



CANARI POLICY BRIEF No. 21

Empowering rural women entrepreneurs in Trinidad and Tobago

2015

Rural Livelihoods

Summary

Rural women are engaging in natural resource-based enterprises in Trinidad and Tobago with limited knowledge of how to sustainably harvest the natural materials or the impact climate change can have on their enterprises. CANARI implemented the project “*Empowering rural women through improving rural livelihoods in Trinidad and Tobago*” funded by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN WOMEN) between 2012 and 2014. It helped to build the capacity of rural women to manage their businesses, communicate their issues to influence policy and improve the resilience of their enterprises to climate change (“climate proofing”). This policy brief outlines the main challenges facing rural women entrepreneurs in Trinidad and Tobago as: poor linkages with natural resource management; limited involvement of rural women entrepreneurs in policy development; and, capacity gaps. Potential strategies that can effectively assist rural women entrepreneurs include: networking and action learning among support agencies; supporting development of rural women entrepreneur networks and including them in policy development; including natural resource management considerations in enterprise policies; and, using a combination of mentoring, coaching and training in capacity building initiatives.

Key messages

- 1. Natural resource-based enterprises managed by rural women significantly contribute to improving and maintaining livelihoods and reducing poverty within rural communities.**
- 2. Government policies do not adequately enable the development of natural resource-based enterprises operated by rural women.**
- 3. Entrepreneurship development policies do not adequately address the effect of environmental challenges such as climate change.**

Why focus on rural women entrepreneurs managing natural resource-based small enterprises?

Improving rural women’s ability to start and sustain profitable small enterprises based on the sustainable use of natural resources can not only improve sustainable livelihood opportunities for rural women and rural communities but also contribute to the sound management of natural resources.

Targeting rural women is particularly suitable because:

- Traditionally, women play a key role in the successful management of the household and household finances and therefore have management potential.
- Rural women in particular tend to have a greater dependence on natural resources, for example as a direct source of food and

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water. This dependence fosters a close relationship with the land and other natural resources that are typically more abundant in rural communities.

- Because of their close relationship with the natural environment, rural women are among the first to notice and respond to changes in the health of natural resources.

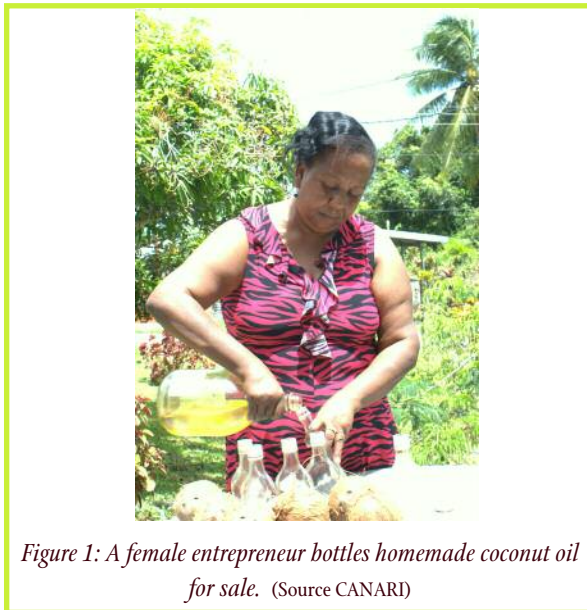


Figure 1: A female entrepreneur bottles homemade coconut oil for sale. (Source CANARD)

These factors place rural women in a position to be both stewards of environmental sustainability and agents of rural economic activity. With the right support, rural women entrepreneurs can therefore lead the creation of livelihood opportunities, poverty reduction and the sustainable use and management of natural resources within rural communities.

Challenges to rural women managing small natural resource-based enterprises

Inadequate consideration of the natural environment in micro and small enterprise (MSE) development policies

While the draft 2013-2016 Micro and Small Enterprise (MSE) Policy for Trinidad and Tobago¹ promotes the creation of green enterprises² and the greening of MSEs, it does not address the effects that

environmental challenges such as climate change would have on small enterprises that use natural resources and are consequently more vulnerable to impacts brought on by climatic changes. Rural women participating in this project have already observed that trees are not bearing fruits and seeds needed for their enterprises at traditional times. These changes are being attributed to climate change.

Policies and institutions are not adequately assessing and addressing the needs and capacity of rural women

Rural women do not currently have an effective and equitable voice in decision-making processes regarding rural development and the management of natural resources. Further, at the policy level, women entrepreneurs in Trinidad and Tobago are often treated as a homogenous group. Consequently, while there is research to advocate for the needs of women entrepreneurs very little substantive information exists on the more marginalised and vulnerable sub-groups, such as rural women, contributing to weak policy support.

As a result, the current MSE policy environment does not adequately consider the special needs of rural women such as the development of their overall capacity and capacity to develop successful enterprises. As such, an effective enabling environment to support rural women entrepreneurs does not exist.

For example, at the institutional level, programmes promoting enterprise development are not effectively reaching into rural communities and do not consider the special needs of rural women in terms of literacy and numeracy levels. The rural women participating in the project also believed that procedures to seek assistance were complicated and beyond their technical capacity.

Interventions are also not grounded in bottom-up needs assessments. Intra-organisational capacity weaknesses in the public sector are further compounded by poor coordination among various government agencies involved in entrepreneurial and rural development and poor collaboration with other supporting organisations including natural resource-based agencies such as the Ministry of Food Production.

¹ The Micro and Small Policy for Trinidad and Tobago: <http://www.molsmed.gov.tt/portals/0/mse/msedocp.pdf>

² Definition of a green enterprise according to the 2013-2016 MSE Policy for Trinidad and Tobago: Green enterprises include eco-tourism, resource and environmental conservation, environmental costing/pricing/valuating, renewable energy, agro-tourism, alternative use of organic products and waste, repurposing and recycling of organic and inorganic products and their waste material, where such activities are profitable or can be made profitable with suitable support. Green businesses also include environmental activities linked to the physical, cultural or historic national or regional patrimony.



Figure 2: A rural woman collects material from the forest to make home decorations and jewellery for sale. (Source CANARI)

Rural women need to build capacity

Capacity challenges that keep rural women in their current circumstances include:

Low confidence in their skills and abilities: Rural women with low literacy and numeracy skills are often intimidated when meeting representatives of the support agencies who they perceive as either more educated or more successful than they are. This often translates into reluctance to access services that will enable self-improvement.

Inability to separate their domestic and enterprise commitments: Many of the businesses run by rural women in the project were home-based. This helped them to reduce the costs associated with renting or leasing separate spaces to house their business. However, it also resulted in women being unable to successfully separate the enterprise expenses and commitments from their domestic ones. Rural women therefore found it difficult to fully realise profits from their enterprises as income generated was used for domestic purposes rather than for the enterprises.

Ineffective communication: Rural women often demonstrate poor communication skills because their messages may not always be clear or understandable or they may not be communicating with the appropriate agencies to meet their specific needs. They also may not always understand communication received from support agencies and may fail to deliver what is asked of them.

Reluctance to adopt new strategies: Rural women may be unwilling to adopt new strategies that may assist in the development of their micro and small enterprises.



Figure 3: Rural women learning to work together to overcome challenges. (Source CANARI)

These include using newer tools such as internet-based tools (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) to market their products and to advocate for change in policies affecting their enterprises. The enterprises themselves may not have strategies built in that would enable them to adapt to changes that may arise such as changes in policies affecting the businesses or the risks associated with climatic changes. Factors such as level of poverty and literacy/numeracy skills may affect assimilation of information and ability to use that information to adopt new strategies.

Approaches to empower rural women

Many approaches are being used by government ministries, agencies, civil society organisations that support the development of enterprises to empower rural women (support agencies) and address these challenges. These include building women's capacity to develop and manage enterprises through training in areas such as marketing, developing business plans and financial management of the enterprises. Several other approaches have been used successfully throughout the UN Women-funded project to enable support agencies to be more effective at assisting rural women to develop natural resource-based enterprises and to build their resilience to climate change.

Facilitate and participate in networking and action learning processes to develop and implement effective approaches or strategies to engage with and assist rural women

During the project, support agencies were provided opportunities to interact directly with rural women

entrepreneurs to better understand their needs and challenges. They were also given avenues to meet to discuss and understand the services offered by each and to informally coordinate their approaches to assist rural women. Regular avenues to share experiences among the support agencies are needed so that rural women can get the assistance that they need to develop their enterprises. An effective way is through the use of action learning groups, which focus on collective sharing and problem solving, where the support agencies can meet with their peers and discuss their challenges to providing assistance to rural women. Such fora can be used to identify their own capacity needs and to develop harmonious policies. Matters such as coordination with partners, gender sensitivity in rural assistance, appropriate budgetary allocations and investment in research and development can be discussed.

Support the development of rural women networks

Networks provide an opportunity for rural women to support and coach each other as well as share experiences on establishing and operating small businesses. Under the project, with guidance from a mentor, the participants established their own rural women's network, Women Involved in Natural Resources (WINR). This will enable them to meet to share challenges associated with managing their enterprises and to advocate for change in the policies affecting them by communicating common positions to key policymakers.

Give rural women a greater voice in policy development and incorporate participatory natural resources management issues

MSE policies need to better consider natural resource management factors and ways in which issues such as climate change will impact small natural resource-based enterprises. Including measures that recognise the impact of climate change and ways to adapt to these impacts can improve the profit margins of rural women's enterprises. Rural women and their organisations must be allowed to take part in the decision-making processes that impact their livelihoods and the natural resources upon which they depend for sustenance. Networks, such as the Network of Rural Women Producers in Trinidad and Tobago (NRWPTT) and the WINR, can help to facilitate this.

Include mentoring and coaching alongside training in capacity building as strategies to building rural women's capacities to manage natural resource-based enterprises

One of the major findings coming out of the project was the need to incorporate measures such as training, mentoring and coaching to build positive attitudes of the women involved in training programmes. Such measures build the capacity of the women to undertake tasks required of them and to increase the assimilation of information. During the project, mentors provided strategic advice and guidance to help the rural women make decisions that improved their enterprises. Mentors were also used successfully to reinforce the training received at the start of the project and to assist the women to implement the activities that led to the improvement of their enterprises.

Caribbean Natural Resources Institute

The Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (CANARI) is a regional technical non-profit organisation which has been working in the islands of the Caribbean for over 20 years.

Our mission is to promote and facilitate equitable participation and effective collaboration in the management of natural resources critical to development in the Caribbean islands, so that people will have a better quality of life and natural resources will be conserved, through action learning and research, capacity building and fostering partnerships.

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