
Strategies on women empowerment and gender equality: how to reduce the gap between rural women and institutions.

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This article intends to analyse the limits that hamper and interfere with constructive and positive relations between rural women and the institutions, which, in all countries - particularly in the Mediterranean ones - should guarantee their empowerment and the development of their activities. In order to conduct this analysis, we will take into consideration the positive results and best practices from several years of experience in the development of cooperation programmes. We will then focus on how these limits may be overcome and how governmental and non-governmental institutions may find better ways to thoroughly understand the needs of women who are fundamental in the rural reality, and whose involvement in rural policies and development is becoming more and more strategic.

For years, the CIHEAM Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Bari (Italy) has been working in the field of gender equality and women empowerment in the rural context and, in the last four years (starting from 2014/2015) - with the implementation of the first phase of the GEMAISA project ("Enhancing gender mainstreaming for sustainable rural development and food security") - the commitment in this strategic subject has been increasingly prevalent and significant. Currently, the second phase of the project has started with the involvement of six countries, giving the CIHEAM Bari the opportunity to spread the already experienced methods and improve its capacity to utilise the strategies developed by governmental institutions dealing with the implementation of agricultural policies.

These methods imply, first of all, a multi-dimensional approach promoting the link between the public and private spheres of women's life that has an impact on their social roles and involves men in the division of labour, with due regard to the constraints women have to face, the resources they have access to and - last but not the least - in building their awareness both on the role they - the men - can play, and on the discrimination women have to face.

The multi-dimensional approach results in a deeper recognition of the role of rural women, both in the formal and informal sectors, creating innovative dynamics, which ultimately generate beneficial effects on agricultural production, on the efficiency of this important economic area and, on the development of the country in general.

Institutional commitment is the only possible way forward to strengthen this approach and to create a desirable circle which may generate effective and lasting changes in Mediterranean rural realities. Institutional commitment could lead to a sustainable change in the advancement of the existing legislative framework in the various countries and the creation of infrastructures and new services (such as women's meeting places, counselling centres, periodical governmental training courses, institutionalised participation in periodical exhibitions etc.).

In this line, NOWARA Observatory (National Observatory for Women in Agriculture and Rural Areas) - created in Lebanon under TERCOM emergency programme, financed by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation more than ten years ago - was the first experience developed by the CIHEAM-Bari in close collaboration with the Lebanese Ministry of Agriculture and Lebanese CNRS, two national institutions which were actively involved in the creation of such an "instrument" whose direct beneficiaries were rural women (entrepreneurs, workers, landowners).

GEMAISA Project (phase I and phase II, currently in its inception phase), - once again financed by the Italian Government through the Italian Agency for International Cooperation - has strengthened, both within the financing body and within the implementing agency, the belief that no real change could happen without the solid support and concrete collaboration of governmental institutions and that, connecting southern Mediterranean institutions is a still more powerful means to reach

a goal in less time and with stronger beneficial effects.

If Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia have worked together for more than three years in the framework of GEMAISA phase I, three other countries have decided that the experience is worthwhile and that rural women empowerment requires a common effort to be developed and improved. Jordan, Morocco and Palestine are the new beneficiaries and together with other national governmental bodies, their Ministries of Agriculture will act together for the promotion of natural resources management, food security, economic empowerment, equal access to resources and capacity building development thanks to stronger women's involvement in the agricultural sector.

As already mentioned, together with the Ministries of Agriculture, other institutions are highly engaged in the current phase of the Project: Ministries of Women, Social Affairs, Economic Development; local bodies such as provinces and municipalities, universities, women's associations and the private sector.

All these actors work together with the same objectives that could be summarised by two of the Sustainable Development Goals of the Agenda 2030: SDG 5 "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" and SDG 2 "End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture".

GEMAISA II aims at becoming a reference model and a best practice for programmes involving rural women in the Mediterranean Basin that establish strong partnerships at different governance levels (micro/local, meso/intermediate governmental institutions and macro/central institutions/ministries), and cooperation with civil society organisations.

This approach would also guarantee the sharing of news, strategies to be adopted, best practices to be

disseminated together with advice, technical and economic information and it would be supported by an on-line platform encouraging networking between the different actors. This Platform is intended as a space for "knowledge-sharing and an interaction point", related to the GEMAISA Project but also open to other programmes/activities with a gender dimension that are implemented by the CIHEAM Bari, in particular, and at an international level, in general.

Through this platform, proper visibility will be provided to the websites of all participating institutions (both the CIHEAM Bari and partner institutions) and partner organisations will be able to share their posts on social media, which is becoming increasingly important for the sharing of information and increased involvement.

Thanks to this instrument it would be possible to be informed and updated on the following sections, which will be decided together with the project coordinators and its beneficiaries. The platform will include:

- An AGENDA – a calendar-based section listing future news and events regarding the whole project and communities.
- COMMUNITY NEWS and VIDEO STORIES – these sections are the communities' "showcase". They will include news and videos on events and activities that will take place within the territories of the communities involved in the Project
- KNOWLEDGE and KNOW-HOW – this section will contain training, knowledge sharing and "awareness-building" material (videos, tutorials, webinars and resources in general) on specific topics. The material will be selected by the project coordinator and the editorial staff.

Integration between local and governmental policies would be one of the main objectives of

the entire programme and it will not only provide full support to the local population beneficiaries of the programme, but also reduce the existing gap between rural people and governmental bodies. This has always resulted in a rural policy that is unaware of people's needs, in particular those of rural women.

Gender Units, located at the different Ministries of Agriculture, will be supported – this has already been the case during the 1st phase of the Project – and strengthened. Vocational training sessions for experts and workers will also be part of the programme in order to raise awareness and disseminate knowledge without forgetting the new generations and their welfare, which will prevent future departures from rural areas and a critical worsening of the migration problem.

The above-mentioned projects could be a possible answer to one of the most important issues mentioned in the Italian Cooperation Gender Equality and Women Empowerment Guidelines where the Italian Cooperation commits itself to; promoting constant collaboration between national and international institutions on gender equality in order to undertake innovative pathways for poverty alleviation and sustainable development that recognise women as an economic force and as actors of innovation. Moreover, gender balance at local and national levels should be favoured as gender mainstreaming tools for budgetary policies, public policies and finally as a tool for political empowerment.

Indeed, policies need to be aware of the leading role rural women can play in improving social and economic outcomes; when the economic sphere is involved and the individuals involved become valuable, their importance and consideration turn out to be consequentially enhanced and social rules could receive important boosts. The economic reasons are always a very strong pull factor in bringing things to a head.

It is crucial to emphasize that institutional changes are sustainable but also very difficult to achieve. Efforts can have an impact on the social organization of communities, but "customs and traditions", in the way of living and acting, carry both large and small risks that can slow down the desirable path to positive transformations. As already mentioned, the involvement of men is crucial and this is what GEMAISA is striving to do at a local and central level as well as with the

people working for the project and involved in the programme's different activities.

At local level, both rural men and rural women can be beneficiaries of the planned training programmes and refresher courses, and be active members of associations and communities. At central level, the ministerial Gender Units are not restricted to female personnel and project referents are often identified among male experts and officers.

This innovative and strategic approach aims to establish a large network whose members, at all levels of involvement (national and local), could exchange knowledge and information, share best practices, keeping in mind that changes occur when the welfare and economic growth of a country go beyond individual interest and emancipation opportunities are equally distributed.

Bibliography

Project Documents of GEMAISA 1st and 2nd phase ("Enhancing gender mainstreaming for sustainable rural development and food security") financed by the Italian Agency for International Cooperation;

Italian Cooperation Guidelines on Gender Equality and Women Empowerment (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation)