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The Role and Participation of Women in Community Development

(Prepared by United Nations Secretariat)

Introduction

1. Twelve years of experience of community development in dozens of countries throughout the world has brought us to the time when we can begin to gauge the dimensions of women's participation in community development and examine the extent and nature of their contribution. As we see what has been done and is being done, we shall be better able to size up by contrast the size of the task ahead if community development is to draw equally on the resources and meet the needs of persons of both sexes.

Community development defined

2. Community development has two aspects implying simultaneous action at two levels:

- a. action by local people themselves, in their own groups and through their own leaders; and
- b. governmental services reaching right down to the people, and, in this instance, to the woman in her home and community.

3. This was recognized in the following working definition agreed upon by the United Nations and its specialized agencies and used by them for the past four years:

The term "community development" has come into international usage to connote the processes by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities, to integrate these communities into the life of the nation, and to enable them to contribute fully to national progress.

This complex of processes is then made up of two essential elements: the participation by the people themselves in efforts to improve their level of living with as much reliance as possible on their own initiative; and the provision of technical and other services in ways which encourage initiative, self-help and mutual help and make these more effective. It is expressed in programmes designed to achieve a wide variety of specific improvements. (E/2931, Annex III)

Emergent roles of women in community development

4. The one dominant and unchallenged role of women is that in the home in which they are universally and traditionally involved. This familiar role of

women in the home, however, is no longer limited to the customary notion of the woman as a housewife and a mother, but is itself evolving as she becomes a central figure influencing and serving the social, economic and cultural needs and standards of the family group to the extent to which her education and acquisition of new knowledge make it possible. The second role is the part she is called upon to play in the wider sphere of her community. Here also her sphere of influence is being enlarged, and in those regions which are in the process of rapid change, she is being called upon to contribute through her experience in the family group to the community at large by influencing the direction of progress in matters of vital concern to the family, such as health, education, housing, communications and work-opportunities. The third role is that of an economic producer and income-earner in an expanding market economy. This also leads her to co-operate with other persons in efforts to mobilize savings and start productive enterprises. Fourthly she finds a new role in governmental services in support of the social and economic development of the nation as a whole. In this last role, as a trained professional person or technical auxiliary, she helps other women to utilize scientific knowledge for the enhancement of the quality of living, helps them form new ideas, evolve new institutions and develop new values, and thus helps to determine not only woman's future and happiness, but also the entire nation's striving for a better life.

5. Thus there would seem to be a progressive enlargement of women's functions from her customary roles into the raising of family living standards, civic action in support of the family, economic activity outside the home, and salaried employment in nation-building services. It might be asked: "What forces have helped motivate women to participate in community development?"

Problems inherent in the widening of women's roles

6. The widening of women's roles in the home, the community, the economy and the nation must be seen against the restrictions and limitations imposed even more by technical under-development than by prevailing social attitudes. In this connexion, the conditions and problems of women in agriculture need special attention and thorough discussion. In the underdeveloped countries agricultural work is extremely hard and physically arduous. Weight carrying is a common feature. In many areas in Africa women farm entirely for home consumption while

men concentrate mainly on cash crops. The ILO African Labour Survey (Geneva 1958) points out that African women are responsible for the greater part of all agricultural activities, for food preparation and other household work, for carrying water sometimes from long distances in two buckets at the ends of a pole slung on the shoulders, and for home industries (spinning, weaving, basketry, etc.), all of which together make a woman's life a drudgery, with very little time or inclination for community activities.

7. The exchange of experience by participants may disclose a variety of other problems relating to the activity of women in particular communities, such as the belief that women are inferior to men; that they are incapable of sharing in the planning and organization of community improvement; that if women get involved in community affairs the home and children would be neglected; and that new responsibilities are bound to affect the balance of relationships in the home. Social change in any sphere of human relations meets with resistance and conflict. This resistance to change may stem from the attitude of men to women in any community, or from the attitude of women towards themselves - an attitude of dependence, insecurity and resignation. They will continue to resist change unless something to which they attach great value and which they themselves want, requires change.

8. This brings us to the whole matter of value scales and what women want for themselves and think worth working for. They are usually interested in the home, food, child care and health of the family. The education of women becomes vital as it helps them to identify their needs and to learn better ways of meeting these needs, to develop the concept of the complementary roles of men and women, and to become aware of what practices hinder development and what actions lead to progress and the attainment of better health, better homes, better economic standards and liberation from drudgery. They must also be led to understand how their attitudes and values affect the projects undertaken by others. Men are not likely to work together to build a house unless women also know how to use it properly; if the villager produces cash crops, the women must grow vegetables in their kitchen gardens and understand their nutritional value for the family diet; if a well is dug, the women must be educated to keep the water and surroundings of the well clean in order to safeguard the health of their family and their community; if men (often women too) build schools, clinics, social centres or village halls, women must encourage both daughters

and sons to go to school and must develop an appreciation of the services provided by the clinic and the hall for the improvement of their family's health and of their own skills in arts and crafts whereby to earn an extra income. It is obvious that these changes in behaviour patterns come about with changes in knowledge, skills and attitudes of both men and women - changes which are not imposed upon them from outside, but which take place as a result of awareness of their needs and their desire to satisfy these needs with as much reliance as possible upon their own efforts and their own resources. Much of this education is informal and comes from membership in groups and leadership of groups. Among the services which governmental and non-governmental agencies make available, assistance with the formation and leadership of new community groups is among the most important.

Approaches to women's participation in community development

9. In order to help women to meet these problems and satisfy these needs, several approaches have been developed. These are varied and have evolved according to the growing and changing needs of each country depending upon its form of economy, social structure, cultural practices and political relationships.
10. Particularly important are those national approaches which turn on new forms of group activity and leadership by rural women themselves.
 - a. One of the most widespread of these is the women's club or association or institute which is found all the way from Canada and the United Kingdom on the one end to Ceylon (3,200), East Africa (1100 in Kenya), the Federation of Malaya (300), China: Taiwan (317), and India (16,000) on the other.
 - b. Another is the mutual-aid society or co-operative for providing credit or marketing products in countries where women are pioneer enterprisers in an expanding cash economy, as is the case particularly in West Africa.
 - c. Another again is the local government body, sometimes with special provision for the representation of women by election as in China (Taiwan), or by co-optation or appointment as in Pakistan and India.
11. Some national programmes stress technical services to women and other villagers:
 - a. The team-and-generalist approach has been evolved in India, Pakistan, the Philippines and some other countries. The two essential features of this approach are a team of specialized workers serving an area of a hundred or so villages along with a generalist worker as the agent

of the team for direct and continuing contact with each small cluster of five or ten villages. If this approach is to reach rural women and help them make and carry out their own plans of improvement in civic life, it calls for actual contact with them at the village level, as well as technical support by specialists concerned with services of particular appeal to women.

- b. The centre approach, as with Egypt's combined units, provides the same physical site for operations in several fields such as agriculture, health, education and social welfare; with respect to this too the question must be asked: Does it offer as much to women as to men and does it call forth the activity and initiative of local people?
- c. The mass education approach emphasizes changes in people's ways of thinking and living which have been sought to be brought about through adult education courses and educative campaigns, as in Ghana, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Burma, Cambodia, Viet-Nam, the Sudan and Liberia.
- d. Other approaches are more specialized and less general. One such is the farm-and-home-extension approach of ministries of agriculture in Japan, Taiwan, Korea and Turkey as in the United States of America with its heavy emphasis on home economics. Another is the women's-social-centre approach of public or private welfare services, as in the Congo.

The unpaid woman community development worker

12. The most important woman community development worker is the local woman who becomes a leader in her group. The better she is trained for her activities, the smaller is the need for paid workers to go around to stimulate women's activity in the villages. Training programmes for village women have therefore become very important, especially in Ceylon, India, Jamaica and the countries of East Africa, where hundreds of women are trained each year by either governmental or non-governmental agencies. In these and other countries, it appears that effective work with local women in the villages has been done by voluntary leaders of high prestige from urban areas, and wives of district officials and of village level workers. In Ghana, over 14,000 women lay leaders were trained in 1958; in Ceylon by 1956 some 800 local women leaders had been trained; and in the Philippines, 9,150 lady leaders were trained in the Lady Leadership Institute (PACD) by 1960.

The paid woman community development worker

13. To put village women in contact with technical services and encourage their group activity, several types of women workers have been developed. Among them, a key role in national community development programmes is played by front-line workers of several kinds. Some may be primary school-teachers, like the community teachers of the Philippines; or home economics instructors, as in Japan; or nurse-midwives concerned with health education. Others may have rather broad functions. For example, there are at present 1,700 gram sevikas out of a total of 25,600 village-level workers in India; 300 lady village-AID workers in a total of 3,100 V-AID workers in Pakistan; 43 women in a total of 420 mass education organizers in Burma; 32 women dehyars in a total of 390 in Iran; 32 girl home science workers out of a total of 128 village workers in Nepal; about 80 women fundamental education organizers in a total of 240 in Thailand; and 98 out of 108 village instructors in Jamaica. Other front-line women workers with broad functions are Ceylon's mahila and kantha samiti workers; Ghana's women mass education assistants; the Sudan's murshidas; women community development assistants in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika; and the social promotoras and orientadoras del Hogar of Latin America. Some countries, however, have used only men as front-line workers. The front-line worker of broad scope is normally supervised by subject-matter specialists, some of whom are women, particularly in such fields as social work, home economics, medicine, midwifery, small-scale industry and adult education. Two countries which do not use women as front-line workers use them as supporting technicians. In Ghana, India and Pakistan, where there are special women's programmes on a nation-wide scale, there are also women officers to supervise the programmes. In Ghana, the hierarchy of women officers, from the top down, consists of a woman Mass Education Officer, Senior Assistant Mass Education Officers, Assistant Mass Education Officers and the Mass Education Assistants (village-level workers); in India, the Gram Sevikas (women village workers) are supervised by the Mukhya Sevikas (chief women village workers); in Kenya, there are 35 women community development officers; and in Uganda, there were 10 women community development officers in 1958. For these various kinds of paid workers, many training programmes have been established. Those for front-line community development workers have usually provided for a formal training of a year or two, on entry into the service; this has included supervised

fieldwork as well as theoretical and practical classwork; and it has usually been followed by refresher courses and other forms of in-service training.

Research for action

14. We still know too little about women's participation in community development and the ways to make it effective. An "action research" experiment is being conducted in Uttar Pradesh, India, to explore the practicability of building a women's "extension" programme around a district research unit. A few particular cases of women in community development have been reported at length; but these few case reports have usually come from isolated non-governmental projects rather than from national programmes. India has also carefully and critically evaluated the women's side of its community development programme. In general, however, we need to know much more about the motivations of women in developing communities, the forms which women's activity and leadership take under these changing circumstances and the methods of stimulating their contribution to community progress.

The contribution of the United Nations

15. The concern of the United Nations in increasing the participation of women in community development programmes has taken many forms. Advice by technical assistance experts and training through fellowships and scholarships, training materials, seminars, workshops, conferences and study tours, are among the ways in which the United Nations encourages the participation of women in community development. A United Nations Mission surveyed community development in Africa in 1956. Experts have been provided to Liberia, Morocco, Tunisia, the United Arab Republic, the Cameroons under British administration and Gambia. A Workshop on the Role of Women and their Participation in Community Development Programmes in the Arab World was held at the Arab States Fundamental Education Centre at Sirs-el-Layyan, U.A.R., 27 September-17 October 1959; a group of Somali officials including a woman studied community development programmes in the Sudan, Uganda and Pakistan in June-July 1959; a Workshop on community development administration was held by the Economic Commission for Africa at Addis Ababa, 14-25 September 1959; and the UN and CCTA together organized a community development study tour of the Sudan, Uganda, Ghana and Mali in 1959. The United Nations has also published studies on Training, Social Progress through Community Development, Public Administration Aspects of Community Development,

a series of community development papers, chapters in the International Survey of Programmes of Social Development, and technical assistance reports. It is at present engaged in studies of the contribution of community development to economic development, urban community development, and methods of promoting participation of women in community development programmes.

16. UNICEF has promoted women's participation in community development through two kinds of projects: (a) from the beginning, through maternal and child health aspects of basic health projects; and (b) more recently through mothercraft and homecraft projects related to community development programmes as in Afghanistan, Mexico, Pakistan, the Philippines, Tanganyika, and Uganda.

Community development and the status of women

17. A United Nations seminar on the civic responsibilities and increased participation of Asian women in public life, Bangkok, August 1957, concluded that:

- a. Community development programmes need to be based on careful studies of existing patterns of family living, so that the introduction of new concepts and methods can be integrated into the life of the community without unduly disturbing the social fabric.
- b. In carrying out community development projects and self-help programmes, attention should be paid to the training of community development workers and of leaders in this field, and to the full use of the facilities and services available to governments through the United Nations, the specialized agencies, and the United Nations Children's Fund.
- c. Education of women for home and community work should be carried out both in schools, through home economics and civics classes, and out of schools in all recognized types of training, including home economics extension services.

18. The General Assembly at its next session voted the following resolution:

Having noted with satisfaction that community development programmes are being carried out or are being planned on a long-term basis with international collaboration.

Recognizing that, in order to accelerate community development which basically on the human element, women should be encouraged to play an even greater and more effective part in it, both in their own interest and in the interest of the community, noting that the reports on this question do not state to what extent women are participating in community development programmes,

1. Recommends to Member States in which community development programmes are being carried out that they should, by every means in their power, encourage full participation of women in the development of their respective communities:

2. Recommends to the Secretary-General and the specialized agencies concerned that, in giving assistance to Governments they should collaborate with those Governments in achieving this purpose:
3. Requests the Secretary-General to include, in his future reports to the Economic and Social Council on the progress of community development, a brief description of the methods used to achieve this purpose, the results obtained and the progress made as regards the participation of women in community development.

G. A. Resolution 1162 (XII)
26 November 1957