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Bernadette Montanari

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Shifting Priorities or Perpetuating the Cycle: The Excluded Rural Women of the Green Moroccan Plan

Dr. Bernadette Montanari, Social Dimensions of Environmental Policy (SDEP), School of Earth, Society and Environment, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Introduction

Worldwide, women play a major role in producing and securing food, managing natural resources, and earning an income either formally or informally in natural resource and agricultural activities (FAO 2011; Masaiganah 2012; Ogato, Boon and Subramani 2009; Olumakaiye and Ajayi 2006). As such, even the first goal of the Millennium Development Goals called for the recognition of women (Rao 2012, 84-86). However, they have been largely undermined for their contribution in socio-economic development. Women produce between 60 to 80 percent of the world food crops; a representation of 43 percent of the overall agricultural labor force (Rao 2012, 84). In addition, besides their contribution for the provision of food security at the household level, they are often fully involved in agricultural activities that contribute to the communities in which they live. In Morocco, this accounts for 79 percent of the rural labor force, a rate which can exceed 90 percent in mountainous areas (Euromed 2006; IFAD 2014).

The country has made substantial progress in the domains of education, mortality, health and sanitation. However, certain aspects of the social development agenda remain insufficient; poverty is still a major issue in some parts of the country. Nineteen percent of the population still lives at the margin of the national poverty line (\$1.25 as set up by the World Bank in 2010) and two thirds of these are in rural areas. Another 25 percent of the population lives under the poverty line, in both urban and rural environments. Two and a half million rural children are illiterate, particularly girls, and 83 percent of the total population in rural environments is still illiterate. Furthermore, 74 percent of girls aged below fifteen have left school to find work in agricultural activities with no contract or social status and three women out of four are not remunerated. In contrast, 63 percent of women in the urban area start working at the age of 20, and only five percent of women have unremunerated work (Belarbi 2013). To address these issues, the government allocates 55 percent of the national budget for social programs.

Green Moroccan Plan

The government's latest attempt to address the issues of poverty, climate change, food security, natural resource conservation and the general challenge of rural women's employment and social

integration is the Green Moroccan Plan-GMP (2008-2020). The GMP is expected to promote growth in the country over the next 10 to 15 years. It aims to end the current economic duality predominant in agriculture, a division between a modern agro-exporting model and subsistence farming of millions of rural families (Duporte 2014, 13). Its main objectives are to increase the share of agriculture in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from 6.35 to 9 billion Euros, to create 1.5 million additional jobs, to fight against poverty and to increase by two to three times the income for four million peasants, and to raise export figures from 0.72 to 4 Mds Dh (ADS 2014; GMP 2016).

Based on two 'pillars' of reforms, the first pillar seeks to accelerate development towards a modern and competitive export-oriented agriculture, relying on projects of high added value in agro-industries, and private investment. The Moroccan government anticipates accomplishing 962 projects by 2020 and to benefit 560,000 farmers with an investment of 75 billion dirhams (US \$7 billion). Pillar II is rural development through sustainable natural resources, agriculture of the poor, women's employment towards gender equality and socio-economic development in the most-isolated parts of the country. It foresees the creation of 545 social projects transiting from traditional subsistence agriculture to a more intensive form of agricultural production to benefit 860,000 farmers (Duporte 2014; Laatar 2014) with an allocated budget of 20 billion Dirhams (approx. US \$2 billion).

A series of actions and measures are specifically targeting women, seeking their participation in bodies and committees making decisions related to project activities, encouraging them to state specific goals towards their participation, capacity building and empowerment through income-generating activities, economic improvement via access to and control of productive assets and an increase of household wealth. The government's plan is to strengthen and ensure that women's decision-making powers are accounted for at the household and community level, that they are represented and participating in the decision-making organs of local bodies. It further seeks to alleviate the workload and to achieve a fair balance of the workload between women and men. Last but not least, the government wants to ensure that the arrangements of projects (composition of, ToR for hiring staff and implementing partners) reflect particular attention to gender equity and empowerment aspects. It stipulates that all efforts will be deployed to reach women with an adequate number of qualified staff to dispense awareness training and all the stages of implementation of a given project (Laatar 2014). To implement this, the government has deployed an important array of reforms within the Ministry of Agriculture and the Chambers of Agriculture and the creation of structures for social proximity services to implement the two pillars of the GMP (Akesbi 2012). These include several local, regional and provincial structures responsible for the implementation of the agricultural policy programs and additional committees at the provincial, regional and local levels to reach the rural populations.

Results and Implications

Geographical Isolation

Several obstacles impede the participation of women in Pillar II initiatives of the GMP in the most isolated villages. The geographical distance and isolation stand as major obstacles for the local populations to be able to benefit from a full exposure of the initiatives of the GMP Pillar II. Because the rural villages are located away from the main axis and the infrastructures are poor, access is difficult. While the local people are used to commutes with donkeys, or carts hauled by

mules, visiting the villages is unpractical unless travelling with a vehicle off the ground (type 4x4), a standard car being too low for the broken dust tracks which branch off from the main national road. Therefore, the creation of cooperatives is more likely to occur in locations that are close to the main geographical infrastructures and the urban centers.

Lack of Consultation with the Women

The government has set up an intricate network of sub-sections, local committees and rural animation teams to reach the local populations. Although the committees at the commune level (elected officials of municipalities, presidents of communes, associative network and decentralized technical services) are the closest geographically, the information about the initiatives is not delivered at the community level. The rural animation teams have specific tasks to engage the populations in participatory processes. They have a major role to play in consulting, informing, triggering initiatives at the village level, enrolling the local populations and encouraging the validation of projects. However, no actions or initiatives are undertaken in most villages. Unlike the government's prescription to encourage autonomy, decision making and participation of women, there is a lack of consultation and a participatory process that would otherwise permit establishing a close collaboration with the women and with the local population. Taking into account the complexity of social factors encountered at the village level (illiteracy, poverty, community social norms, frequent community conflicts, mistrust), the creation of cooperatives and income generating activities implies persistent and recurring visits to the villages supported by advisory services and to establish a trust relationship with the women and the local population.

Unrealistic Expectations

The rural women are eager to participate in and work on projects to improve their livelihood and provide better education for their children. However, given the complexity of the administrative and financial processes, the creation of cooperatives is problematic. The ability to benefit from financial support for the initiatives and opportunities offered by the initiatives of the GMP Pillar II requires not only the ability to read and understand the information and the funding mechanisms, but also to be able to fill application forms and the associated administrative duties. Given that the women in the villages are illiterate, they do not have the educational capacity to proceed with the required administrative tasks.

In addition, it is expected that the women are able to financially contribute 30 percent of the overall cost of a project, or a 20 percent contribution (from a personal source, personal savings, acquaintance or family support) and a 10 percent of the total cost in cash for the creation of a cooperative (INDH 2015). To request this type of financial contribution from a poor population is unrealistic given that people subsist on a low economy and cannot access micro-credit facilities that usually imply repaying high interest rates. Another unrealistic requirement for the creation of a cooperative is the gathering of likeminded people for an administrative bureau. This is a difficult task given that unresolved conflicts are common within villages; the people who manage to create a cooperative have some level of education and typically enroll family members to facilitate the creation.

Furthermore, beside the unrealistic requirements that are expected from people, one of the conditions to benefit from institutional funding is the proceeding of diagnostics to identify

local resources and local needs. The women have in-depth knowledge of the local resources and especially the local needs; however, to expect them to proceed to diagnostics as required by the authorities is illusory. Given women's tasks to maintain daily subsistence (women's average schedule is from 6am to 10pm), their schedule does not allow time for anything else and making diagnoses is the last preoccupation on people's minds.

Conclusion

The Pillar II initiatives hold the potential to benefit all within the rural world. However, it requires a new approach that is culturally sensitive and that encompasses women's aspirations and needs, integrating local inherent factors, socio-economic conditions and community dynamics. This requires a shift in priorities: first, re-designing policies to engage women in an entrepreneurial "mind set" and increasing confidence for the integration of markets; second, employing experienced technicians who dedicate time, energy at the local level and who bring technical support to the initiatives; third, enforcing of accountability to higher level of authorities for technicians working at the ground level.

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