

SEMINAR: *Food Security in the MENA Region: Participation of Civil Society and Associationism*



Food Security in the MENA Region: *The Role of Women*

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Case study - PRODES 'Promotion et Développement Social' (Lebanon)

«The importance of socioeconomic development in Lebanese villages for promoting the role of women in order to preserve traditional food production»

Since it was created in 1999, the PRODES 'Promotion and Social Development' Association has sought to promote the participation of women at national level. A tangible impact has been noticed in several villages and communities thanks to a strengthening of capacities and educational programmes aimed at children, adolescents and adult women.

Since 2002, one of our priority objectives has been to offer training programmes aimed at women who live in rural areas. 2009 saw the opening of a training centre that offers qualified training to women from various Lebanese villages, regardless of communities or religious beliefs. Itinerant training programmes are also organized in the villages. So far, some 3,600 women have participated in the various training programmes offered by PRODES.

In Lebanon, the public sector neglects rural areas, but some local NGOs are making a constant effort in sectors such as agriculture, tourism, the environment, etc. However,

training and education, despite being fundamental factors for development, are generally ignored.

Therefore, PRODES seeks to devise training programmes that satisfy the actual needs of the different villages. Once the fieldwork has been completed, the local communities submit an application. Before the various programmes begin, a motivation process is required in order to demonstrate the approach and the suitability of these activities. The training programmes are offered according to their specific needs: technology (IT), management, languages, shelter services (accommodation, kitchen), arts and handicrafts, reviving local traditions, organization of festivals, etc. These activities develop the participants' skills and boost their creative capacities, thus helping them to become active members of society.

In addition to these factors, food production constitutes a crucial objective for the development of rural areas. In fact, women represent the first link in the chain of production of food products through their daily tasks.

They are involved in agriculture and stockbreeding. They are responsible for the harvesting, processing and storage of agricultural produce in accordance with the Lebanese tradition known as "Mouneh", whereby all the produce grown during the summer is harvested in autumn and preserved for storage throughout the winter months. This concept is very significant. On the one hand it helps to maintain ecological diversity and the culinary heritage, and, on the other, it ensures a certain degree of food security for families, especially during periods of economic instability. Furthermore, it can represent a source of income for women, when these products are marketed and sold.

The women also know a great deal about local and indigenous species of wild plants, and about how to use and store dried plants and extracted oils. Moreover, they are experts in the multidimensional utilization of their products and their other edible aspects.

They are also in charge of various food-related services such as the preparation of meals and menus, catering and the marketing of products, etc.

In spite of these essential tasks, the problems lie in the absence of an organizational strategy to control this system of production and services, which leads to the marginalization of these tasks and to a negative effect on food security in our society.

The causes that have been specified in the rural areas of Lebanon and observed during various activities and projects carried out there are summarized in the following points:

- 1- Women's limited access to primary production resources such as water, land and land use restricts the output of food products and reduces the self-

sufficiency of rural families. This is why women try to find extra income in order to be able to meet the everyday needs of their families.

- 2- Dependence on agricultural production. Employment in the rural environment is currently in decline due a lack of support and subsidies, and is facing competition from the domestic and foreign market. Hence the need for a strategy to create new employment initiatives and to ensure stable incomes that will lead to a certain degree of economic and food security.
- 3- Utilization of traditional means of food production and processing. These “rudimentary” technological means are tiring, time-consuming and inefficient, but above all they do not allow for the control of international standards of production and hygiene. Furthermore, this know-how could be lost due to a lack of specific, practical and scientific documentation.
- 4- The lack of creativity, new initiatives and job opportunities in rural areas forces women to leave their village to look for work elsewhere. Therefore, they devote less time to preserving local species, ecological diversity and the environment.
- 5- The difficulty in obtaining micro-credits has an influence on all the abovementioned tasks, be it due to the fact of reducing output, limiting the range of products, not being able to buy new equipment, using environmentally harmful materials, etc.

These problems force us to establish certain courses of action and specific activities in rural areas through our projects and to forge a partnership with various associations in order to be able to aspire to the food security of the society.

Therefore, PRODES has created a training and dissemination programme about all aspects of food production. Training courses, conferences and demonstrations are organized for the benefit of women and young people, covering important issues for food security such as nutrition, preparation of balanced menus, rules of hygiene in the kitchen, food preservation, etc.

Production management, the organization and management of purchases, storage and marketing are also essential training topics for women, given that they are generally in charge of buying food for the home and for selling their products.

PRODES has also created a vocational training and food production kitchen, whose architectural aspects and facilities comply with hygiene and safety standards. This training space will be used for culinary production courses and gastronomic cultural exchange seminars, allowing the participants to acquire new ideas and prepare new balanced menus.

PRODES has also established a partnership with other local initiatives in an attempt to combine their efforts and share experiences. Associations such as 'WADA' (a women's association from Deir el Ahmar), Batrouniyat and Souk el Tayeb, among others, continually exchange their projects. Books documenting traditions such as 'Mouneh' or 'Manakish' are useful references for the conservation of the culinary heritage. These local associations promote women's participation in the agri-food sector and contribute to the start of a modest yet reasonable output. These initiatives can be shared with other Arab countries in order to reinforce the role of women in food production.

The creation of new job opportunities is also an important factor for achieving food security, activating the micro-economy of villages and ensuring sources of additional revenues for families, thus helping to stabilize their income. To this end, PRODES organizes awareness-raising campaigns about the importance of the tourism industry in these regions and emphasises the high tourism potential of catering services, accommodation and local gastronomic production.

These continual training programmes are complemented by a monitoring plan for production and service micro-enterprises run by women. This monitoring is carried out by experts in nutrition, hygiene, culinary production, marketing, etc.... in order to guarantee a certain level of product quality and to improve the production standards adopted by the women.

PRODES also establishes communication links with micro-credit institutions that allow women to make affordable investments to renew their production equipment, use new technological resources, or set up a new micro-enterprise.

All these private initiatives should be supported by the programmes of the various actors involved in food security, principally government institutions such as the Ministries of Agriculture, Economic Affairs, Tourism, Health and the Environment, and the Chamber of Commerce. A unified and specific national and international strategy, with practical courses of action, is indispensable for the integral promotion of food security in Lebanon.

Meanwhile, the interaction of local private initiatives and the exchange between the different countries in the region enrich and consolidate the specific actions carried out on the ground by the associations.