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Building a Sustainable Future with Rural Women

Message of the International Co-operative Alliance on the occasion of International Day of Rural Women



International Day of Rural Women, formerly known as World Rural Women's Day, takes place annually on 15th October to recognise, acknowledge and support the multiple roles that rural women play.

This year celebrations are focused on the acknowledgement of the contribution of rural women to building a sustainable future, all over the world.

The theme draws attention to the need and on-going search for a new paradigm of socio-economic development; one that is more equitable and just for all - women and men of all generations. At the same time, the Day highlights the fundamental role played by world rural women to achieve more just and equitable development objectives through their daily activity. The key however is that on this International Day we are invited to reflect upon the situation of rural women and take action.

Gender equality is a fundamental factor for the socio-economic well-being of all. It is of particular importance in terms of global economic recovery and global development. Yet, despite the gains made so far and the efforts and political commitment of the international community, visible and invisible obstacles continue to persist that prevent rural women from fully exploiting their capabilities. These barriers equally deny them their right to be recognised as the driver and the main actor in rural development.

Rural women face a number of constraints. Rural women have limited or no access to natural, infrastructural, technical and financial resources due to both cultural and legal constraints; rural women are not heard since they have no voice; and rural women mainly work in the informal sector and in subsistence agriculture.

As a consequence, their access to education and basic social services is compromised. According to United Nations data, rural female farmers produce more than 50% of global food production, but earn only one third of global income. At the same time, the number of rural women that live with less than US \$ 1.25 per day has doubled since 1970. Women farmers own 2% of the total land and only 5% of agricultural resources are addressed to them. Moreover they receive 1% of all agricultural credit. Finally, women farmers represent two thirds of all illiterate people.

The impact of the current crisis on rural women is not yet fully understood, although it is expected that rural women will be most adversely affected by rising of international food prices and persistent economic volatility. This is likely to bring about huge job losses.

To face this dramatic situation and identify solutions, actions will be needed at least on two levels. Policy-makers must take action to ensure that policies can promote and support, among other, the self-empowerment of rural women. .../..

At the same time, bottom-up initiative should be enhanced. Studies and practice have over and over again confirmed that when the rural women improve their livelihoods through economic and social associations, it has long term positive effects on their families and their communities; it ensures them food security and safety.

All over the world, rural women have joined forces to form self-help groups and organisations. They have established or joined agricultural co-operatives to meet their socio-economic needs and aspirations. In many countries there are stories of how rural women co-operators empowered themselves, and by doing so were able to bring about the much needed change from the bottom-up. In other words, the co-operative form of enterprise presents a viable model for rural women to gain access to key productive factors, to increase their bargaining power thus enter the so-called formal economy and start working their own way out of poverty.

The role of rural women co-operators is vital. Rural women not only contribute to feeding the world in a safe and sustainable way but also promoting a true development and contribute to building peaceful and socially cohesive communities.

On this International Day of Rural Women let us honour rural women - who are often in very difficult situations - for their remarkable contribution. Let us recognise their role in planting and preserving the seeds which make the world a better place to live, for both the present and future generations.

The ICA and its Gender Equality Committee strongly encourage all ICA members, co-operatives and other organisations, especially those active in or working with rural areas, to celebrate International Day of Rural Women. Be committed and reflect upon the contribution of rural women in member societies; identify and seriously implement gender equality policies and programmes. These actions are no doubt one of the most significant and enduring contributions to making an impact on the lives of millions of rural women around the world.

We count on your support and actions.

Pauline Green
ICA President

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Chair, ICA Gender Equality Committee