs listened to this broadcast either collectively or individually.

In several cases, community radio stations also solicited a direct contribution from members of the community, to enable them to work more effectively. In some villages in the Province of Tshopo, DR Congo, a number of clubs have decided to compensate the radio broadcasters who came to record programmes in the community, by paying for their transport or giving them agricultural products. ■

DR Congo Partnership with clubs in Tshopo, the view of the radio stations

The dynamism of community radio stations in the Tshopo Province and their partnership with Dimitra Clubs has been critical in the process of setting up the clubs. Seven radio stations – Radio Kulukoko, Radio Mabele, Radio Yanonge, Radio Bondeko d'Isangi, Radio Boboto, Radio Mwangaza and Radio Télévision Bondeke-Isangi (RTBI) – have since 2013 become involved in working with the clubs. Partnership agreements have been signed between Dimitra Clubs and community radios, and dozens of programmes have been produced and broadcast on subjects chosen by the clubs themselves (literacy, sharing of farming tasks between men and women, aquaculture, horticulture).

During a forum held in Kisangani, at the end of the project (2015), the partner radio stations shared their views on the club approach.

“For us journalists, the clubs have revolutionized our work. Now, when we go to the communities, people know us and we feel like members of the community. And these communities participate in the radio transmissions. Radio programmes have been redeveloped to include proposals made by the community. This is radio by the communities and for the communities! (...) Our broadcasts are far more interesting when they include the voices of women. That makes them richer, the broadcasts are participatory, and full of ideas: people listen and enjoy hearing themselves on the radio.”

JOSEPH BASSAY OF RTBI

“Before the clubs arrived, we spoke on behalf of the people. The training has been important in showing us how to design and produce our programmes differently, in a participatory manner, giving an equal voice to women.”

SYLVAIN LOULA, OF RADIO BOBOTO

Practical training on Community radio and Dimitra Clubs

FAO has developed a specific training module aimed at improving links between the Dimitra Clubs and community radio stations. It includes three main sessions:

- The first training session clarifies the clubs' main principles, which must also guide the production of radio broadcasts. Two of these principles, which are crucial for collaboration with radio stations, are explored in detail: gender and community participation. Participants – men and women – conduct a critical analysis of media from a gender perspective, to ensure a good overview of the concept of gender. Participation is central to exercise on the formats/types of participatory radio broadcasts that can be used in a rural setting to attract the widest possible outreach.
- The second session is devoted to preparing and recording a live broadcast on the clubs, paying special attention to the two principles highlighted earlier. Listening to this afterwards allows technical and content issues of to be addressed.
- Finally, the third session allows relations between the clubs and radio stations to be explored, and to emphasize the need for clubs to engage with radios that they have themselves chosen. The message for the radio stations is that the clubs are a by-product of the community, not an FAO project, and that this represents an opportunity for the radios.



Dimitra Clubs use ICTs as enablers for sustainable development



Worldwide, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have rapidly spread, including in the developing world where mobile phones' penetration at the household level has surpassed access to electricity and improved sanitation. Their proliferation has led to important social and economic transformations, boosting agricultural development, expanding job opportunities and improving services. Youth are at the forefront of this technological advancement, with 70% of them (aged 15-24) using the internet globally.

Despite the fact that much progress has been made, huge challenges still remain. According to the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies (ITU), over half of the world's population is still offline, particularly in Africa. Only 30% of young people in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) have access to the internet compared with 94% in developed economies. In Africa, 9 out of 10 young individuals is not benefitting from internet access.

In this context, FAO is convinced that increased attention is needed to reducing the gender gap across all areas of its work and that ICTs can play a key role in rural development.

The Dimitra Clubs' approach has proved to be extremely effective in achieving this goal and putting ICTs at the service of inclusive rural development. The clubs combine capacity development processes with the use of ICTs. In this dynamic, ICTs are not a development objective in themselves. They are enablers for social inclusion and improved dialogue in rural areas. By making use of them in support of an empowerment process led by rural communities, the Dimitra Clubs ensure inclusive participation and ownership of the actions undertaken and thus, sustainability.

The clubs are equipped with wind-up and solar-powered radios, often paired with mobile phones connected in a fleet. In the empowering process led by men and women from the clubs, community radio stations and other means are used to relay information requested by the clubs' members and facilitate exchange and networking.

Many stories from the field show how ICTs are successfully used by FAO Dimitra Clubs as enablers for collective action, improved food security and rural people's resilience while contributing to gender equality.

In a rural isolated village of Niger (Mallam Koïra), a women's Dimitra Club noticed that some insects were damaging the millet fields. After discussions, the club decided to take action by sending a mobile phone picture to the regional agricultural inspector who was able to promptly advise on actions to stop the infestation. Three days after, the pest control agents had already seen the picture and were able to provide the adequate treatment on time.

In the district of Falwel, the youth's Dimitra Clubs have created a WhatsApp group and use it to exchange experiences and achievements. This is an open window to surrounding villages outside the community, which acts as a first step towards the creation of local synergies and partnerships with other clubs, beyond the villages. Similarly, the two NGOs providing support to the Dimitra Clubs in Niger have created their own network using WhatsApp. All their facilitators were provided smart phones and participate in a permanent discussion group to share achievements, pictures, as well as

to seek advice on specific challenges related to the functioning of the clubs or technical issues. The network is also a powerful way to motivate the facilitators. The best stories are often posted in a "private" Facebook page.

Some of these isolated rural communities communicate for the first time with the world to share their clubs' achievements using photos, videos, texts and voice messages. The use of ICTs coupled with the dynamism of the community development process and the increasing participation of the young men and women in decision-making can be a source of motivation for them to stay in rural areas.

In line with the principle of 'leaving no one behind' from Agenda 2030, these stories show how participatory approaches like the Dimitra Clubs are making an inclusive use of ICTs, which contributes to empowerment of rural people, social inclusion of marginalized groups in rural areas, and gender equality. ■



South-South cooperation – the clubs of Niger, Mali and Senegal share experiences

FAO offers substantial support to South-South cooperation as part of its efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, especially those linked to hunger, malnutrition and poverty. Among other things, this involves promoting solidarity between developing countries to enable them to share their knowledge, skills and resources. In this context, the Dimitra Clubs have been identified as a good practice to share. In 2017, exchanges were organized between the Dimitra Clubs of Niger, Senegal and Mali.

As a first step, two delegations made up of clubs' members and other actors from Mali and Senegal visited Niger in August 2017.

On this occasion, a training and discussion workshop was organized on the theme of "South-South cooperation in the Sahel: Mali, Niger, Senegal. The Dimitra Clubs for social cohesion, gender equality, community mobilization and the empowerment of rural people." The event was an opportunity to gather different actors from the rural sector around the same table: men and women farmers, clubs' members, NGO partners, representatives of producer organizations, community radios, national and regional administrative authorities, traditional chiefs and religious leaders. It enabled all participants to present their vision of the Dimitra Clubs' approach and to begin the process of sharing experiences, success stories, and particularly constraints.

A field visit to the village of Gassedra, situated 80 km from the capital of Niamey, followed activities in the workshop. Gassedra was chosen since this was the site of the first Dimitra Club in Niger. The visitors from Mali and Senegal joined club members from Niger in planting one thousand fruit trees. In the village schoolyard they also witnessed the planting of the FAO-Dimitra grove for the education of girls.

The participants held talks with the villagers on the functioning of the Dimitra Clubs and their achievements. Some of the most notable accomplishments include the vegetable garden of the women Dimitra Club in Banizoumbou. This made a strong impression on Mariama Nantoume of the women's club in Mopti, Mali: "In our village, women have difficulty in accessing land and water. For me, the experience of this vegetable garden has been a source of inspiration to take action in my own club, to improve our livelihoods."

In Niger, participants developed individual and collective plans of action, and committed themselves to taking concrete action in their respective countries, together with initiatives aimed at strengthening the capacities of rural actors. They went on to draw up a series of recommendations, namely: institutionalizing Dimitra Clubs in all FAO programmes, setting up a network of Dimitra Clubs at national, sub-regional and regional level, and a platform for the exchange of knowledge.

Delegations in Mali and Senegal

The second phase of this initiative for South-South cooperation took place in December 2017, when two delegations from Niger paid a visit – one to Mali and the other to Senegal. In the two countries, the delegations met a number of people involved in implementing clubs' activities, including small-scale men and women farmers (members of Dimitra Clubs), local NGO partners, and representatives of producer organizations and community radios. The participants were able to strengthen the exchanges that had begun in Niamey, and took stock of and renewed the individual and collective commitments made during the first phase.

In Senegal, the Governor of the Region of Tambacounda, Mr. Elhadji Bouya Amara, stressed "the relevance and efficiency in combining FAO's programme of South-South cooperation with the methodological approach of the Dimitra Clubs to promote harmonious and equitable development in our rural communities. All this is in line with the Plan for an Emerging Senegal (PES), our new policy aimed at leading Senegal towards emergence by 2035."

In Mali, there was also full support from the authorities: Mr. Siaka Fofana, the National Director of Agriculture, sent a message of support and encouragement for the approach, declaring that "the clubs fit perfectly into the vision of the highest authorities in Mali, and specifically, integrating the gender perspective into the economic and social development process."

This initiative has demonstrated the relevance of South-South cooperation as an effective mechanism for exchange on technical issues, but also and above all, an opportunity to build strong relationships, confidence and mutual understanding between development actors. ■



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The voice of youth





According to United Nations estimates of 2015, Africa has the world's youngest rural population, with 130 million rural inhabitants aged between 15 and 24. These young people are the focus of growing interest by the international community, even though their situation is often viewed through the prism of extreme phenomena (conflicts, violence, migration, rural exodus), or based on the experience of previous generations.

Who are these young women and men? What are their aspirations? What roles can they play as agents for change in the economics and social norms of the rural sector? They represent a major asset for development in Africa, but is their potential being sufficiently exploited?

Experience shows that the Dimitra Clubs' approach can help to find answers to these questions and enable young people to become engaged. Thanks to this inclusive approach, young rural Africans can at last play a full role in community life, have a say in the decision-making process, and take action for their personal development, and that of their community.

In rural areas, young people are often out of step with previous generations, especially regarding their openness to the world, notably as a result of new information and communication technologies. It is time to remove the constraints that hamper their social and economic empowerment, and the need is even pressing in the case of young women, who face even more challenges. The clubs serve as a lever in this sense, and can help young people to develop self-confidence and realize their aspirations.



Youth Dimitra Clubs: a driver for local governance



In Niger, the approach and success of Dimitra Clubs serves as an important lever in the process of decentralization and local governance. In order to be more closely aligned with the villages and rural communities, municipalities are increasingly encouraging synergies with Dimitra Clubs, especially those of young people, whose engagement and mobilization for community activities are widely acknowledged.



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In 2018, there were more than 1 200 Dimitra Clubs in Niger, distributed throughout five of the country's regions, and covering a total of twenty one municipalities. Since their launch, the clubs have successfully conducted a wide range of activities in areas linked to rural development: agriculture, so as to combat food insecurity and malnutrition, economic and social empowerment for men, women and youth, education, infrastructures, etc. By building

on an endogenous dynamic, the Dimitra Clubs have managed to introduce an inter-generational dialogue at village level, which gives an increasingly important place to young people – boys and girls – and facilitates group decisions, community mobilization and collective action.

Strengthening youth capacities

Focusing on youth therefore appears a logical step in order to maintain communities'

dynamic momentum and ensure that the Dimitra Clubs' approach continues. It was with that aim in mind that the idea emerged to strengthen the organizational capacities of young leaders – men and women – in rural communities, so as to set up a network and make them flagbearers of community dynamism through the Dimitra Clubs' approach.

In this context, the organizational capacities of young Dimitra Club leaders have

been strengthened by FAO, in partnership with local NGOs AEDL and APEBA, in the regions of Zinder, Tahoua, Dosso and Tillabéry. In each municipality, two young women and two young men are tasked with organizing monthly meetings, managing inter-village gatherings, monitoring the results of activities and arranging cascade training at village level.

A municipal bureau Réseau des clubs Dimitra (Network of Dimitra Clubs) has already been set in place in fifteen municipalities, with the support and empowerment of the young Dimitra Club leaders representing the communities. In the future, these municipal bureaux will in turn be organized into a national federation of municipal club networks, with a mandate to strengthen community dynamism, while developing links with the municipal administrative authorities.

Networks of Dimitra Clubs

Each Network of Dimitra Clubs bureau is charged with developing and implementing monthly plans of action to support the Dimitra Clubs' dynamics, assist the young Dimitra Club leaders, organize forums and meetings to galvanize the clubs, and give feedback on and share the results with the municipal authority. The process has just started, but setting up the network is a long-term process, in the words of Assoumane Hassane and Ibrahim Seybou, coordinators of NGOs AEDL and APEBA: "The enthusiasm shown by the young people demonstrates the value of investing in community mobilization on a voluntary basis."

The two coordinators say they believe a significant step has already been taken in terms of community management. Some Dimitra Clubs, like those of Dantiandou and Garhanga, have already set in place municipal bureaux for Dimitra Clubs and in some cases have moved on to formalize their organization.

It is expected that the networking by Dimitra youth clubs will help to strengthen cooperation between the municipal authorities and village institutions. Already, the Mayors of Tamaské and Garhanga have been made aware of the existence of the Clubs and the municipal bureau, acknowledging them as well structured organizations that are effective in driving community mobilization.

Encouraging closer ties

For NGOs AEDL and APEBA, it is crucial to have effective communication strategies, so as to draw the attention of the traditional and municipal authorities to planning issues and achievements by Dimitra Clubs in the municipality. They have seen that "overall, local elected officials in these places have been made aware of the activities of the Dimitra Clubs and are in contact with them, either through the mediation of young leaders, or through direct exchanges with members of Dimitra Clubs, or often through a facilitator (of the NGO) for the Dimitra Clubs.

On some occasions, the elected officials have requested community radio, which is the most suitable channel for getting messages to club members and the community. At all stages, the municipal authorities are encouraged to highlight the Dimitra Clubs' capacity for mobilization, and the importance of making them known to public services, NGOs, and development projects in the municipalities, which can all draw considerable advantage from collaboration."

Communication and dialogue certainly facilitate the forging of closer ties and collaboration between municipal authorities and citizens. At Fararat Babba (Garhanga), for example, a participatory analysis led to the drawing up of a list of problems facing the municipality, and solutions to address them. This discussion resulted in the planning of activities to be carried out in the village, which will be included in the new Municipal Development Plan. This work has been possible partly due to members of Dimitra Clubs, some of whom are also local councillors. To secure the involvement and engagement of the town hall in the development of their village, men and women club members displayed skills in debate, planning and negotiation.

Youth's active engagement

Here as in other municipalities, the youth Dimitra Clubs and rural communities feel more comfortable in their relationships with the administrative authorities, and have no hesitation in presenting their grievances or requesting an intervention. In Laba and Fararat Babba, at the request of clubs which expressed a need for training, the Mayor of Garhanga organized training to identify

sources of funding, so as to strengthen the capacities of the Dimitra Clubs. On other occasions, when a large project is to be undertaken, requests are made to the municipal technical services, before starting work or to prepare specifications.

One lesson to bear in mind, according to the representatives of NGOs AEDL and APEBA, is that villages manage themselves with determination and autonomy according to the Dimitra Clubs' approach, when the dynamic is driven by young people – men and women – who are committed and well trained. They maintain it is a good policy to plan "the involvement of youth as a deliberate strategy for impetus and sustainability of the Dimitra Clubs, while promoting the setting up of a sharing network for these young people." In the same way, it is important to define and plan "a strategy capable of systematically supporting municipal networks of young people in Dimitra Clubs, so as to lay the foundations for actions to continue in the long term". ■

"The enthusiasm shown by the young people demonstrates the value of investing in community mobilization on a voluntary basis."

ASSOUMANE HASSANE AND IBRAHIM SEYBOU,
COORDINATORS OF NGOS AEDL AND APEBA
AEDL ET APEBA

NIGER

Getting married: which choice for young people?



The youth bring the debate on dowry and the “marriage suitcase” to the Dimitra Clubs.

In Niger, as everywhere, young people leave adolescence with their heads full of hopes and dreams. Finding their way in life, making career plans, meeting a soul mate, setting up a home, having children. The dream of marrying starts early in Niger. Because here, in the eyes of society, marrying young is a sign of maturity and secures a position of respectability within the community.

In Dikki as in many other villages in the region of Dosso, young people between the ages of 18 and 21 contemplate the transition to adulthood with considerable anguish over the issue of marriage. To get married, it is not enough to declare your love for your sweetheart and ask for her hand. Before the wedding can take place, the suitor must first find the dowry.

A recent practice, no doubt passed on from the urban areas, obliges the aspiring groom to offer his fiancée what is commonly known as the marriage suitcase. “15 suits made of high quality fabric, shoes, jewellery, cosmetics, a radio, a telephone, clothes for the future parents-in-law, not to mention cash,” explains a young bachelor from the village of Dikki. The equivalent of two bulls or at least two years’ work for those who have the opportunity to emigrate to neighbouring countries. That is a fortune for many young people in the villages, who live in a state of constant dread, a thunderbolt to the head as they say, as the age of marriage draws closer.

The pressure is even greater in Marafa Kwara, in the municipality of Falwel, where, as well as the marriage suitcase, the prospective groom has to pay a large sum of money in the form of a reward if the bride is a virgin, considered a bonus to the family honour.

The gravity of the situation has prompted the young men of Dikki to defy the rules of etiquette and bring the debate to the Dimitra Clubs. “Given the situation, I had begun to lose hope – me who always thought of my village as a place to live and flourish. But



things have changed very quickly. With the help of the Dimitra Clubs, we have managed to shake up the community and force it to hold a discussion on this practice, which was unsettling all young people”, observes one young man.

A unanimous decision

The young people have taken advantage of the space offered by the Dimitra Clubs to explain their arguments to the older members. Paradoxically, it is a practice that is inconsistent with the custom of young people marrying early. On the contrary, men are now waiting longer and longer to get married. It is not unusual to see young fiancés leaving the village for several years in an attempt to amass enough money for the wedding. And often, according to a resident of Dikki, “as a result of social pressure, and tired of waiting for their suitors, young women end up agreeing to become the second wife of an older man”.

Discussions within the Dimitra Clubs went on for three weeks, and to the surprise of those involved, the decision was taken to end the rule about the marriage suitcase. “The decision was swift and unanimous, because the whole community supported

our demands. To think that everyone was against this practice, but no one had ever done anything to put a stop to it,” says the young bachelor, happily.

Much to the delight of young people, the suitcase is no longer a precondition for asking a girl’s hand in marriage. Around one dozen families are encouraging their sons to follow the example of Abdoul Razak, a young man from Dikki, who did not wait long to ascertain that the marriage suitcase was indeed nothing more than a bad memory.

In the neighbouring village of Marafa Kwara, the awareness-raising carried out by the Dimitra Clubs has also enabled the marriage requirements to be relaxed, with a positive effect on marital relations and the dignity of young married couples. Hadjara, who was married last April, welcomes the progress, confiding: “the Dimitra Clubs have enabled us to remove the intimacy of our married life from the gaze of the community”.

Times have certainly changed, and in Dikki, Marafa Kwara and other neighbouring areas, young people are now free to marry, without too many constraints. ■

TESTIMONY DR CONGO

Reducing early marriage

In the province of Kwilu, a number of tribes, among them the Yansi, have the tradition of encouraging young girls to marry at an early age. Mimi Mungiele, member of a Dimitra Club, explains how the Dimitra Clubs are helping to curtail this phenomenon.

“Where we live, early marriage is a real obstacle to development.

The main cause is poverty. When we parents are unable to send our children to school, it becomes difficult to supervise them and meet their needs.

Up until now, it was the men who generally managed the household revenue. The wives were not involved, even though they do almost everything in terms of agricultural production. This meant that the women and young girls were forced to look for ways to find a minimum to survive.

The other cause is tradition, which poses a threat to our society: parents sent their sons to school while the daughters stayed at home to help their mothers with household chores or work in the fields.

At the age of 12, 13 or 14, the girls are often approached by boys of their own age along the path leading to the field, or the place where they fetch water. As a result of

these numerous meetings they end up getting pregnant. Once a girl is pregnant, her father demands that the boy’s parents take responsibility for her, and that she goes to live with this new family. When the baby is born, the girl does not return to live with her parents. The girl’s parents end up claiming the dowry, since the marriage has been consumed. All these family responsibilities represent a significant expense. The boy, who is often not prepared to start a family, is forced to look for a way to sustain a living. That is the vicious circle of poverty.

The question of early marriage, and the negative consequences it entails, used to be a taboo subject for us. People simply said it was tradition, and that was an end to it.

Here in Bulungu, the arrival of the project “Women and men, let’s make progress together” (see box), brought about significant changes. As a result of improved communication between all groups in the village, and the information on gender roles learned within the Dimitra Club, we started to get organized.

For us it was an opportunity to say no to this customary practice, which stopped girls from going to school and forced them to stay at home to help with household chores and work in the fields. Since discussions on the subject also included the traditional chiefs, we realized that changing our habits could lead to improvements in our lives.

Although it was not easy, we put this subject at the centre of our discussions. All the members of our club committed themselves to talking about it by taking part in the public theatre shows organised by UNICEF, taking the message door-to-door and using slogans, with the help of clubs and FAO leaders and facilitators. Today, many families have been made aware of the issue, and that is a good thing for the whole community!” ■



“Women and men, let’s make progress together”

Dimitra Clubs were set up in the province of Kwilu in DR Congo as part of the programme to combat gender-based violence implemented by FAO and UNICEF between 2014-2017, with funding from the European Union.

A total of 153 Dimitra Clubs made up of 3 900 members, of whom 2 730 are women and 1 170 are men, have been set up, with 20 of the clubs launched in the province of Kinshasa, and 133 of them launched in the former province of Bandundu.

The Dimitra Clubs are an important tool for behaviour change and gender relations, with a view to combating gender-based violence.

Youth club of Yanonge, an example of self-determination



In the province of Tshopo, the Mwangaza (Light) Dimitra Club has launched several initiatives aimed at mobilizing the young people – both girls and boys – of Yanonge. Despite very limited resources, these young people have organized panel discussions on themes of general interest, as well as training in information technology.

Noticing the lack of development initiatives engaging the young people of Yanonge, the members of the youth Dimitra club in the village took the decision to organize public debates. The first panel discussion was arranged to explore a sensitive but important matter: violence against women in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Members of this mixed club divided-up the tasks among them to organize the event and find documentation on the definition of this violence and its legal, health and psychological aspects. They also found videos on YouTube to screen. The conference was a resounding success: more than 200 people attended the gathering, including several guests of honour such as the village doctor and administrator. The conference was so successful that it lasted nearly 4 hours!

This first youth club activity generated much enthusiasm among the young people of Yanonge, who hoped that this type of event would now be held on a weekly basis. But without a budget, this was out of the question: hiring the room and a generator, and use of a printer all cost money. As a reminder, the Dimitra Clubs never receive money or financial support from FAO to conduct their activities. It is up to the club to find resources for its own actions. As a result, the young people grouped together to set up a restaurant stall, as a way of providing funds for the club.

Other activities, including information technology

Aside from the debate on violence, the club subsequently decided to focus on other issues of general interest, such as early marriage and illiteracy. To benefit the community, they also organized activities

to maintain and clean up the area. Since some club members had computer skills, they received support to strengthen their capacities. Although the internet connection is poor and costly in Yanonge, email and Facebook accounts have been set up so as to interact with the rest of the world.

No need for financial support to take charge of your own destiny

For club members, it is important to change mindsets, and to set an example. Many people in the region think that in order to take action, you must receive money, but the club refuses to espouse this idea. The Dimitra Club of Yanonge was determined to show through its own activities that action without external funding is possible, that everyone can take charge of their own lives and stop being passive, and that young people in particular have an important contribution to make. ■





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Acknowledgements

How not to begin by thanking the women and men from the Dimitra Clubs for their trust and enthusiasm? It is of course to them that this issue is dedicated, even though there is not enough space to describe all the incalculable changes and achievements generated in their communities.

A number of people made this special issue of the newsletter possible. The contribution of the members of the FAO Dimitra team was invaluable. They are, in alphabetical order: Ali Abdoulaye, Aster Bashige, Mauro Bottaro, Yannick De Mol, Ibrahim Farmo, Christiane Monsieur, Eliane Najros, Alassane Ndiaye, Julie Nyolo Love and Andrea Sánchez Enciso, not forgetting Sidi Koné and Julien Zamuangana. We would also like to mention Seydou Sarr, who provided the critical impetus for the work of information gathering and writing of many articles.

Our warmest thanks are also extended to all those who work so hard on a daily basis to put the Dimitra Clubs' approach into action, first and foremost the partner organizations that "accompany" the clubs. They are tireless in communicating the results of their work, and are a source of inspiration to us all.

This work is also the result of the continuous support provided by FAO country offices in Burundi, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and by the state partners that sustain this initiative. Finally, we would like to recall that the Dimitra Clubs approach could not have been developed without the support of the Belgian Cooperation that we wish to thank here for their continued trust.

The number of Dimitra Clubs in sub-Saharan Africa has reached 3 000, marking a milestone. This gender-transformative approach aimed at rural people's empowerment through community mobilization has proved increasingly successful.

Through this flexible approach developed by FAO, the rural communities themselves, through their decisions and actions, determine the changes that need to be made to their environment, and how to improve their livelihoods.

The Dimitra Clubs' areas of impact are many and varied. Several themes shape this special edition of the newsletter: community mobilization, gender and women's leadership, food security and nutrition, social cohesion and peace, adaptation to climate change, rural organizations, information and knowledge, and last but not least, the future: youth.

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