

Collecting information, exchanging knowledge and networking: the Dimitra experience

Gracey J.

in

Sagardoy J.A. (ed.), Hamdy A. (ed.), Trisorio-Liuzzi G. (ed.), Lamaddalena N. (ed.), Quagliariello R. (ed.), Bogliotti C. (ed.), Guelloubi R. (ed.). *Institutional coordination and streamlining partners activities in the framework of GEWAMED project*

Bari : CIHEAM

Options Méditerranéennes : Série A. Séminaires Méditerranéens; n. 68

2006

pages 43-47

Article available on line / Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

<http://om.ciheam.org/article.php?IDPDF=800501>

To cite this article / Pour citer cet article

Gracey J. **Collecting information, exchanging knowledge and networking: the Dimitra experience.** In : Sagardoy J.A. (ed.), Hamdy A. (ed.), Trisorio-Liuzzi G. (ed.), Lamaddalena N. (ed.), Quagliariello R. (ed.), Bogliotti C. (ed.), Guelloubi R. (ed.). *Institutional coordination and streamlining partners activities in the framework of GEWAMED project*. Bari : CIHEAM, 2006. p. 43-47 (Options Méditerranéennes : Série A. Séminaires Méditerranéens; n. 68)



<http://www.ciheam.org/>
<http://om.ciheam.org/>

COLLECTING INFORMATION, EXCHANGING KNOWLEDGE AND NETWORKING: THE DIMITRA EXPERIENCE

J. Gracey*

* DIMITRA Project Officer, Brussels, Belgium;

Email: dimitra@dimitra.org

DIMITRA IN BRIEF

Dimitra is an information and communication project implemented by the Gender and Development service of the FAO, SDWW. It is coordinated in Brussels and works with a large network of local partners.

The Project's main objective is to "Empower rural women by highlighting their role as major agents of change in their communities and by improving their living conditions and status".

The Project 'keywords' are:

- Partnership: working closely with local partners.
- Participation: grassroots participation is at the very heart of the project.
- Networking: sharing best practices, ideas, experiences, support, etc.

DIMITRA PARTNERS

Dimitra reinforces the capacities of intermediary organisations. Intermediary organisations are closest to the rural populations and have detailed knowledge of local culture and languages. They know local initiatives better than anyone else and are the most likely to have an impact on the livelihoods of the population. They work to make rural women's voices heard at all levels.

In Africa and the Near East, these partner organisations are: AMSED (Association Marocaine de Solidarité et de Développement) for Morocco, CARDNE, Jordan, (Regional Centre on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development) for the Near East, Conafed, (Comité National Femme et Développement) for the Democratic Republic of Congo, CREDIF, Tunisia, (Centre de Recherche, d'Etudes, de Documentation et d'Information sur la Femme) for Algeria, Libya and Tunisia, Enda-Pronat, Senegal, (Protection des Ressources Naturelles) covering part of West Africa, Gender Development Institute, Ghana, for part of West Africa, ONE, Madagascar, (Office National pour l'Environnement) for the Indian Ocean: The Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles, ONG-VIE, Niger, working on the countries of the Sahel, SANGONeT, South Africa, (South African NGO network) covering Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland and WOUGNET, Uganda, (Women of Uganda Network) for East Africa.

Dimitra partners translate material into local languages and decide on appropriate communication techniques to reach out to rural populations, especially women. The project focuses particularly on exchange of experiences, resources and knowledge.

Through the partner organisations, Dimitra helps build stronger links between grassroots organisations, NGOs, civil society and decision makers.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE AND COLLECTING AND REPACKAGING INFORMATION

Dimitra local partners collect detailed quantitative and qualitative information on organisations working with and for rural women in their country and sub-region. They document the contributions made by women, the situations they are in, projects developed and the difficulties they face. This information is then disseminated through various media, including publications, workshops and the Dimitra free online database. At present the database contains information on approximately 1400

Organisations, 3000 Projects and 900 Publications. A CD-ROM of the database and website is also available.

Since the first phase of the project, the network has expanded by more than 62%, an increase of 72% in the number of members covered by one of the partners and a 432% increase in the grassroots organisations.

The information collected creates a body of knowledge and information which provides an overview of priorities and activities of NGOs, networks and grassroots organisations throughout Africa and the Near East, as well as valuable data on who is doing what, where, and how. This is disseminated at all levels through the Dimitra mailing list, which currently stands at around 6000 individuals and organisations, worldwide.

Appropriate information and communication tools and techniques are used, both traditional and modern, to repackage information. The project uses channels such as the Dimitra database, website, newsletters, CD-ROM, participation at workshops and meetings and community rural radios. It also pools technical resources and expertise from other FAO services, UN agencies and other organisations to benefit and enlarge the network.

The project also acts as an 'information hub' providing an interface to help connect grassroots organisations to decision-making level and vice-versa.

The project has also enabled rural women to participate at decision-making level and improve their status. For example, in Senegal a network of rural women, established after a Dimitra workshop, now has a seat on the National Land Commission, in Madagascar the Dimitra network is a member of the joint platform of NGOs that liaises with the government, and in Niger the ONG Vie, which heads up the Dimitra network for the Sahel region, participates in the National Consultative Framework for Education as a civil society organisation.

The project has developed various strategies to advocate for improvements in the situation of rural women, including making targeted presentations to decision-makers in various bodies and helping formulate demands and workshops on issues of key importance.

Community rural radios play an essential role because they use local languages; they reach out to a very large number of people who are difficult to access and often illiterate and they help make the voices of isolated populations heard. Through improved access to information, rural women can participate in decision-making processes. Some examples of recent activities involved equipping community centres with access to Internet and linking them to rural community radios; popularising legal texts and disseminating information on human rights.

SOME EXAMPLES OF WORKSHOPS ORGANISED WITH DIMITRA PARTNERS AND RURAL WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

- "Workshop on building the communication capacities of rural community radios and rural women's networks in the South Kivu region", Bukavu, DRC, February 2006.
- "Rural women, dynamisation of networks and the fight against HIV/AIDS in rural areas", Brussels, Belgium, June 2005.
- "New ICTs and Women's promotion", in Berber, Arabic and French, Rabat, Morocco, June 2004.
- "Advancing rural women's empowerment: ICTs in the service of good governance, democratic practice and the development of rural women in Africa", Johannesburg, South Africa, February 2004.
- "Rural women and access to land and natural resources", in Wolof and French, Thies, Senegal, February 2003.

INFORMATION: A POWERFUL RESOURCE FOR WOMEN

- Access to information reinforces women's influence in their communities and their ability to participate in decision-making.

- Information improves women access to resources (e.g. e-learning, production and conservation techniques, credit, training, reproductive health, etc.)
- Modern and traditional information and communication techniques increase the visibility of the work being carried out by rural women

Rural women's difficult access to information further restricts their already limited participation in decision-making processes and their access to resources. This situation presents a major obstacle to sustainable development, considering that information is a critical tool in the fight against hunger and poverty and an essential factor for progress. Dimitra focuses on practical skills and technologies selected and prioritised by local people, and women in particular.

OBSTACLES

There are many varied obstacles to rural populations access to information: a gender dimension is not often included in national ICT policies, physical and service infrastructures are inadequate, the financial cost of IT hardware and software is too high, there is a marked lack of use of local languages and of relevant content and there are sometimes gender-specific constraints to access and apply ICT-based information systems.

Progress can be made by investing more in mentality-changing projects, creating meeting places with easy access, both geographically and in cultural terms and further encouraging women to participate in events and workshops. The encouragement of mixed associations can help to sensitise male members of the community to the challenges faced by women.

- **It is necessary to valorise the fundamental role women play in rural economies.**
Women are the driving force of rural economies. However, their property rights, their control over land and natural resources and the return on their own labour are minimal. This situation needs to be documented and addressed so as to sensitise all development partners.
- **It is necessary to assess if and how women are consulted, involved and affected.**
Because women are frequently excluded, their needs and their knowledge are neglected even though women are often the first to adopt technologies effectively and spontaneously.
- **It is necessary to assess men and women's capacity to participate in resource management and the factors affecting that capacity.**
Often water resource policies and programmes fail to take into consideration the existing imbalance between men and women's ownership rights, division of labour and incomes. Cash crops are usually controlled by men and decisions regarding the scheduling of irrigation water tend to be made without consideration for women's farm and household activities. Participation in resource management needs to be inclusive, e.g. water user association membership should also be open to people renting land as well as to land owners. Ensuring women's use and control of land is fundamental.
- **It is necessary to increase women's access to control and management of natural resources.**
The management of natural resources is closely linked to the distribution of power in a community and to gender roles. Women's substantial contribution to household welfare, agricultural productivity and economic growth continues to be systematically marginalised and undervalued. Land and water resources form the basis of all farming systems and their preservation is crucial. Women are responsible for providing water for domestic use and agriculture and as such should always be included in training to enable them to manage water.

WHAT IS THE POINT OF NETWORKING?

- It simplifies access to information.
- It breaks through the isolation of rural women and creates solidarity.
- It helps share problems and solutions, and the exchange of experiences and knowledge.
- It helps empower rural women.

- It provides information on human rights and women's rights in particular.

It is important to encourage networking between women's organisations at grassroots level and to develop the federative spirit of these organisations. Women's voices are stronger when they join forces to work together. Groups in a particular region can form their own communication links to develop their own activities and build social solidarity.

ROLE OF NEW ICTS

- New ICTs bring rural populations, especially women, access to information that is rapid, broad, dependable and direct.
- ICTs can help bridge the rural digital divide.
- ICTs can break through traditional barriers to information access and dissemination.

New information and communication technologies can help reduce the isolation of women and rural communities by giving them the chance to participate in networks and making the work of marginalised people, especially women, more visible.

NETWORKING AND INFORMATION FLOW

- Horizontal and vertical communications.
- Quicker and more efficient exchange of information.
- Ability to connect geographically dispersed people.
- Supports communication in various forms.
- Facilitates informed decision-making.

The methods and channels used to collect and disseminate information must be appropriate, flexible and interactive. They should encourage bottom-up exchange and vice-versa. Decision-makers need to base policies and programmes on the realities faced by women and men in the community and grassroots communities need to be informed on initiatives, laws and policies which affect them.

Information and communication play an essential role in promoting synergies. So as to encourage the integration of gender as a cross-cutting issue, it is important to encourage close cooperation amongst the different stakeholders, i.e. representatives of Ministries, International Organisations, NGOs, etc.

INFORMATION FLOWS

- at Local level through local networks, grassroots organisations, farmer organisations, intermediary organisations and rural women's organisations.
- at National level through civil society organisations, intermediary organisations, NGOs, Ministries and Training and Research Institutions.
- at Regional/Sub-Regional level through regional networks, fora and inter-network linkages.
- at International level through collaboration and information exchange with international organisations.

BUILDING STRONGER LINKS

- Produce joint strategies for sustainable activities to benefit rural populations, especially women.
- Strengthen networks with a better capacity to share information.
- Connect with each other on issues of common concern and developing a common vision for the future.

THE BASIS OF A STRONG NETWORK

- Local content,
 - Participatory planning,
 - Build on existing systems,
 - Address diversity,
 - Build capacity,
 - Ensure equitable access and empowerment,
 - Develop knowledge partnerships,
 - Use appropriate technologies,
 - Connect your network with other networks with similar areas of interest.
-
- It is useful to blend local and external content, knowledge and experiences. Community-based communicators can collect feedback on what works in their setting and why, based on their daily experiences of what approaches people feel comfortable with and the communication channels used and trusted.
 - It is necessary to consult both men and women during meetings to gather information from the local community, taking into account the circumstances of local people. Women and men may have varying literacy levels due to gender biases in education. Men may also be more confident and have more experience putting their arguments forward. It is important to overcome women's shyness and encourage them to speak out and get involved.
 - It is better to try and build on structures that already exist and function effectively than to impose a new external system. For example it is important to explore the organisations and knowledge systems available at the local level to determine how to improve them.
 - Programmes must be adapted to the actual needs and realities of the men and women in the community. It is necessary to identify who will be using water, the amounts needed at what times and for what purpose. Men and women may have differing perspectives on appropriate and sustainable ways of addressing their needs, such as choice of technology, location, cost of services, systems of operation, management and maintenance, etc.
 - Women's needs are often overlooked when it comes to technical information and training. Sufficient time should also be allowed to enable women to acquire new skills and adjust schedules to fit women's existing workloads.
 - Much can be learnt from previous experiences – what projects worked well and why. Success stories and failure stories can help feed into the planning, design and implementation of programmes and improve their sustainability and effectiveness. People are less likely to resist adoption of an innovation when the new technique is based upon a concept or procedure they are already familiar with or are currently using.