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‘Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls’

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Leave No One Behind, Starting with the Furthest Behind

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Winformal settlement and rural areas make the largest women and girls living in poverty both in urban majority of our population that is left furthest behind from the shared benefits of social, political and economic development. Interestingly, past development strategies and agreements around the world have not been short of public pronouncement of this inequality. Unfortunately, this realization and pronouncement never translate into adequate actions towards tackling the underlying reasons on why rural women in particular continue to stay on the margins. After the impact of 1970s structural adjustment programs that almost crippled the social and economic fabrics in many developing countries, the Beijing Platform for Action was probably the closest the world came to launching a comprehensive strategy to emancipating rural women from exclusion and poverty.

The Beijing Platform rekindled the hope of the women movement, civil society and development agents around the world momentarily. Indeed, there are many people around the world who still affirm the Beijing Platform for Action and its agreed 12 critical areas of intervention as a turning point in women's human rights. Since this 1995 groundbreaking Women's Conference, a lot of its content continue to be recycled over and over in development blue prints without transformation in the lives of a significant proportion of women in rural areas around the world.

The implementation of the eight (8) Millennium Development goals over the 15 years (2000-2015) was another failed opportunity to address the needs and priority of women in rural areas and in poverty. While there is evidence that some progress was made, a

deeper analysis shows that very little was achieved to meaningfully change the lives of rural women. In developing countries like Kenya, rural women are still compounded by a myriad of challenges. Insecure land tenure for example is a huge dilemma despite enactment of many progressive laws while the state of basic needs infrastructure makes living in rural setups unbearable.

The benefits of sky rocketing food prices, growing economies with arising middle income class who have a high purchasing power and a rapidly urbanizing society are not equitably shared with the producers, especially small scale farmers. While the cost of food production continues to rise steadily, most inputs are scarce and when available to these farmers, the quality is substandard. This is not withstanding the negative impact of climate changes that has had a significant impact on the agriculture sector, a source of livelihood for most rural households.

Ascending to positions of power is considered to be an important gateway for women to influence the directions towards their desired change. Even though many countries have witnessed a slow but steady rise in percentage of women joining decision making platforms in both public and private spheres, due to social exclusions, illiteracy and low economic status rural women constituents nevertheless still serve largely as voting blocks. In cases where the affirmative action is expected to guarantee equal participation of women in public leadership, only a handful of rural women who live in poverty benefit. Such positions are filled by those connected to powerful individuals and who have political influence.

In the midst of all these challenges, there has been progress in foreign direct investments packaged as solutions to the most pressing needs in developing countries. This investment is most visible in large infrastructural projects like transport, water, commercial agriculture, banking and housing. One consistent element of this size of investments is that information relating to them is very opaque and often riddled by corruption scandals. In the current development modalities, it is rather impossible for a common citizen let alone a grassroots rural woman with a primary level education to be engaged. In cases where resources are misappropriated, rural women like other citizens, shoulder two sets of burdens; 1) in taxes going to the repayment of loans and 2) in the consumption of sub-standard goods and services.

Another highly documented challenge of rural women is access to financing. Increasingly, evidence has shown that there is a number of commercial facilities available for credits to rural women. However, in many cases the credit is neither flexible nor adequate to facilitate women to strategically invest enough to move out of poverty. As many rural women may not have adequate assets to be able to secure commercial loans, their family and individuals saving become their collateral. Table banking and group savings among rural women have become major celebrated platforms of economic intervention. Experience has shown that without very targeted and sustained capacity, these platforms can and have become new frontier for deepening poverty and violence among rural families.

A call for institutional and structural changes

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development presents the world with yet another opportunity to address gender inequality and accelerate the empowerment of all women and girls. Thus, the priority theme of the 62nd session of the Commission, 2018 on the Status of Women (CSW) “Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls” is timely. Closing gender equality gap and ending poverty is possible, but it will require political will to do things differently and to first and foremost share power with those left behind:

- **There is need for significant and sustained investment to organize (not mobilize) and enhance the capacity of grassroots women to drive demand for accountability.**

Today, there are many progressive laws and policy interventions with intentions to resolve the problem of the most in need population with special attention to women and children. In Kenya for example, the 2010 constitution provided for devolution, public participation and affirmative action which are possibly the most critical vehicles that can benefit emancipation of rural women. While this is an important and positive move, complimentary support to strengthen women focused agencies is essential for them to organize. An important strategy to ensure that those who are intended to benefit most from development are at the centre and engage effectively with the institutions responsible of operationalizing such frameworks.

Case 1: *Rural women offer the best starting point to influence implementation of Laws and Policies on inclusive development and*

halting gender inequality. In Kenya, devolved government and entrenchment of affirmative actions in legal and national policies are considered a major gain for those living in exclusion and margins of poverty. The 47 Counties established in 2013 are essentially the second tier of the government and shoulders the responsibility of public participation on the County Governments. This is guided by the Public Participation Act 2016 and an elaborate County Public Participation Guideline. GROOTS Kenya empowers grassroots women to convene their communities to track County Government plans and budgets using the guidelines. Women champions support neighborhoods to establish their development priorities ahead of scheduled formal public consultations. This helps the communities to provide input that is well thought out and is synthesized enough for inclusion into sector plans. Further, this grassroots women led process provides vigilance so that county governments stop adhoc consultations which are only aimed to exclusively achieve compliance. There are many instances when timely and correct background information as stipulated by the guidelines is provided to the stakeholders by government agents. These practices have in the past limited the community contributions in development agendas. Increasing, duty bearer out of fear to be challenged by a well informed and organized citizenry, or conviction to do good after experiencing the positive impact of true community participation start to follow laid guidelines. Ultimately, improving the practices of participation in public affairs

Case 2: Grassroots women provides leadership in enhancing gender equality and quality in public affairs decision making. Rural women know too well that putting people who are committed to their agenda in decision making positions is critical to transforming their lives. Traditionally, political aspirants self-identify themselves and spend resources in campaigns to convince voters why they are best suited to

be elected into leadership. Once in office, many leaders disconnect with the electorate and the cycle is repeated in the next general election. In order to change this trend, the women with support of GROOTS Kenya organize from village level by rallying their respective communities to articulate the kind of development agenda they collectively envision. They also invest in reviewing existing plans, programs, development policies and legal frameworks. Armed with adequate information, they identify and approach individuals who are suitable and/or have shown interests in elective positions to become aspirants. The champions are not “campaigners for hire” but rather facilitate and catalyze mutually agreeable development focused campaign in partnership with the aspirants. This process has not only ensured committed leaders are placed in positions of leadership, but also that the leaders are accountable to the electorates throughout their term of service. The process is biased to identify and support women political candidates. Further, a lot of the women community leaders have ascended to power through elective, nomination and appointments contributing to gender equality in Kenya’s leadership as well as increased proper management of public resources

- **Security of land tenure is crucial for rural women to successfully improve their economic empowerment as well as access basic primary services like water, health and education.**

The work of The Global Land Indicators Initiative under the SDG framework provides an excellent opportunity for accelerating women’s secure land tenure. Moreover, the African governments have committed to ensure that by 2025, 30% of land is in the hands of the women. While the output of such initiatives are expected to transform security of women’s land tenure, there are

fundamental changes required on how data is collected, analyzed and consumed. In the proposed frameworks, data collection, analysis and use is left exclusively to land professionals and statistical institutions. Unfortunately, corruption in land administration and ownership starts with the secrecy by which land data and registry have been treated in the past. It is thus essential that grassroots women including rural women are central and work along with professionals in collection, maintenance of records and utilization of land data.

The Social Tenure Domain models by Slum Dwellers International gives us evidence on the transformative role community led data mapping has, on the lives of people living in poverty. Furthermore, GROOTS Kenya is currently part of a regional initiative that is supported by the Dutch government to establish replicable models that will secure women land tenure through the power of land data. This initiative draws lessons from a past successful model that was funded by the Embassy of Sweden in Kenya on Community Public Land Mapping. It is imperative to build on already successful community led initiatives in efforts to advance the status of rural women in development,

Case 3: Grassroots Women are experts in Land Mapping. *Many countries do not have any inventory of their public land and this important assets has been irregularly or illegally taken away by the ruling class. The Kenyan national Land Policy 2009 and the National Land Commission Act 2012 envisioned the establishment of an inventory of all public land. The policy recommended a participatory approach to the development of the inventory. For grassroots communities, this is very progressive as administration and governance of public land in the past has been marred in secrecy, corruption and mismanagement. Further, land administration has*

been and still is highly “professionalized” leaving no or minimum room and respect for citizens participation. GROOTS Kenya found it necessary to empower grassroots women and communities to develop a potential “Community Led Model” for consideration by the National Land Commission in undertaking Public land inventory. This initiative has enhanced the capacity of populations to safeguard existing public land and provided an effective channel to suffice grabbed public land that potentially could be repossessed. Interestingly, community led mapping have nabbed “hidden” and undeclared public land. Public servants who have opened up to and worked closely with the community land mapping teams have successfully incorporated this findings in their development plans and projections for public service investments.

- **Strategic investment in the agriculture sector still remains a major entry point to drive the empowerment of rural women.**

The link between quality & quantity of production by small scale farmers coupled with access to profitable markets and other important development outcomes like financial autonomy, health, land security, peace and women leadership among others is very well documented. However, one critical change that is required for agriculture to make optimum contribution to the development is to desist from treating rural women as passive participants in the sector.

Case 4: *In 2012, GROOTS Kenya embarked on a project funded by the Japan Government and administered by the World Bank to develop a model to demonstrate that it is possible to close the gender equality*

gap and end poverty by “Accelerating Rural Women’s Access to Agricultural Markets and Trade” in Africa. Over 70% of the 3500 small scale rural women farmers who were engaged in the project had their incomes rise in 10 folds. They were receiving commercial loans, had improved quantity and quality farm production, they had direct link to lucrative urban markets (as opposed to relying on exploitative brokers. Majority of them had either acquired new portions of land through buying or negotiating with families for legal control among many other transformative changes. A major shift was that the women farmers are now able to influence agricultural extension service delivery as well as prioritization of complimentary infrastructure development through government funding.

➤ **Harnessing the opportunity presented by a rapidly urbanizing world**

The rural- urban linkage embedded in the New Urban Agenda (NUA) provides the advancement of the gender equality and rural women’s empowerment agenda a great opportunity. First, it is crucial to be cognizant and take full account of the major contribution that rural women make to cities and towns through supply of goods and services especially in the context of emerging urban centers. These important contributions must be strengthened in moving forward. Secondly, there needs to be strategic interventions to halt the loss and employ mechanism to secure women’s lands rights in the face of unchecked urban sprawl.

Conclusion

Ultimately, there is commendable progress in the establishment of institutions, good policies and legal framework over the years aimed at eradicating the cycle of poverty among rural and urban under-resourced communities. There is a strong correlation between good policies and development, but this alone is not enough to make meaningful change. Urgent attention is needed in the redistribution and governance of available resources. This will not be achieved without the involvement of all including most excluded and marginalized.

In spite of this, rural women have had to seek from within themselves survival strategies to sustain families and communities albeit with much difficulties. They have developed profound women led initiatives to secure basic needs. The world therefore need to recognize and ensure rural women are central to the pursuit of sustainable development. Thus, rural women are not mere beneficiaries, but experts and development agents with capability to effectively contribute to the overall good of their communities.

Sustained political will and investment must be guaranteed to facilitate grassroots women leadership in the development agenda. Moreover, states must be consistently held accountable as they shoulder the highest responsibility for achieving rural women’s’ empowerment and human rights. Additionally, it is important that both men and women take the differentiated and complimentary responsibilities to close the gender inequality gap.