Short Article

"Women First" to Reduce Poverty in Rural Asia

Women, especially rural women in developing countries, face wide and lasting negative discrimination, also known as the "gender gap" (UNFPA, 2005) or gender inequality (World Bank, 2001). Regarding the capacity to live an active life, they are disadvantaged for several reasons. In their youth, they receive less education, less health care and less skills; in their adult life they are disadvantaged through limited access to land, credit and information, and in the remuneration of their activities.

Yet, a look at recent trends and prospects for 2010 from an international database (FAOSTAT, 2005) for developing Asian countries (DAC) reveals a striking point: the number of women economically active in agriculture (WEAA) is increasing and growing faster than the number of males economically active in agriculture (MEAA). Since the account of women's role in agriculture is widely underestimated by statistical data (UNFPA, 2005), especially in developing countries, in itself this result is a major indicator.

In fifty years, the share of WEAA has risen from 40 per cent to 45 per cent. At least 455 million women work in agriculture, 230 million more than 50 years ago in DAC. Projections (FAOSTAT, 2005) for 2010 indicate that an equivalent additional number of women and men will engage in agricultural activities. This means higher growth in the women's share of the Asian population economically active in agriculture.

In a sub sample of 17 South and East Asian countries, cross-country disparities are wide (see Figure 1). For the countries located above the diagonal (parity line), Bhutan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Cambodia, Nepal, Pakistan and India, the WEAA growth rate per decade will be higher for 2000-2010 compared to the 1950-2000 period. The countries between the parity line and the X-axis: the Philippines, Viet Nam, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Myanmar; will see an inverse relationship but still with a positive growth rate for the period 2000-2010. In only four countries: Mongolia, China, Malaysia and Thailand, all below the X-axis; will the growth rate of WEAA be negative for the first time in their history.

When comparing the expected growth rate of WEAA and MEAA, a group of five countries (including Nepal and Sri Lanka) will still show a higher growth rate for WEAA than MEAA. In Pakistan, in particular, it is expected to be three times larger, and in Bangladesh and Indonesia MEAA growth will be negative while WEAA growth will be positive. Another group of seven countries located slightly below the parity line shows more balance between WEAA and MEAA. However, in this group we find China and India respectively with positive and negative growth for both WEAA and MEAA growth rates. Given the size of the population of these countries and the wide internal and regional disparities, it is likely that in rural areas similar trends as for the sub sample are predominant. This would, however, require further investigation.

Figure 1.

Active Women in Agriculture. Past trends and prospects
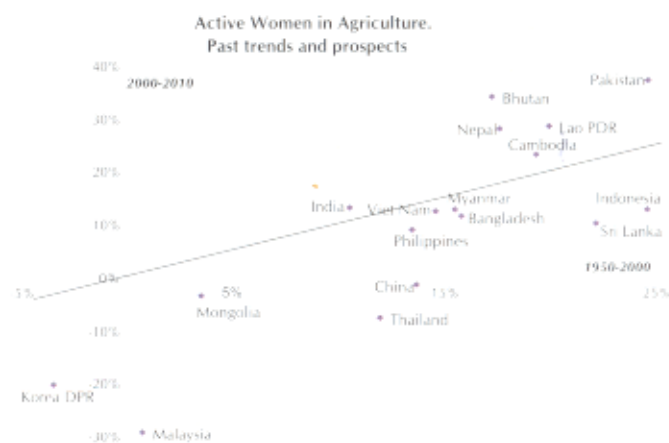
Data thus seems to indicate that in the least developed countries (LDCs) of the sample and some others such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and India, the number and share of WEAA is likely to increase both in absolute and relative values. Women will play an even more significant role. Due to the gender gap and inequalities this means that the challenge of poverty alleviation through agricultural development will become even more comprehensive. Pathways out of poverty will have to not only be technologically sound but also infrastructure based. Fighting the gender gap and gender inequalities is the emerging issue and the keystone for attaining the MDGs in rural areas.

Prospects for rural poverty alleviation depend on the capacity of Asian countries to place rural women at the forefront of development priorities. A new type of policy agenda also needs to be written ∎

Written by Robin Bourgeois, IS/DB Programme Leader, UNESCAP-CAPSA, Bogor, Indonesia.

(References available upon request)