

**The Food Crisis and Women in the Global South**  
**Paper presentation by Isis International**  
**Women – Right to Food, Food Security, Food Sovereignty**  
**Marsh 9, 2011, 1:00-3:00 pm, Room 24**  
**Palais des Nations**

Isis International would like to thank the organizers for inviting us to participate in this panel on Women, Right to Food, Food Security and Food Sovereignty. I would like to give a special here to Marilee Karl, founder of Isis International and who has been work the issue of Fppd Crisis since 1996.

**Voices of women farmers**

As we meet here today, women farmers like Mela Gipanao in the village of Bulan in the Philippines are struggling to feed their families. Growing rice and raising small livestock have been insufficient, so Mela has been rising at 3 a.m. to go to the port to buy fish, which she later resells at the market. She can no longer afford to send her children to school and her family eats only two meals a day of rice and fried fish.

Still, Mela, and countless women like her, are not passive victims. Mela told us “we need to be prepared for hard times like these. There has to be a reservoir of resources which we can tap when supplies fall short. It is also important to expand and diversify our crops. These measures can be more effective and empowering through collective action. And so we are doubling our efforts in our community farm, where we, women farmers, produce organic fertilizers. Unlike the non-organic fertilizers which cost about 39 US dollars a sack, ours only cost 6 dollars per sack”. Although using organic fertilizers means low yields in the first few cycles, Mela explains that their use can help alleviate the problem of farmers’ indebtedness and lack of access to financial resources. Sometimes no rice is left for the farmers’ consumption as they begin to borrow money at the very beginning of the planting season because of the cost of non-organic fertilizers.

Mela says that “collective action is needed in the farmers’ struggle for land. Although some of us are already in the process of claiming ownership of the lands we till, many more farmers have yet to benefit from agrarian reform.”

Mela is one of the many voices of women farmers and indigenous women, rural and urban poor women, women fish workers, and their organisations, as well as women community organizers and activists that Isis International brought together in the publication of *Women in Action*, entitled, *Harvest Reaped but Hard to Reach*. This publication also contains analyses of the food crisis and women’s crucial roles in food security, but the focus here is on the experiences of the women.

### **Making women’s voices heard**

Isis is an international women’s organisation whose mission is to contribute to the empowerment of women in the global South, through helping them to communicate and make their voices heard.

Although, Isis International is a small organisation with limited resources, it reaches a wide network of women activists and their organisations. This network includes women who are speaking out about the impact of the global food crisis on their lives and communities and how they are meeting the challenges of the crisis.

Although we feel privileged to be able to present their views and experiences, we would prefer that they and their organisations were here to speak for themselves. One of their demands is to be able to participate in fora and in decision-making bodies at local, national, regional and international levels on issues of food security, the right to food and food sovereignty. Women farmers have a wealth of knowledge about agriculture and biodiversity and significant contributions to make to debates about food security, food sovereignty and the right to food.

### **Participation begins at the local level, but should not stop there**

Participation begins at the local level, but should not stop there. Mela, for instance, is a member of a local farmer’s organisation that is affiliated to Pakisama, National Federation of Peasant Organisations, which in turn is a member of the Asian Farmers Association for Sustainable Rural Development.

The Farmer and Nature Net (FNN) of Cambodia, another affiliate of the Asian Farmers' Association has its own Rural Women's Network.

The FNN reports that: "although these women have the capacity to produce their own food and organise their own communities, they were not spared the abrupt price fluctuation during the food crisis and the rising cost of basic commodities. As their incomes remain unchanged, the women tend to buy less of other needs. Some women have decided to migrate to richer neighbouring countries like Thailand and Vietnam and work as garment factory workers. Other women farm leaders are organising their communities in collective savings and in accessing training on health, sanitation, family-budgeting and agricultural techniques.

More than ever, organising women farmers has become an important strategy towards a clearer understanding of the issues, enhanced knowledge and capacities, and stronger solidarity. Many of these tasks begin with making men understand women by providing gender-sensitivity among husbands, leaders of farmers' organisations, and other members of the communities."

### **The Secret Gardens of South Africa**

Organising women in the community is a widely used strategy. Engender, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in Cape Town, South Africa told us that: "Through our workshops with grassroots communities, including women's migrant groups and informal settlements (where people live in shanties with little or no state support), we received several pressing requests from women for support on establishing backyard and community gardens. Women were unaware of South Africa's formal financial policy, beyond the fact that the government was failing them; the fact that they were without food and other basic resources; and the fact that no one seemed to care about them. They themselves wanted to take charge of their own lives and provide their own food, through these simple gardens. There are now some 200 backyard gardens which serve more than a hundred people in the informal settlement."

### **Preserving Biodiversity**

Indigenous women, particularly in Latin America and Asia, are engaged in multiple initiatives for preserving their cultures and biodiversity. One such group is Ananmuri, the National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women of Chile. Faced with increasing monoculture and use of genetically-modified crops, they are defending local and regional biodiversity. Since 2002, Ananmuri has run the Seed Campaign, which includes seed beds, seed exchanges and biodiversity fairs. The Quillon community has fought hard to protect local food sovereignty and ancestral seeds. The women participate in ecologically-friendly farming groups, where they grow their own vegetables. As a response to large-scale industrial food production, many organic crops have sprouted up in these communities.

### **Kerala's fisher women fight for their rights**

In India, the Kerala fish workers federation, KSMT, has actively worked for the rights of fisher workers for decades. In the late 1980s, its women members formed a women's wing, the Theeradesa Mahila Vedi (TMV). Since then, TMV has taken action on discrimination against fisherwomen in transportation; the lack of basic market and sanitary facilities for women; and gender-based violence, spearheading many agitations that have influenced and changed government policies. TMV says: "The lack of transportation was a major impediment for women selling fish in the 1980s. TMV led a protest march on the streets; pickets at bus stands; strikes directed at public transport and government vehicles; *dharna* or fasting in front of government offices for four to five years, until the government relented. Special buses were provided for fisherwomen." When this overdue initiative also encountered problems, TMV organised a series of mass actions once again until the women's demands were met. It also created village committees of fisherwomen and has taken actions to improve the conditions of markets for women fish vendors. Magline Peter, one of the leaders of the protests says: "We know our women are politically conscious. That's why they are able to show tremendous energy and courage in the phase of agitations."

TMV has also stepped into the issues that women face at the home front including violence and sexual harassment. Magline says: "Today our women are more vigilant and conscious about all

kinds of violence and sexual harassment against them. They have grown in confidence and have the courage to fight until the end. They also have developed the capacity to deal with the officials and police.”

TMV says: “It is also crucial to perceive women as citizens with specific perspectives and not just as vulnerable victims. Further, the long-term impact of the change in gender balance must be considered in the formulation of all policies and programmes to promote women’s rights and protect their interests.... As a community dependent on the resources from the sea, the political process of the struggle is intertwined with ecological concerns, economic security and gender dimensions. Its future depends on the political support and solidarity this movement receives from all other women’s groups and the struggles of other marginalised communities.”

### **Women peasants take action**

Another movement, La Via Campesina, unites peasant farmers in countries across the world.

Women organise their own groups and units within La Via Campesina and the peasant organisations that comprise it. The movement has a history of activism by and for women. For instance, for International Women’s Day in 2008, around 900 women of La Via Campesina in Brazil occupied land purchased by a large multinational corporation. The women cut the eucalyptus and planted native trees. They said that: “Women farmers are the most affected by the export-oriented agriculture model and the exclusion of small farmers by transnational companies. All around the world, eucalyptus plantations as well as other monoculture plantations destroy the environment and prevent small farmers from making a living and producing food for all.”

At the 2011 World Social Forum held in Dakar, the African members of La Vía Campesina launched a campaign condemning violence against women. La Via Campesina has decided, as a farmer’s movement, to mobilize against this injustice. One of the Campaign activities is to: “Fight for parity in our organisations, guarantee women’s participation in decision making and their visibility in public events, and encourage the creation of specific women’s areas. Violence against

women, whether it occurs in the workplace, within our organisations, in the home or in the community is also the business of farmers' organisations.”

### **Using all means of communication**

Women working for food security, the right to food, and food sovereignty are making use of both old and new information and communications technologies (ICTs). Community radio was cited by grassroots women as the most accessible of all communication tools in a study carried out by Isis International in five Asia-Pacific countries, as it works in remote farming communities even where communications infrastructure leaves much to be desired.

FemLINK Pacific, a feminist communications organisation has been running a community radio station in Fiji for years, both from its community media centre and in rural communities through the use of a suitcase radio. They say they have “noted the high response to food security, given the number of women returning to subsistence farming in order to support their families and women’s fear of not being able to have sufficient food and nutrition for a healthy and productive lives for themselves and their families.”

Isis International also conducts training programmes on community radio. One of these was at the Khoun Community Radio for Development in Laos, carried out at the request of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The chair of Khoun Community Radio for Development, Mrs Pany, told Isis: “Radio is very important to people, especially those who live in remote areas and cannot receive information from other sources.... we have received enquiries from women who are in charge of women’s groups at a village level asking about their roles and rights.”

One of the basic principles of Isis International’s work in the field of communications is to see women not only as receivers of knowledge but producers as well. The Isis International Activist School on Engendering Climate Justice this past year gathered grassroots women leaders from Southeast Asia for an interactive and dynamic discussion on the impact of the climate change at various levels and its impacts to communities, particularly women. Development Communications

is a major component of the activist school that facilitates women's use and control of communication tools from crafting their own messages for engendering climate justice.

In conclusion, women at the grassroots have knowledge, skills and experiences to contribute to achieving food security and the right to food, not only at the local level, but at the decision and policy making levels as well. Why then are they not centre stage more often at international gatherings on food security, either at inter-governmental or civil society meetings? This requires strong women's organisations and/or strong women's groups within mixed organisations. Strong networks of communication, support and solidarity are also crucial.

How can we transform these women's voices and integrate their visions into policy processes at the international, regional, national and community levels?

Thank you.