**Empowering women farmers in Nepal to make changes that bring progress for all**

6 MARCH 2014 – When women are economically and socially empowered, they become a potent force for change. Women produce and consume, manage businesses and households, earn income, hire labour, borrow and save, and provide a range of services for their families and communities.

This is the reality behind the theme – 'Equality for women is progress for all' – that the United Nations has set for this year's International Women's Day , which is observed annually on 8 March.

Women are also major players in the world's food system. They produce as much as 80 per cent of the food consumed in sub-Saharan Africa, 50 to 60 per cent of all staple crops in Asia, and about 30 per cent of all food consumed in Latin America. But women rarely have access to the resources and equipment that would make their work more productive and ease their heavy workloads. Ultimately, it is not just women who are held back, but also their families, their communities and local and national economies.

In Nepal, women make up 62 per cent of the agricultural workforce, but only around 8 per cent of the female labour force receives equal remuneration for their work. To address this and other inequalities, IFAD and SNV Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV), which have been working together since 1991, have worked in Nepal on the High- Value Agriculture Project (HVAP) since June 2011. Results so far from HVAP demonstrate that giving women the right support and training and connecting them to markets can have remarkable results.

This is Dil Maya Sijapati, from Surket province in Nepal. A 22-year-old mother with one child and another on the way, Sijapati could have been one of the thousands of women who are forced to manage all alone while their husbands are abroad earning for the family. Yet because of the support she was given by IFAD and SNV − including access to collection points for markets − she was able to earn more in one growing season than her husband was making in a whole year as a security guard in India. When he heard about his wife's success, Sijapati's husband returned home to help her manage the farming business. Now he is "enjoying doing the cooking and taking care of the children," she says.

Stories like Sijapati's show that when women are given practical support and training, they are able to provide for their families and communities. Boosting women's incomes is especially important because women spend up to 90 per cent of their income on their families, while men spend only 30 to 40 per cent. The empowerment of women is fundamental to reduce poverty, hunger and malnutrition. In order for poor rural communities to prosper and grow in an inclusive way, women's voices must be heard and greater gender equality is essential.

Access to markets is essential if poor rural women in Nepal are to be able to move beyond subsistence and plan for a better future for themselves and their families. Still, achieving inclusive market access for women remains a puzzle with many pieces. Safe storage facilities and all-weather tracks or roads are physical needs that are particularly crucial in Nepal's mountainous terrain. In addition to such basic infrastructure, there is also the need for market information systems – that allow smallholders to know the real time current demand for farmers' goods and what prices they will fetch.

Thousands of young Nepali men leave their country every week in search of better paid work. This means that women are often left alone to head households and manage smallholder farms or patches of land in remote areas. Women make up 62 per cent of the agricultural workforce in Nepal, but only around 8 per cent of the female labour force receives equal remuneration for their work. To address this, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and SNV Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV), have been working together on the High- Value Agriculture Project (HVAP) in Nepal since June 2011. HVAP demonstrates that giving those women support, training and connecting them to markets can have remarkable results.

In 1952, when the country opened up to the world, there were hardly any drivable roads even in Nepal's capital Kathmandu. The majority of rural communities situated in the hills and mountains were far from the road network and hence essentially cut off from nearby markets. Over the last 10 years, many roads have been built to provide those communities with access to markets and services, opening up opportunities for agricultural commercialization. IFAD and SNV, in their joint work with the government of Nepal, seized these opportunities to support agricultural value chain development along the new corridors.

The IFAD-supported and SNV-implemented HVAP has provided production and post-harvest support – including quality seeds, technical know-how and advice to about 10,000 women in Nepal. The project creates sustainable market linkages between small producers and traders. Concentrating on seven high-value agricultural commodities such as off-season vegetables and fruit, and spices like ginger and turmeric, it aims to provide benefits to each actor in the value chain through inclusive development. It has other benefits too, as Sijapati explains, "Before all us women were alone and isolated, we were all busy with our own household work, but now we see each other, share stories and information and even help each other out."

Nepal's traders use dokos − traditional Nepali baskets woven out of bamboo culms, which are carried on the back with a strap over the forehead – to collect vegetables and fruit from the farmers. The produce is then either sold from house to house, or taken to the nearest market, which can be up to three hours away. Through IFAD and SNV-supported work, Nepalese women form cooperatives to help them get the best prices for the loads they carry. The doko traders share camaraderie with the farmers and being women makes this much easier.

The project provides training and equipment to women all along the value chain to improve conditions for their families and, ultimately, transform their communities. Bimala Adhikari, 30, would rather lose money selling to traders than spend "all day" at the market selling products directly for slightly more money. "When the traders come to buy my products (in bulk) it means less money, but it saves me time to work on my business," she says. "When I have more money, I have more confidence. When I am able to have more time to concentrate on what I do, I gain confidence too. I am a farmer and I do that best – I think the traders are good at what they do, so let them do it and make their money."

When women have a greater say in how household income is spent, including the money they earn themselves, studies have shown that they are more likely than men to spend it on food for their family. Manju Tiwari, 27, grows lettuce, cabbage and tomatoes in the patch of land behind her house. Small plots of land like the ones cultivated by Sijapati and Tiwari represent the roots of change and independence for rural women in Nepal. "How long should we rely on our husbands?" Tiwari asks. "Before, we had to ask them for everything." She also noted a change in the "bad habits" of men in the community since the women in her community started earning increased incomes. "My husband now helps me farm, but he also helps with the housework. Before they used to play cards, drink and gamble, but now all the men help outside and inside the home."

In Nepal and across South Asia, boys still outnumber girls in primary school enrolment and girls are more likely than boys to drop out of school. This leads to a situation where almost half of all adult women are illiterate. Tiwari now earns enough income to cover most of the household expenses and to contribute towards educating her family. "If we didn't have the vegetables, we wouldn't be able to educate our children, we wouldn't be able to immediately give our children the things they need and we would be in debt," she says. Critically, extra income earned by Nepalese farmers can be used to meet other family needs, such as healthcare, that are vital to escaping poverty.

http://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/empowering-women-farmers-nepal-make-changes-bring-progress-all