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PROMOTING LOCAL INNOVATION AND PARTICIPATORY AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH FOR DEVELOPMENT: The Role of Women

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The contribution of agriculture to many developing countries' gross domestic product (GDP) and to the eradication of hunger and reduction of poverty has been recognized for a long time. In sub-Saharan Africa, that contribution ranges between 15% and 50%. However, global hunger persists due to lopsided access to food and not because of underproduction; in fact there is overproduction of food globally. Women in Africa are the main producers of food as they account for over 60% of the production, although in the recent past there has been a decline in food production in Africa which has been exacerbated by the current unpredictable weather conditions.

Women as the main producers of food have over the centuries engaged in activities that aim at improving various aspects of the food value chain. They have been innovating, experimenting and conducting 'informal' research in the agricultural sector from time immemorial. There are, however, certain constraints to women's effective participation in agricultural production. Such constraints include, *inter alia*, land ownership problems brought about by the patriarchal nature of African societies; low formal education among women which results in low levels of employment in the formal sector and hence low incomes; limited access to credit which negatively impacts their ability to mobilize financial resources for further investment in the agricultural sector; and the multiplicity of roles that women perform for their families in particular and communities in general.

A number of attempts have been made to modernize African agriculture with the mistaken belief that African farmers just need to adopt 'modern' technologies in order to increase food production and realise surpluses for sale. The whole process is known as encouraging 'farming as a business'. The most recent continent-wide attempt at addressing African agriculture is known as the *Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP)* which was launched in 2003 in Maputo, Mozambique. CAADP has four pillars: land and water management; market access; food supply and hunger; and agricultural research. Not all the countries have adhered to the Maputo Declaration and allocations to the agricultural sector vary between 3% and 6% of the national budgets. In some 10 countries, allocations have been decreasing, e.g. in Eritrea, Gabon, Senegal, Zimbabwe, and Niger.

This paper illustrates that women are actively involved in innovations and agricultural research and experimentation, and that is as it should be since they are the majority of smallholder farmers worldwide. Concrete examples have been presented ranging from innovations targeting reduction in working hours by women, through experiments to predetermine the sex of chicks and innovative land use management to small scale irrigation.

There are key lessons to be learned from the participation of women in innovation and research and experimentation. Some of these are area: farmers are willing to co-operate with formal research scientists in agricultural research so long as it is relevant to them and they drive it; the need to have a paradigm shift with respect to how research is conducted that will benefit smallholder farmers; the way financing of research is being carried out needs to be re-examined as available evidence shows that smallholder farmers are capable of managing small grants intended to finance innovation and 'informal' research; and the necessity to recognize and appreciate the smallholders' innovation and research initiatives. Finally, we need to move further than just addressing food security issues to addressing food sovereignty as an approach that empowers smallholder farmers if we have to eradicate global hunger.

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