Telling the stories of rural women through SDG indicators¹

During the eighth meeting of the Open Working Group (OWG) on Sustainable Development Goals at the United Nations, New York (3-7 February 2014), one and a half days were dedicated to social equity, gender equality and women’s empowerment. A side event to focus on rural women in an SDG framework was co-organized by the Rome-based Agencies, with the support of the Permanent Missions of Mongolia and Nicaragua to the UN.

At the OWG, many speakers affirmed gender equality as an end in itself, and called for a stand-alone goal on gender equality as well as cross-cutting targets under other goals². UN Women is calling for a transformative goal, to further drive change and monitor transformation in the structural determinants of gender-based inequality³. The three components of the stand-alone goal are: freedom from violence; access to resources, knowledge and health; and voice, leadership and participation.

As we move forward in the SDG debate, it is essential to ensure that the debate on gender is complemented by sufficient attention to rural women and their specificities.

Lack of visibility of rural women in the MDGs

A factsheet prepared by UN agencies in 2012⁴ on the progress of rural women against the MDGs found ‘globally, and only with a few exceptions, rural women fare worse than rural men and urban women and men for every MDG indicator for which data are available’.

However, understanding the real condition of rural women was frustrated by the lack of data, not only disaggregated by sex but also by rural-urban location. It also became evident that many of the 60 indicators used to track MDG progress did not resonate with the lives of rural women.

Why the rural dimension matters

The rural dimension of the SDGs will be crucial for addressing hunger, poverty and environmental concerns⁵. Today, more than 70 per cent of the extreme poor live in rural areas, widespread in low income countries and as pockets of poverty in middle income countries. It is estimated that smallholder farmers support the livelihoods of approximately 2.5 billion people and feed about 5 billion. The drive to increase productivity will be vital as the urban population continues to grow, with an estimated 70 per cent of the global population living in urban areas by 2050.

And in order to realise the potential of the smallholder sector, it will be essential to address gender inequalities which currently hinder production. Women farmers are major producers of food and yet their efforts are regularly hampered by their lack of access to productive resources, inputs, technologies, services and markets.

¹ Informal viewpoint following participation in a side event on rural women during OWG8 meeting, New York, February 2014.
² http://www.iisd.ca/vol32/enb3208e.html
What stories do we want to be able to tell about the situation of rural women through the SDG indicators?

The three objectives of the IFAD policy on gender equality and women’s empowerment provide a useful framework for identifying indicators relevant to the livelihoods of rural women. A number of indicators identified to track progress are listed in Box 1; many have already been noted by UN Women but those marked with an asterisk are new.

It is also essential to track whether there is any improvement in the quality of the lives of rural women. The indicators in Box 2 are targets in their own right but they are also indicative of more profound changes linked to the transformative agenda. For example, if women are able to exercise their reproductive and health rights, or if there is a reduction in harmful traditional practices - such as early marriage or female genital mutilation – or a reduction in the perception that gender-based violence is acceptable behaviour, then there are indications that there has been a significant shift in thinking and behaviour change at the household level. Similarly, improvements in nutrition indicators for women and children demonstrate that women are able to exercise more voice in the allocation of household resources and prioritise nutrition benefits.

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