



## Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
2 December 2011

Original: English

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### Commission on the Status of Women

#### Fifty-sixth session

27 February-9 March 2012

Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda\*

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: “The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges”**

### **Statement submitted by Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council**

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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\* E/CN.6/2012/1.

## **Statement**

### **Introduction**

During the present social crisis triggered by economic and environmental crises, our world is going through a transition. The direct negative impact of this crisis is particularly felt by women, who have been disproportionately affected.

All around the world, women are engaged at all levels of the economy — from providing basic necessities for their families (food, water, fuel and health care) to building communities and running businesses. They are forest stewards, farmers, land managers, community leaders, researchers, political leaders, technology designers and entrepreneurs.

Women reinvest a much higher portion of their earnings in their communities and make important investments. Yet, due to sociocultural gender inequality, women's skills and contributions often remain unrecognized. By recognizing and strengthening women's roles in both formal and informal economic activities, women are empowered.

On the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (17 October 2011), the Secretary-General said that women were critical to addressing hunger, malnutrition and poverty and contributing to food security and economic growth but lacked equal access to opportunities and resources. Women cannot be empowered unless we address not only economic, social, cultural and environmental issues but also gender discrimination.

### **Rural women and poverty**

It is increasingly recognized that poverty is heavily concentrated in rural areas (75 per cent of the world's working poor live in rural areas) and that substantial progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals and other international development goals depends heavily on improving agricultural and rural development. According to the International Labour Organization, 60 per cent of the working poor are women. Working poverty shares many of the characteristics of extreme poverty. The rural poor are predominantly smallholder farmers (particularly in sub-Saharan Africa) or agricultural wage labourers (particularly in South Asia).

Rural women are the backbone of agriculture throughout much of the developing world. They produce half of the world's food, and in some developing countries, they produce as much as 80 per cent of the food. On a global scale, women make up a substantial portion of the agricultural workforce. While it is estimated that women's agricultural work produces 35 to 45 per cent of gross domestic product in developing countries, rural women have little access to land ownership.

### **Small farmers and food security**

The Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, said that each year, up to 30 million hectares of farmland were lost to environmental degradation, conversion to industrial use or urbanization — a trend made worse by increased competition between food and energy crops and speculation on farmland by private investors. He also cautioned that smallholder farmers faced the risk of exploitation under contract farming arrangements with processing or marketing

companies and recommended mechanisms that could ensure that such agreements were fairer. The world was witnessing a situation in which pressures on land and water were increasing at an unprecedented speed, with dramatic consequences for millions of farmers, fishers and indigenous peoples and their right to food (A/65/281).

The world's largest agribusiness companies are pouring billions of dollars into and claiming patents on what are claimed to be "climate-ready crops". Far from helping farmers adjust to a warming world — something peasant farmers already know how to manage — these crops will allow industrial agriculture to expand plantation monocultures into lands currently cultivated by poor peasant farmers. This approach is not a solution to growing hunger but only feeds corporate greed.

According to the Special Rapporteur, in order to allow small farmers to climb up the value chain, we need to encourage them to develop cooperatives that can process, package and market the food they produce. In order for this to happen, farmers must have access to local markets in order to ensure that they are not excessively dependent on one commodity buyer who has access to the global market and essentially acts as a gatekeeper for access to the high-value countries of the North.

Jamaican farmers have shown success in growing vegetables in greenhouses in the past several years. This means that an environmentally vulnerable country which had previously imported more than half its food is now in a position to export food. This success story can be replicated in other countries, enabling them to become food-secure.

Through organic food production from natural seeds, fish production by small fishers, traditional aquaculture and riverine and lake fishing, each nation could become self-sufficient. The land should be owned by small farmers, water bodies should be owned by small fishers and forests should be owned by tribal and indigenous peoples.

### **Economic globalization and rural women**

The free movement of capital for making profit by a few at the expense of the vast majority who do not have the basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, education and health care must be revisited so that greater justice can be provided to all stakeholders. All Governments need to make food sovereignty and environmental protection a priority.

The food supply is currently being controlled by the rich multinational corporations. In the name of profit, those corporations introduce high-yielding hybrid seeds, genetically engineered cultivation and pesticides, which not only make food poisonous but also lead farmers into debt. India alone has reported thousands of suicides among farmers.

Nations and communities have not only lost their food sovereignty to industrialization and high-technology cultivation by the multinational corporations but have also displaced and/or destroyed the culture of a vast majority of small farmers and indigenous peoples.

**Impact of geo-engineering on rural women**

In this period of unprecedented technological research and development, geo-engineering is taking precedence as a solution to the climate crisis. Geo-engineering is the deliberate manipulation of Earth systems to alter the climate, including high-risk technologies, such as blasting particles into the stratosphere to mimic volcanic eruptions (to block sunlight) and “fertilizing” oceans to grow plankton blooms for carbon sequestration.

The impact of such climate manipulation on agriculture would be particularly felt by peasants in the South, and tinkering with the oceans could destroy the livelihoods of thousands in the small-scale fishing community. The social and environmental impact of geo-engineering needs to be assessed before it causes irreversible damage to the planet and its inhabitants, especially women and children.

**Policy and rural women**

Providing women with access to reproductive health education and services helps empower women and can address some of the concerns associated with an expanding global population. We need to ensure profound policy and legislative changes that are inclusive. The Committee on World Food Security acknowledged that women farmers received only 5 per cent of agricultural extension services worldwide. There is a need to promote women’s awareness and participation in Government and business leadership to capitalize on their intuition and skills for the common good. The right to information should be made accessible to women in rural areas.

In many countries women are the poorest of the poor. If social support programmes reach women directly, the entire family benefits. We strongly support the Social Protection Floor Initiative as a policy which ensures that all family members are adequately cared for and leads to a just future in which girls, boys, women and men all have the time and opportunities to learn and contribute.

**Recommendations for the United Nations and Member States**

- Ensure a universal social protection floor to the 631 million least privileged people living below \$1.25 a day. Ensure that the cash benefits reach women directly.
- Governments need to encourage small farmers and the use of traditional seeds and organic cultivation as a means to achieve food security and sustainability.
- Criminalize land grabbing and regulate the use of small farmers’ lands by agribusiness companies for “climate-ready crops”.
- Secure women’s property rights and control over natural resources and promote rural women farmers’ cooperatives and access to market the food they produce for sustainable food security.
- Food sovereignty and regulation in food prices should be among the national priorities of all.

**Conclusion**

In the words of the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, Helen Clark, “We have a collective responsibility towards the least privileged among us today and in the future around the world — and a moral imperative to ensure that the present is not the enemy of the future”.

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*Note:* Statement is endorsed by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Council: Carmelite NGO, Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and VIVAT International.