

**CONCEPT NOTE****GOVERNING COUNCIL 2015****PANEL: EMPOWERING WOMEN TO TRANSFORM RURAL AREAS****Objectives of panel discussion:**

- In the context of Beijing +20, reflect on accomplishments in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in IFAD-supported field operations; define and explain gaps and challenges and discuss new ways to overcome these.
- Discuss women's role in achieving sustainable rural transformation and why gender equality is important.
- Encourage Governors to think about and renew their commitment to gender equality and rural women's empowerment and consider the importance of political will for ensuring successful project outcome.

**Background:** Gender equality and the empowerment of rural women are cornerstones of IFAD's work. As 2015 marks the 20th anniversary of the landmark United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (Beijing +20) which set the path for achieving gender equality, IFAD invites the Governing Council to reflect on the great strides made in empowering rural women and achieving community development by involving men and women equally, whilst considering how to close the gaps that still exist.

Twenty years ago, the United Nations unanimously adopted the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, but no country in the world has achieved full gender equality and disparities in rural areas of developing countries are often particularly acute. This has a significant impact on the transformation of rural areas (socially and economically) and on food security and nutrition. There is evidence that economies with greater gender equality have higher economic growth and offer a better quality of life overall.

Some of the major challenges that still need to be addressed are:

- Lack of recognition of the vital role that women play in the rural economy
- Poor rural infrastructure and services, impeding women's involvement in social, political and economic activities
- Inequitable decision-making, restricting women's opportunities
- Structural constraints, such as land and property rights
- Gender-based violence and discrimination

There is great diversity between regions and countries, from fragile states to middle income countries, and each comes with its own challenges and solutions. Governments play a key role in these efforts, and the most successful projects are those where the political will at the highest level is the driving force in creating an enabling environment.

**Gender work at IFAD:** Women's representation among people receiving services from IFAD-supported projects has continued to increase steadily, growing from 28 million in 2011 to 49 million in 2013. Women now account for almost half of all beneficiaries and continue to dominate in specific sectors (training in business and entrepreneurship; community management; crop and livestock production practices). Rural finance projects – which are critical in fostering financial inclusion and strengthening beneficiaries' investment capacity – continue to have the highest outreach and share of women beneficiaries.

Progress is incremental. It starts with greater awareness about the different roles and responsibilities of men and women in rural development, facilitating the participation of women. It expands to address the diverse needs and roles of poor women and men, and to target women through specific activities in rural infrastructure development, agricultural inputs and services, rural finance, business development and rural institutions. Finally it reaches a point of rural transformation where both women and men's situations improve in a sustainable manner and communities are lifted out of poverty. IFAD believes this can be achieved by fostering economic empowerment, giving women a voice in decision-making and reducing women's workloads. IFAD has recently demonstrated its commitment to gender equality by setting itself more challenging targets in the new Results Management Framework for 2016-2018.

**Main questions to be addressed by the panel:**

1. How will gender equality contribute to the achievement of rural transformation and what is the cost of inaction?
2. What are the current gaps that need to be addressed in order for women's empowerment to be truly transformative?
3. Which lessons can be learnt from IFAD's experiences and field operations?
4. Which policy priorities should Government set to empower rural women and achieve gender equality?
5. Twenty years after the Beijing conference, what do we need to do to achieve sustainable gender equality in the future?