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Smart pacts for rural women

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ONE of the things Lamia Radi plans to do upon returning home to Morocco is to share her excitement in discovering the hydroponics way of growing vegetables during a field trip to Sepang, Selangor.

To this adviser to the Moroccan Minister of Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries, developing agriculture sans land seems like a good idea that would help rural women in her country facing problems of desertification and lack of access to land.

Radi, who is also the personal representative of Princess Lalla Meryem of Morocco, plans to organise a meeting of government and non-governmental organisations to share ideas gleaned during last week's meeting in Kuala Lumpur of the International Steering Committee on the Economic Advancement of Rural Women (ISC).

She hopes to link interested NGOs in Morocco with relevant agencies in Malaysia in order to help poor rural women.

By doing so, Radi will be following one of the recommendations of the third ISC meeting, that is, to advocate smart partnerships between government organisations, NGOs and the private sector in mobilising resources and expertise to enhance women's economic activities through environment-friendly agricultural practices.

Member countries that attended the three-day meeting were also urged to promote the formulation and implementation of the policies on such smart partnerships in up-scaling micro-enterprises to small and medium businesses amongst rural and island women.

At the same time, they should advocate the formulation of policies, programmes and resources so that affordable, women and environment-friendly technology can be developed. Such technology should be appropriate, taking into consideration the needs of women as end-users.

They were encouraged to get research and development institutions in both government and private sectors to invest in the development and transfer of suitable technology that incorporates technical and financial assistance for rural and island women.

The concerns of poverty and women have been high on the agenda of the ISC, (an advocacy group of wives of heads of state or government and their personal representatives), since it was set up in 1992.

Under the theme "Poverty Amongst Rural Women, Their Families and Communities", the recent meeting was attended by 86 delegates and observers from nine member countries: Belgium, Senegal, Nigeria, Jordan, Egypt, Kyrgyzstan, Morocco, Ecuador and Malaysia. Eleven representatives from international organisations namely IFAD, Unifem, Unesco, UNDP, Unicef and Aarro were also at the meeting.

In his opening address, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad noted that over 60 per cent of the rural poor in developing countries are women who form the backbone of the agricultural labour force as farmers, petty traders, artisans, industrial home workers, micro producers and domestic servants.

They produce 35 to 45 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product as well as 50 per cent of the developing world's food. Yet most of them still live in abject poverty and lack access to resources and markets. The current financial crisis in Asia and elsewhere has worsened the situation for many of these women. If their contribution to the reproductive sector is taken into account, rural women with this burden contribute about US\$11 trillion

to rural and national economies.

Micro-financing, cooperatives, extensive social and health services as well as training have been used to eradicate poverty and generate self-reliance amongst thousands of poor women in rural areas.

Malaysia, for example, has often been cited internationally as a success story in reducing its poverty level from 49.3 per cent in 1970 to 16.5 per cent in 1990 and 8.9 per cent in 1995.

"Despite all these efforts, IFAD recognises that progress is still too slow and that all local, national, bilateral and multilateral agencies must join forces in the search for expanded knowledge to better respond more directly to rural women's needs, demonstrating to decision-makers that providing women with the right resources can have a dramatic impact on household, community and national well-being," said Farhana Haque Rahman, representative of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

She added in her paper on "IFAD's Approach to the Environment, Women and Technology" that better than anyone else, the poor understand what their own problems and needs are. Hence, rural poverty can be overcome only through close participation of the poor themselves in the planning and implementation of programmes intended to help them improve their lives.

Unifem's regional programme adviser Dr Lorraine Corner's paper on "Rural Women, Micro-enterprises and Partnership" discussed reasons why rural women tend to be involved in micro-enterprises, and the challenges they face in gaining access to credit and markets.

Outgoing ISC president Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali, in her regional report, highlighted some policy initiatives as well as innovative approaches, programmes and projects carried out in some countries. While individual country reports were distributed among delegates, they were not presented during the meeting.

One example of an innovative project to help rural women is that of Egypt's "one-classroom school". To increase functional literacy, this project is targeted at young, illiterate, out-of-school, rural girls between eight and 14 years of age.

"At these schools, the girls are given basic educational and practical training on productive projects which could be used to enhance their skills and improve their living conditions," said Dr Siti Hasmah.

This project started as a joint effort between the Government of Egypt and Unesco for a three-year term from 1993 to 1995. It succeeded in reaching 24,144 girls and was further extended to 1997.

During the meeting, plenary and concurrent sessions were held, with the latter focusing on four sub-themes: development and access to suitable technology; managing and conserving the environment; importance of micro and small-scale enterprise for rural women, their families and communities; and mobilising women's groups for rural development through smart partnership between government organisations, NGOs and the private sector.

Unlike last year's regional meeting of First Ladies from Asia-Pacific during which local rural women were brought into the conference room to meet delegates, participants of this year's event went out into the countryside to meet their rural "sisters".

The delegates were enthusiastic about the day-long field trip to Banghuris, Sepang, where they saw how rural women, with help from relevant agencies, became successful in various micro-enterprises such as handicraft-making, and producing noodles and beancurd, and other food products. They also visited a health clinic, community-managed projects and a home-stay programme for tourists.

Besides Radi of Morocco who was deeply impressed with the way rural

Malaysian women use various resources to achieve a better livelihood, the First Lady of Nigeria, Justice Fati Abubakar, also expressed favourable remarks.

Said Fati, a newcomer to this grouping of First Ladies: "The visit to Banghuris is a testimony of the actions put in place towards poverty eradication. I hope to put some of these ideas to work back in Nigeria, in addition to those that are already in place."

The new ISC president, Senegal's First Lady Elisabeth Diouf, lauded Malaysia's, and in particular, Dr Siti Hasmah's efforts in organising a successful meeting as part of the strategy to help poor rural women. Senegal will host the next ISC meeting in the year 2000.

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