

# Building on traditional cooperation among women for sustainable rural development

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**The 2014 International Year of Family Farming (IYFF) aims to raise the profile of family farming by focusing world attention on its significant role in eradicating hunger and poverty, providing food security and nutrition, improving livelihoods and managing natural resources in a sustainable way. In order for this potential to be fully realized, there must be the development of agricultural, environmental and social policies; increased knowledge, communication and public awareness on the importance of family farming; and improved understanding and action in terms of family farmers' needs at a technical level.**

The goals of the IYFF make it a subject of direct importance in terms of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of Family. Family farming has the power to eradicate poverty, starting at the level of the family unit and eventually impacting entire economies. Women and youth are central in this process but many challenges persist. The rural exodus of young people to the cities has huge implications not just for future agricultural productivity, but also for social cohesion and intergenerational solidarity in the context of families. Women farmers face a gender gap, which negatively impacts families and the viability of family farming. The key role played by women in family farming is not recognized in terms of income earned and asset ownership.

The IYFF is a chance to highlight and impact the millions of farmers across the world who contribute to food security through family farming, along with the projects and policies that enable this process. One such example is the work being done regarding the utilization of women's interest groups for sustainable rural development in the Fouta Djallon Highlands (FDH). The project shows how the marginalization of women in terms of decision-making and access to productive resources and markets can be overcome. In this project, social cohesion is reinforced through traditional modes of cooperation and collaboration, in order to strengthen family farming as a viable, income-producing endeavour.

The FDH is a series of high plateaus ranging from 900 to 1,500 metres above sea level, concentrated in the central part of Guinea and extending into Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Senegal and Sierra Leone. The highlands are the point of origin of a number of regionally important rivers including the Gambia, Niger, Senegal and Konkouré Rivers and, together with the surrounding foothills, harbour a rich variety of savannah and humid forest ecosystems.

The FDH area is predominantly inhabited by the Fula ethnic group and extensive subsistence agriculture is still the principal source of livelihood for most households. This case study is based on the results of a survey of 95 households and seven interest groups conducted in June 2012 in the Guetoya watershed, Sub-prefecture of Bantignel, Prefecture of Pita in Central Guinea.

Women and young people are the most vulnerable in the rural society of the FDH. Women play a crucial role in the household economy, from agriculture to livestock breeding, from nutrition to health care, and including all domestic jobs — preparation of meals, water and fuel wood collection, house cleaning and laundry — activities in which they are usually assisted by daughters or granddaughters. They increasingly take on various responsibilities in agricultural production, processing and small-scale commerce, including traditional male duties, as men and young people leave



Women tilling a kitchen garden for sowing in Heirè, Bantignel

in search of work elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Of the 95 households surveyed, 168 former members were found to have out-migrated, a trend concerning 71 per cent of the sample and a warning for a critical level of dependence of the local economy on external remittances.

Widespread polygamy often results in a multiplication of split widow-led households where, in an already difficult environment, women must fulfil all family needs. The massive outmigration of work-age men is significantly increasing the number of female-headed households.

Twenty-four per cent of the households surveyed are female-headed, of which 70 per cent are due to widowhood and 30 per cent due to the outmigration of the household head. In 38 per cent of the households, women entirely or partially contribute to children's educational costs, and in 46 per cent they do so for health care expenses.

While legally recognized as equal to men, rural women are still disadvantaged in many ways. Most of them suffer from marginalization, social and cultural discrimination, and illiteracy. The low level of education among women directly affects their ability to access information, agricultural extension services and inputs, improved technologies and decision-making. Where ownership or usage of land is concerned, men habitually claim priority and hereditary rights.<sup>2</sup>

Striving with often uncomfortable situations, women have learned to come together and share burdens and difficulties. Traditional forms of solidarity and collaboration among Fula women in the FDH imply mutual assistance in case of need in terms of both exchanges of food and resources and of labour for agriculture.

### Family farming in the FDH

Seventy-five per cent of the households surveyed acknowledged agriculture as the main source of livelihood and 38 per cent of them practice both rainy- and dry-season agriculture. Farming is often complemented by small-scale livestock rearing. Due to the mountainous topography of the area, several types of land are exploited for agricultural production. They include kitchen gardens, delimited by fenced perimeters surrounding the houses and cultivated exclusively by women, as well as external fields in the valley bottoms, the plains and on the slopes.

Typical crops of kitchen gardens are maize, cassava, taro, sweet potatoes, groundnuts, beans and vegetables for daily consumption, including tomatoes, eggplants, chilli peppers and okra. On the slopes, mountain rice and fonio, but also cassava, maize and groundnuts are cultivated with the slash-and-burn system. In the plains, fonio is mostly cultivated. In the fertile bottom valleys, where dry-season agriculture is more easily practicable due to adjacent streams, the main crops are tomatoes, cabbages, eggplants, onion, chilli peppers, potatoes, sweet potatoes, beans, okra, lettuce, paddy rice and maize.

With the exception of lowland vegetable production, all agricultural stock produced is destined for household self-consumption.

Land, if not personally owned, is allocated to villagers by the most influential families — the descendants of those who came first to the area during the Fula colonization of the highlands. Normally, one tenth of the seasonal agricultural production is due to land owners in exchange for land use rights.

Work division by gender assigns to men the heaviest tasks, including preparation of wooden fences, clear-cutting, cleaning and burning, ploughing, sowing, harvesting and threshing. Common women's tasks are weeding, sprinkling and winnowing, while children deal with surveillance and the carrying of tools and crops.



Image: P. Oel

Women of a market garden group and villagers in Fello Férobhè, Bantignel





Image: P. Ochi

A woman watering tomatoes in the market garden of Gaggal, Bantignel

Since the 1980s, building on these already existing social practices, development projects have worked to establish women's interest groups and facilitate their legal recognition. Their aim has been to strengthen community solidarity, improve agriculture production and increase and diversify household incomes.

Interest groups are effective instruments to reach women, inform and train them, thus contributing to improved living standards. Groups targeting men's activities also exist, addressing livestock rearing and reforestation, but women's groups specializing in vegetable production in the fertile bottom valleys and, to a smaller extent, in dyeing and soap-making, prevail in the FDH. As a result of the establishment of these groups, a considerable boost was witnessed in the production of cabbages, tomatoes, aubergines, chilli peppers, lettuce, spinach and so on. The increased yield from horticulture allowed women to enrich the daily family diet, to become more financially independent and to contribute to school fees, resulting

in increased enrolment rates. Forty-seven out of the 95 families interviewed participate in interest groups. Thirty-seven per cent of the women living in the households surveyed are members of groups, or 49 women compared to 18 men.

In this context, the FDH Integrated Natural Resources Management Project, executed by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), is assisting farmer groups. In 2012 the project trained 19 interest groups in five pilot sites — including Guetoya — in anaerobic compost preparation and the manufacture of improved stoves, which can significantly reduce cooking time and wood consumption. Some 449 people were trained in improved stove production, out of which 360 were women, while 244 out of the 306 people trained in compost preparation were also women. In other sites, the project assisted farmer groups to fence and secure agricultural fields against livestock encroachment as well as to improve access to water resources for dry-season agriculture.

#### Common price fluctuations of frequently marketed commodities and average seed costs

Commodity	Local name	Minimum final market price	Maximum final market price	Average seed cost
Tomato	Tamati	600 Guinean Frank (GF)/kg	1.400 GF/kg	32.500 GF/hg
Aubergine	Giakatou; Kobö kobö	600 GF/kg	800 GF/kg	25.000 GF/hg
Lettuce	Saladi	300 GF/head	1.000 GF/head	60.000 GF/hg
Cabbage	Chou	1.000 GF/head	2.500 GF/head	66.000 GF/hg

\* Exchange rate at the time of the survey: €1 = 8.890 GF

Source: FAO



Cochineals affecting cabbage plants in the women's market garden of Gaggal, Bantignel

### Traditional forms of women's mutual assistance

Several forms of mutual assistance exist among Fula women. The most widespread is the *Kilé* that can be called upon by one of the household head's wives at the beginning of the rainy season when the most demanding tasks in the agricultural cycle are due.

The *Kilé* confers on women the right and privilege to spell out a collective invitation to the entire village, normally to work on steep slopes. Farmers go with their own tools to the field of the convener, who offers a copious midday rice and meat lunch, accompanied by traditional cola nuts.<sup>3</sup> However, this particular arrangement is rather costly and, therefore, restricted to the social class that has the means to organize it. A reduced version of *Kilé* is called *Kilé Futu* and is convened by old women who periodically gather their young nephews and nieces to help out.

Other forms of mutual assistance include the *Ballal*, which appeals to family solidarity based on the principle of reciprocity, for instance all the women living in the same concession work together. There is also the *Yirdé*, associations of youth of the same age who provide assistance in exchange for meals or small compensations. Under the arrangement of the *Tontine*, women periodically take up a collection of money that, in turn, is given to each of them according to needs. Remunerated work, which replaces slave work, can also be a solution for those who have the means to hire daily labourers.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, household-leading women who are not able to rely on sufficient economic resources started coping with the situation by joining forces and reciprocally assisting each other in heavy agricultural tasks.

In its second phase (2014-2019), the project will pursue a two-pronged approach to target both women's groups and innovative individual farmers for business development, encouraging their adhesion to the Fouta Djallon Farmer Federation. Activities will include diversification of agricultural production by introducing innovative techniques and crops, the promotion of pest-proof storage bins, and training in integrated pest management and improved processing techniques.

In connection with the increased vegetable production of women's groups, it was observed that the simultaneous influx on local markets of unprecedented amounts of perishable products and the lack of access to wider market networks is likely to occasion severe seasonal price drops. Gross-buyers from Conakry dictating daily market prices, combined with the lack of negotiation power of sellers, result in little income and can even make groups incur losses after the hard work in the fields.

In order to reverse this undesired effect and to provide farmers with more economically viable alternatives, the project plans to test and promote sustainable conservation and transformation techniques for surplus agricultural production, and to develop capacities for an increased level of organization of women's groups and for business development. High attention will be paid to the labelling of high-value processed products from organic agriculture, grafted fruit trees and native tree species (such as Shea butter and *Néré*), and to developing market networks and inclusive value chains. The linkages between nutrition and health will be demonstrated, for instance by testing local production of groundnut oil to replace the use of imported and less healthy palm oil.

Governance and land tenure issues will also be looked at. Men tend to occupy managerial positions even in women's groups — including presidency, secretariat and bookkeeping — with a resulting imbalance in decision-making and power distribution

that the project will have to address. Land is normally borrowed by groups from the wealthiest families based on 10-year written agreements. Given that the project is investing in this land also in terms of irrigation infrastructure, agricultural facilities and equipment, access issues will have to be carefully monitored and eventually rectified in the coming years.

The strength of the interest-group approach presented here lies in its potential to reach a higher number of people for training purposes and to trigger a farmer-to-farmer process of knowledge transfer. It plays for long-term sustainability, as it builds on motivation, interest and commitment expressed by local actors who join forces to pursue common objectives. Notwithstanding, past experiences show that innovation and entrepreneurial skills are equally important in order to identify market niches, diversify groups' activities and develop cost/profit positive ventures. This highlights the need for leadership considerations and to empower women to take on decision-making responsibilities as well as to increase their negotiation capacity especially in market contexts. The current project executed by FAO, as well as similar initiatives active in the region, are expected to harvest more tangible results if they embark on a strengthened collaboration with women's interest groups.

Family farmers around the world face a number of challenges, from lack of access to services and markets to unfavourable policy environments. Group formation and collective action as depicted in this case study go a long way in overcoming these impediments. The gender gap in agriculture has enormous implications for family cohesion, agricultural productivity and income levels. The FDH Integrated Natural Resources Management project executed by FAO seeks to overcome these challenges. From compost preparation to improved techniques, storage, processing and marketing — the project is enabling family farmers to succeed, with women's interest groups leading the way.