International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth

The International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth is jointly supported by the Poverty Practice, Bureau for Development Policy, UNDP and the Government of Brazil.

One pager No. 130

June, 2011

Providing Incentives to Women Farmers for Sustainable Food Production

by Savita Mullapudi Narasimhan, Expert Consultant, Innovation for Human Development, Poverty Group, UNDP

Women form an integral but often undervalued part of the agricultural production system in developing countries. Roles traditionally defined as "female", such as saving, exchanging seeds, and acting as custodians and users of traditional knowledge, ensure rural food security and the maintenance of agricultural biodiversity. These responsibilities are distinct from those held by male farmers, who largely take care of harvesting cash crops for the market. In many ways, privatisation of agriculture and biological resources in the wake of increased production and the need for higher yields has resulted in degradation and shrinkage in the availability of natural resources. Ever more, women are left with fewer options in maintaining a key place in the productive system, thus affecting rural food security and biodiversity:

- The lack of resources to compete financially, and now the need to purchase what was once freely available, have meant fewer opportunities for women to use traditional knowledge and various innovative practices in farming.
- Intellectual property rights that provide incentives for the privatisation of natural resources have a tendency to further dilute the roles and responsibilities of women farmers, without offering alternatives or options for continued or increased opportunities. The lack of social safeguards in intellectual property frameworks has resulted in the deskilling of women farmers (by removing the need for those skills or by commercialising them) and the misappropriation of traditional knowledge.

Through various practices such as non-technological forms of cross-breeding species and the use of traditional knowledge, women farmers have helped to maintain agro-biodiversity and sustain the production of certain types of staples that are also important for nutrition. In several communities in the Andean region, women have been active in the local marketing of community products, such as in the case of the Jambi Kiwa cooperative in Ecuador. In Peru's Potato Park, women farmers have established innovative collectives such as the medicinal plants collective (including a network of communal pharmacies) and the gastronomy collective, where the use of traditional knowledge, native plants, food varieties and practices is important in their economic security. Similarly, women farmers in Chaur, Nepal grow 24 different varieties of rice. Bio-piracy, however, is an ever increasing challenge to such practices, often resulting in the loss and misappropriation of traditional knowledge. Moreover, the privatisation of seeds has been known to affect the continued availability of traditional foods and traditional varieties of crops, also affecting the extent to which farmers can adapt to new climatic and environmental conditions.

In South Asia, women farmers in Parvathpur and Enkepally in India practice "mixed cropping", whereby "small change" crops are grown alongside "cash crops". While this is being undertaken to meet household food-security needs on the one hand, the practice also contributes significantly to agricultural biodiversity and tends to reduce the exposure of households to the impact of crop failure and disease. This is changing as the predominance of market seeds reduces crop-variation practices and increases reliance on the receipts from cash crops to buy market seeds. This persistent reliance on cash crops has also made it more difficult for farmers to endure climate/weather impacts. Traditionally, crop variation has been an effective tool in adaptation to climate variability and change. An increased preference for cash crops has also resulted in less involvement by women in household production systems and the declining relevance of their traditional knowledge and practice.

With the increasing need to include climate variability and change in micro-level planning and productive systems, the use of traditional and adapted knowledge and techniques is expected to become more important. This will require an enabling environment in which the intellectual property protection mechanisms for plants and varieties do not lead to the further monopolisation of commercial varieties. What options can be explored at community, national and international level to advance such a transformation? A comprehensive framework that is both rights-based (intellectual property rights) and programmes-based (women's cooperatives, community registries, seed banks, participatory plant-breeding systems), and that converges with a gendered approach to governance and decision making, is critical in addressing these issues. Empowerment mechanisms that seek to give women greater access to farming inputs are important, but should co-exist with mechanisms that restore incentives for innovation/adaptive techniques in small farming systems.

Moreover, in order to advance the recognition of women farmers primarily as innovators, it will be equally important to maximise the capacity of instruments in the multilateral and international policy framework, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (CEDAW), to offset potential negative impacts of wide-ranging intellectual property laws on women farmers. Greater coherence between CEDAW and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and varied efforts to improve food security programmes will also be critical in this regard.

Reference:

UNDP (2010). 'Intellectual Property, Agrobiodiversity and Gender Considerations: Issues and Case Studies from the Andean and South Asian Regions', *UNDP Policy Paper*. New York and Geneva, UNDP. Available at: <http://www.undp.org/poverty/topics7_intellectual_property.shtml>.

International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC - IG)
Poverty Practice, Bureau for Development Policy, UNDP
Esplanada dos Ministérios, Bloco O, 7º andar
70052-900 Brasilia, DF - Brazil

E-mail: ipc@ipc-undp.org ■ URL: www.ipc-undp.org
Telephone: +55 61 2105 5000