

If countries are to achieve their development goals, and in particular the reduction of hunger and poverty (MDG1), concerted and targeted action is needed to empower rural women and to redress existing inequalities. The contribution in producing, processing, marketing, and preparing food need to become central elements of development policies and operational investments and activities. Allocation of resources and services need to take into account the differentiated roles women and men play in the rural economy to ensure that women capture a share of development benefits that corresponds to their contribution. Policy and programmatic interventions that target rural women enable them to play their economic and productive roles more effectively. National governments need to take the lead in recognizing and addressing the needs of rural women and need to be assisted by development partners, UN agencies and other stakeholders. The time has come to take action on all levels and across institutions to support rural women to achieve the MDGs.

Key Recommendations

A number of key recommendations emerged from the discussion:

Invest in agriculture and in rural women. The fight against hunger needs to address the needs of rural women. Country-led investment plans and appropriate legal and policy frameworks are necessary for countries to bring out the productive potential of 50% (or more) of the population.

Recognize women as stakeholders not beneficiaries. National development and food security strategies should recognize rural women as producers, entrepreneurs, and managers of natural resources. To accelerate results, strategies should support rural women's empowerment in agriculture and rural development.

e. Improve local and national data collection to support rural women's empowerment, and the informal economy.

Give women their share. Investments in agriculture and rural development need to be country-led, and correspond to the different contributions men and women make to agriculture and rural development to ensure that a larger share of programming resources reach women farmers and agricultural producers and support their economic empowerment.

No one size fits all. Policies and programmes need to be holistic and address both the needs of rural women and the needs of rural men.

Be accountable. Monitor implementation of existing commitments in support of agriculture and rural development and evaluate and report on their impact on rural youth.

Empowerment is an important tool for enabling both poor men and women to overcome poverty while recognizing their different roles in society. Men need to be part of the dialogue and can be powerful enablers.

A piece of land, equipment, and credit of her own. Strengthen legal frameworks to ensure gender equality and adopt measures to ensure women's access to resources, including land, credit, technologies, training, markets and information.

Support an agricultural research agenda that focuses on rural youth-friendly, labour-saving agricultural equipment and modern means of communication.

Enable rural women to make their voices heard and participate in decision-making processes in local, national, regional and global fora related to food security, agriculture, rural development, environment and climate change.

Strength in number. Support farmer organizations as important actors in increasing the capacity of those organizations to address gender issues.

Summary of Panel Discussion

Opening the session, the President of the ECOSOC reiterated the critical role of women in the rural economy and their contribution to crop production, livestock care and off-farm activities. Despite their contribution to the local and national economy, women continue to have limited access to vital resources and services, including health, education and productive services, as well as decision-making processes. Rural women have been disproportionately affected by recent crises and climate change as their livelihoods largely depend on agriculture. Despite some progress towards improving the condition of rural women, there is a need for renewed efforts to transform existing commitments into action and empower women to exert their potential as agents of change. Panelists and participants were encouraged to identify best practices in this regard that show potential for replication and scaling up. It was stressed that the discussion would be an opportunity to provide concrete recommendations for actions for the ECOSOC session in June/July and the MDGs Summit in September.

Panelists raised a number of critical issues affecting rural women and their capacity to become agents of change:

The centrality of women in agriculture, rural development, and food security

Agriculture and rural development are strategic entry points for reducing rural poverty, improving food insecurity, and ultimately for achieving the MDGs. There is a need to reverse past trends of under-investment in the sector and re-focus attention and investments on those who produce a large share of the food consumed around the world: rural women. Women play a central role in rural communities and are largely responsible for household food security. They produce 50% of food in the world and 80% of food in developing countries.

Women also play a fundamental role in the transmission of knowledge, particularly of traditional agricultural practices critical for the conservation of traditional crops and biodiversity. They also make a central contribution to many other development goals, such as poverty eradication, health, education and child malnutrition. For this reason, investments in women tend to have a higher rate of return than those in men, especially in agriculture and education. Despite the centrality of women in the rural economy and development, they continue to remain largely invisible, unrewarded and unsupported. But it is becoming apparent that the food crisis cannot be resolved and empowerment of women is central to food security and development. Women should have equal employment opportunity and wages; be trained to use agricultural technology; and participate in decision-making on food security.

Addressing gender-

Female-headed households have been more harshly affected by the food crisis than male-headed households, as women spend a higher portion of their income on food while at the same time having less access to resources. Levels of gender inequality in rural areas tend to be high with women having less access to knowledge, information, resources, health and education services, property rights, tenure security, agricultural extensions, and access to credit and other activities that can generate income. Such persistent gender inequality hinders local and national development and prospects for the achievements the MDGs. There is a need for country-led development plans/strategies that systematically incorporate a gender perspective and adopt appropriate technologies, access to natural and productive resources.

Frequently, rural women are also the subject of violence and discrimination. Despite progress in changing this situation, implementation levels, which in turn will require appropriate governmental institutions, policy and legal frameworks that actively promote gender issues.

Need for gender-d

In many developing countries, they continue to be invisible in national labor and other statistics. The situation is particularly grave for indigenous rural women who are often subject to both gender and ethnic sensitive statistics is essential for putting in place and strengthening economic, social and legal policies, mechanisms and practices that work support rural women rather than ignoring them or even undermining their ability to improve agricultural production and food security. This will

decentralizing government, finance, and right of information to allow women to have a voice in decision-making and problem-solving; the need to allocate bwf i gv tguqwtegu vq yqo gpøu pggfu cu a practical way to ensure implementation of gender-dkcugf rqnkekgu cpf ejcpig rgqrngøu okpfugv; the need for cross-cultural planning tools that take into account the ethnical diversity of indigenous women.