Rural Development and Woman Empowerment
A Case Study of Egypt

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Abstract

Rural development is the process of improving the quality of life and economic well being of people living in rural areas, often relatively isolated and sparsely populated areas. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development highlighted food security and sustainable agriculture as the 2nd goal of the Agenda. To achieve such goal, rural development has emerged as a process that seeks promoting rural life a way that achieves the social and economic progress of people living in rural areas. It constitutes an integral part of sustainable development as it combines the three major dimensions of sustainability, including economic, social, and environmental sustainability. In addition, the Millennium Development Goals adopted by the United Nations have indicated the necessity to “promote gender equality and empower women.” In this regard, Women are the core of society and one of the major contributors to sustainable development. By adopting the new sustainable development goals of 2030, the world recognizes the important role of women in achieving sustainability. This paper aims to analyse the central role of women in rural development in developing countries with a special focus on Egypt as a case study. We argue that a successful and effective rural development process must involve women as key players in rural societies. Such role of women arises from their contribution in both agricultural and rural activities. The role of women in rural development can be summed up in their role in socialization, agricultural production, animal or poultry production, and management of environmental resources.
Introduction

Development has been considered a comprehensive process that encompasses different aspects of human life. One of the major components of any sustainable development plan is rural development. Rural development is concerned mainly with improving people’s lives in rural areas. Rural areas have been regarded as home of deteriorating socio-economic conditions. This justifies the significance given to such areas as compared to urban areas.

Under Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals, women empowerment and gender equality are key ingredients of development plans. This explains that rural development must involve women as major participants who would contribute to the prosperity and sustainability of such process. Women empowerment, therefore, must involve a facilitated access of women to a variety of social and economic rights that would ensure their active participation in the community.

This paper aims to analyse the role of women in rural development. Our main question is how empowering rural women could contribute to the success of rural development. We argue that women empowerment must be fulfilled locally given the domestic nature of rural development. We further argue that gender biases and ongoing deprivation of women from accessing education, employment, income, decision-making, and other rights results in underdevelopment in rural areas.

This paper is divided into seven main sections: the first section defines rural development and its scope; the second section analyses the role of women in rural development; starting from the third section, we overview the current situation of women empowerment and rural development in Egypt as a case study. This would include analysing the current situation of rural development in Egypt, the threats and challenges faced by rural development, and finally, how empowerment of women takes place in rural development.
1. Background: Rural Development

Rural development is defined as the process of enhancing the quality of life of rural populations, especially in remote and marginalised rural areas, both socially and economically (Moseley 2003, p. 4). Rural development is often contrasted with urban development, since it emphasises on rural areas, which are basically areas characterised by lower population density, including countryside and villages (Moseley 2003, p. 1). Rural development is, therefore, an interdisciplinary process that involves efficient investment in land-extensive industries (including agriculture and forestry), social and physical infrastructure, community services, and human capital in rural areas.

Emphasis on rural areas emerges from the fact that these areas are mostly underdeveloped. They face major economic, social, environmental, and political and institutional challenges. From an economic perspective, rural areas are generally pressured by increasing competition over the exploitation of both arable land and natural resources. Land-use activities, including agriculture and forestry, secure livelihoods for rural populations, and in the light of such competition, employment and incomes are at risk. Socially, the term “rural deprivation” describes deterioration in the social conditions of rural areas, this includes, but not limited to, fragile infrastructure, higher unemployment, lower incomes, rural to urban migration, and limited access to education and housing (Moseley 2003, p. 2). Environmentally, rural areas are particularly vulnerable to risks of climate change and environmental degradation due to their weak adaptive capacity. Finally, from political and institutional perspectives, rural areas generally lack access to mechanization to cope with the modern change. In addition, policymakers direct most of their attention to urban areas as compared to rural areas.

Significance of rural areas as a separate subject of development further arises from the correlation between rurality and poverty. Studies indicated that the poorest populations worldwide are located in rural areas (IFAD 2001; Ravallion 2001). This means that people located in some rural areas are under poverty line and unable to achieve self-sustenance. In addition, the majority of poor people in developing countries are located in rural areas (Ravallion 2001). Despite a witnessed reduction in
rural poverty in some regions of in East and Southern Africa from 59% in 1990 to 52.8% in 2010, half of rural population suffer from extreme poverty, living on less than US$1.25 per day (IFAD 2016). Countries including Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, and Zambia suffer increased rates of hunger and malnutrition (IFAD 2016). Finally, despite the significance of agriculture, contemporary development trends involve a diminished share of agriculture as compared with other industrialised sectors (Anríquez & Stamoulis 2007, p. 6). An increasing share of rural population in a country might denote poverty and underdevelopment; this is mainly because rural economies are primarily based on agriculture and resource-intensive activities (Anríquez & Stamoulis 2007, p. 6).

A further investigation in the relationship between agriculture and development has been conducted using agriculture’s production linkages (Anríquez & Stamoulis 2007, p. 10). When discussing the production linkages of agriculture, a distinction must be made between two types of linkages: forward linkages and backward linkages. Forward linkages refer to the connection between agriculture and other sectors where agriculture serves as an input of production. Backward linkages, in contrast, refer to the connection between agriculture and other sectors where those sectors serve as inputs of production for agriculture. Agriculture’s forward linkages include food production and supply chains for restaurants, schools, and other businesses. Backward production linkages of agriculture include animal feed, fertilizers, pesticides, and machinery, which is composed mainly of small labor-intensive businesses. (Anríquez & Stamoulis 2007, p. 11).

According to Rasmussen (1958, p. 109), a developed agricultural sector results in an increase in both backward linkages and forward linkages. This would be evident in increased demand by agriculture for inputs such as machinery, fertilizers, and pesticides. It would additionally be evident in an increased demand by other sectors such as tourism and education for food products. Rasmussen (1958, p. 110),
nevertheless, suggested that the multiplier effect of agriculture, which accounts for its production linkages, is much lower as compared with other sectors. This explains why addressing agriculture is postponed to later stages of development as opposed to other sectors, especially industry.

Historically, rural development highlighted a rather economic dimension of reformation and reconstruction of rural areas, that is, increasing land- and resource-intensive activities in such areas, including crop production, livestock production, and forestry. A global shift towards urbanisation, industrialisation, and tourism, nevertheless, has reshaped the economic drivers of rural development (Ward & Brown 2009, p. 1243). Consequently, a modern concept of rural development adopts a wider scope of policy options, including investment in physical infrastructure, social infrastructure and human capital. Rural development is regarded as an multidimensional process that surpasses merely providing incentives for economic growth in rural areas (Rowley 1996).

The main objective of rural development is to promote human potential through catalysing changes in economic, social, political, and institutional circumstances in rural areas. This could be achieved by efficient and effective utilisation of unexploited resources and skills. In agriculture, for instance, rural development would involve boosting the productive capacity in terms of quantity and quality of crops through investment in education, training, and extension services. Rural development, therefore, can be seen as a phenomenon that encompasses physical, social, economic, and institutional drivers. In addition, it can be regarded as a strategy that aims at improving the quality of life and alleviating poverty in rural areas.

One of the distinct features of rural development is its local nature. Unlike urban areas, rural areas are different in their structure among countries. This explains the variations in the strategies of rural development used worldwide (Moseley 2003, p. 7). Considering such local nature, rural development has been conducted through a top-down approach from local authorities, central governments, NGOs, or international organisations. This, nevertheless, does not deny the significance of
indigenous knowledge in rural development. Today, rural development additionally adopts a bottom-up approach allowing for an active participation of rural population in the development process.

2. Women Empowerment and Rural Development

International community drew attention to women at the Beijing Conference, held in September 1995. The conference resulted in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) as the first international framework for gender equality and women empowerment. The BPfA addressed 12 areas related to women, including: (A) women and poverty, (B) education and training of women, (C) women and health, (D) violence against women, (E) women and armed conflict, (F) women and the economy, (G) women in power and decision-making, (H) institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, (I) human rights of women, (J) women and the media, (K) women and the environment and (L) the girl child (UN Women 1995).

In September 2000, the General Assembly adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration. The declaration highlighted the importance of gender equality and woman empowerment as effective tools to achieve sustainable development and alleviate poverty (UN General Assembly 2000). Following the declaration, the United Nations set eight development goals named the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for the year 2015. The 3rd goal of MDGs was “to promote gender equality and empower women”. The United Nations further adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015 (United Nations 2015). The agenda set a number of goals based on the MDGs known as the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations 2015). The 5th goal of SDGs is “to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.”

Women empowerment is a multidimensional process that enhances the capacity of women to choose and decide their own lives. This process ensures an active participation of women in the decision-making process related to their communities. Such process combines a set of social, economic, and political tools to achieve such empowerment. In this sense, women empowerment is merely a synonym
of gender equality, in which rights and duties are distributed among individuals irrespective of their gender (European Parliament 2016; Quagliariello, Hamdy & Ciannamea 2016, p. 2645).

As noted earlier, rural areas are considered as major locations of poverty and marginalization. A particular attention was given to the empowerment of women considering their central role in rural development. The central role of rural women is evident in their extensive efforts in both production and reproduction activities. Such efforts exist in developed and developing countries. In addition to their reproduction and household activities, rural women take part in agriculture, crop production, livestock production, and other off-farm activities (Dekens & Voora 2014; Quagliariello, Hamdy & Ciannamea 2016, p. 2644; Sandys 2008).

A correct evaluation of the position of rural women requires screening their experience in rural economies. This includes their situation in the community, their access to basic infrastructure, education, employment, resources, and decision-making. Given the diversity of rural areas globally, variations exist among rural women based on location, class, age, race, religion, and other socio-economic factors (Dekens & Voora 2014; Sandys 2008).

Since rural development is a multidimensional process that encompasses economic, social, institutional, and political approaches. Empowerment of rural women must involve all dimensions of the development process. This means that the position of rural women could be improved through the designation and implementation of gender-sensitive strategies and policies. For instance, improved access of rural women to education, healthcare, physical and social infrastructure, decision-making, training and extensions services in addition to employment, income, land ownership, capital, technology, and other production inputs, all considered essential requirements for an effective empowerment of rural women (UN General Assembly 2005).

As key players in rural development, women face a number of challenges that might hinder their empowerment. Among these challenges are globalization, trade liberalization, commercialization of agriculture, labor migration, and climate change. Such global challenges pressurize the situation of rural women, especially if they
interact with other local challenges. The negative impacts of such challenges include unfair competition over employment, resources, incomes, and opportunities between men and women; an unfair competition led by gender bias against women. In contrast, these challenges might strengthen the position of rural women and contribute to their empowerment (Sandys 2008; UN General Assembly 2005). Liberalized crop markets could result in employment opportunities for rural women, and therefore, increased and independent sources of incomes for them.

Another major challenge to empowerment of rural women is land and property ownership. Such ownership secures livelihoods and subsistence for rural women. It additionally secures access to credit, irrigation, and other agricultural infrastructure. Currently, there exist land reform programmes and schemes that allow increased access of women to land and property. Gains from such programmes, nevertheless, have been gender-biased, as men have benefited from such programmes more than women. In addition, customs and traditions, especially in developing countries, have allowed for the violation of property rights of women (UN General Assembly 2005).

Credit and microcredit are important factors to enhance the role of women in rural development. These financial tools assist women in their on-farm activities, including crop production and livestock production. Women engaged in agriculture activities use credit to purchase seeds, pesticides, fertilizers and animal feed. This would enable them to sustain their livelihoods and income. Most agricultural credit schemes use land or property as a collateral in the loan contract (UN General Assembly 2005). Given the restricted access of rural women to land and property rights, rural women benefit less from credit than men. In addition, the lack of knowledge and advertising about such credit schemes limit the benefit of rural women from such financial support. Finally, adoption of liberalized financial markets led to a decrease in credit schemes provided by the government, and therefore, limited access for credit by rural women (Kelkar, Nathan & Jahan 2004).

A final challenge discussed in this context is the role of rural women in decision-making. Although globalization has brought about positive impacts on democratization and decentralization, the role of women in the decision-making process is still subject to various challenges. Since rural development is primarily local, the participation of rural women in decision-making would depend on their
representation in local councils and local governments. This, again, would depend on the society's degree of gender bias and discrimination against women. This would additionally rely on women’s access to education, knowledge, and culture. It must be noted that given the extensive role of women in rural society, their participation in the decision-making process would ensure pragmatic decisions and plans related to rural areas (UN General Assembly 2005).

3. Sustainable development in Egypt Vision 2030

In line with Plan 2030, in March 2015, Egypt launched its Sustainable Development Strategy "Vision 2030". The Egyptian strategy includes three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental dimensions. The main objective of this strategy is to make Egypt having a competitive and advanced economy, to support social justice and to contribute to the creation of creative human capital that contributes to sustainable development and makes the lives of Egyptians better (Ministry of International Cooperation 2016, p. 6).

Prior to the launch of sustainable development goals in 2015, Egypt committed itself to sustainable development through the Egyptian Constitution, which was written and adopted in January 2014. This Egyptian constitution is largely in line with the philosophy, principles and objectives of sustainable development and the international agenda for 2030 and was approved by a national vote covering the three dimensions of sustainable development as well as many other rights of citizens in education, health, security, development and promotion of equality, binding to all sectors in the State (Egyptian Parliament 2014). The strategy indicates that by 2030 Egypt will be among the top thirty countries in terms of dimensions of the economy, market competitiveness, human development and quality of life.¹

Figure 2 shows the ten pillars that fall under the three main dimensions of sustainable development, knowing that these ten pillars are integrated and interrelated, in addition to the main framework of the strategy of sustainable development that are the foreign policy, national security and national policy.

¹ For more information about the methodology used to develop the strategy, the timeline of preparation, milestones, and partners involved in the development of the SDS, please check the official website of SDS: www.sdsegypt2030.com as well as other SDS social media pages.
Figure (1) National long-term targets

Source: Sustainable development Strategy: Egypt Vision 2030

Figure (2) Main Pillars

Source: Sustainable development Strategy: Egypt Vision 2030
4. Rural development in Egypt: A Background

Human development has become an important approach in the development of rural areas. The Egyptian government has started to legislate and develop local resources and has also covered executive aspects through rural service networks under central supervision, all in pursuit of sustainable rural development (Nawar 2006, p. 52).

There are many challenges and problems in rural Egypt that hinder rural development, such as the lack of access to services and public goods, inability to attend school, limited employment opportunities, relatively high illiteracy rates, especially among rural women, high population growth compared to limited natural resources, air pollution and gender inequality. Additionally, Poverty indicators have shown that the poor are concentrated in rural areas, notably in Upper Egypt, as well as much lower income levels than in urban areas (Smith & Rees 2003).

There is a broad strategy until 2030 that includes developing life conditions, building rural communities' capacities, improving living standards, reducing poverty and satisfying rural populations, and to increase the contribution of rural Egypt to national food security, the sustainable use of natural resources, increase the competitiveness of the agricultural sector in international markets, improve the climate for agricultural investments, and vertical expansion to benefit the best from the productivity of limited resources especially water and horizontal expansion for better distribution of the population for demographic, economic and social characteristics (Ghanem 2014, p. 15).

5. Threats and Challenges Faced by Agriculture and Rural Development in Egypt

5.1 Agriculture

The old farming methods are still in use, leading to the deterioration of limited resources such as water, resulting in a shortage of agricultural crops and therefore the use of the latest economic irrigation techniques. Land fragmentation should also be
limited to increase agricultural production, expand diversification and produce new agricultural crops with higher prices and be eligible for export markets, not only for local markets, as well as for the expansion of strategic crops such as cotton, wheat, maize and rice (Shalaby 2015, p. 6).

5.2 Natural Resources Environmental Problems

Natural resource threats include pollution of irrigation water and deterioration of environmental and natural resources due to the bad behavior of some people such as excessive exploitation of water and the removal of agricultural land, which leads to soil erosion and destruction due to population pressures (Shalaby 2015, p. 6).

5.3 Poverty

The economic situation varies greatly between rural and urban areas. The rural population includes several groups, the poorest ones, such as tenant farmers, small farmers, workers who do not own land, unemployed youth, and women. All these groups need from government to study their problems and work to solve them so as to increase agricultural production and improve their standard of living (Shalaby 2015, p. 6).

5.4 Education

Rural women are deprived of educational opportunities compared to men because of the social and cultural habits in the countryside. As women create future generations, ignorant women will create an ignorant generation. There is also a shortage of schools, universities, academic facilities and services in general in rural areas, as well as a lack of awareness of sustainable agriculture and consequently a shortage of skilled and qualified farmers (Shalaby 2015, p. 6).

5.5 Health and Nutrition

There are continuing challenges in the area of maternal and child health, such as high maternal, infant and child mortality rates, poor health, high disability rates and
high birth rates, leading to high population growth rates, rural-urban migration, difficulty accessing health care services, less specialists, nurses and health experts also noted that there is inadequate health data for monitoring infectious diseases and major health risk, also insufficient funding for health care from both public and private sector taking into account health care is one of basic public services and of citizens' rights that must be funded by the state because the private sector seeks to profit and therefore, the poor rural population can not afford to pay for the health care services to the private sector (Shalaby 2015, p. 6).

5.6 Women Farmers, Children, and Youth

The problems experienced by rural women may be the discrimination against girls and gender differences. Women are the active labor force in the countryside; such role of women arises from their contribution in both agricultural and rural activities. The role of women in rural development can be summed up in their role in socialization, agricultural production, animal or poultry production, and management of environmental resources (Shalaby 2015, p. 6).

However, they suffer from illiteracy, malnutrition, poor health, lack of employment opportunities, fewer assets and thus poorer economic status. In rural areas, poor girls account for 70% of the total poor (Shalaby 2015, p. 6). As for children, they are forced to look for work, to drop out of education and therefore to be victims of child labor and exploitation because of poor economic conditions, which leads to many negative effects.

5.7 Inadequate Support Services and Poor Rural Infrastructure

Low-level technology and inadequate agricultural inputs, such as seeds, fertilizers, credit, etc., congestion, overcrowding in rural households, poor roads, muddy roads and poor rural infrastructure (Shalaby 2015, p. 6).
5.8 Poor Policy Framework and Institutional Constraints

There is unequal distribution of land, lack of marketing for strategic crops, limited institutional coordination and low public sector investment in rural infrastructure. Few charities and civil society organizations work to improve the lives and standard of living of rural people (Shalaby 2015, p. 6).

6. Comparison Between Rural and Urban Poverty in Egypt

Rural - urban gaps appear clearly within the socio economic environment. There are sizable regional disparities among the governorates of Egypt that mirror the imbalance of resources distribution and also the inequity between the citizens. These have an effect on social cohesion at the national level (Elsaid 2007, p. 72).

Over the past decade, the poverty rate in Egypt has been exaggerated. In 2016, the poverty rate in Egypt was 27.8%, an increase of 2.6% over 2010. This high rate resulted in undernourishment (Rogers 2017). In 2014, 31% of children under the age of five were very vulnerable due to malnutrition due to the inability of their families to provide food because of extreme poverty (Rogers 2017). In addition, the poverty rate in rural areas is 37% higher than that of urban areas in 2016. There is a causal relationship between the economic situation and the number of family members and illiterates (Rogers 2017). The poor are less able to enroll in education and thus are unable to find better jobs and remain poor, and so the cycle of poverty continues (Rogers 2017).

About 56.8% of those living in rural areas of Upper Egypt cannot meet their basic needs compared to 19.7% of rural areas in the Nile Delta (Egypt Independent 2016). This applies to about one third of the urban population in Upper Egypt. According to the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), the urban and rural governorates of Upper Egypt and the rural areas of the Nile Delta experienced an increase in poverty between 2012 and 2015, while the urban and geographical regions of the Delta experienced a similar decline. The governorates of Assiut and Sohag graded the highest in terms of poverty levels at a rate of 66%. Poverty in Cairo, on the other hand, reached 18% of its inhabitants (Egypt Independent 2016).
In addition, the figures provided by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics indicate that there is a strong correlation between the poverty rate and the number of family members. While 6% of families have fewer than 4 members are poor, 44% of families with six to seven members fall below the poverty line. That percentage will increase to 75% poverty for families with ten members or additional (Ahram Online 2016).

Though most of the people in Upper Egypt depend upon agriculture for their livelihoods, smallholder farming during this region does not give them enough food security and financial gain. They cultivate crops that have a low market value and generate restricted financial gain, and that they do not have adequate access to finance and credit. Various employment opportunities are lacking in Upper Egypt owing to the restricted development of microenterprises or different non-farm economic activity. Native markets are underdeveloped, and promoting infrastructure – including transport and storage facilities – is poor, whereas producers’ associations don’t seem to be well organized (IFAD 2014, p. 2).

To eradicate poverty, Egypt has committed itself to reducing poverty through a combination of sustained economic growth, income distribution and social justice. The government also gives priority to providing employment as an inevitable way to combat poverty by increasing the efficiency of the agriculture sector, rationalizing water and land use to increase Income and food security for the poor with attention to human development to enhance the capacities of the poor through education, health care and nutrition, the advancement of women and bridging the gender gap (IFAD 2014, p. 4).

7. The Situation and empowerment of Egyptian Rural Women:-

In 2017, it was announced to be the year of Egyptian women and a new strategy for women empowerment and gender equality will be launched. The main stakeholders of the strategy include but are not limited to ministry of education, ministry of interior affairs, ministry of planning, ministry of youths, the ministry of health and population, the national council for women, the national council for
childhood and motherhood, the national population council, the private sector and the non-governmental organizations (Ragab et al. 2016, p. 50).

Rural women play an important role in providing food to the family and ensuring food security at the national level. However, they face discrimination in terms of lack of ownership of agricultural land, commercial difficulties, failure to meet their legal rights and restrictions on training opportunities, as well as the double burden of their participation in income-generating activities. In addition to their family responsibilities, there is also a noticeable gap between the proportions of men and women, as is the case among rural women and females living in urban areas in the field of women’s participation in the labor market (Elsaid 2007, p. 74).

A World Bank study on women in Upper Egypt shows that 82% of those who never attended school are female, 80% of them live in rural areas, especially in rural Upper Egypt (Ragab et al. 2016, p. 112). Female illiteracy rates in those areas reaches 24% nearly double the rate among males. The gender gap in education grows much wider in Upper Egypt (Ragab et al. 2016, p. 112). The findings of the study indicate that one in five girls in the 6-15 age groups never attends school. This confirms that female dropout rates in rural Upper Egypt reaches up to 65% (Ragab et al. 2016, p. 112).

Available data on the gender gap in wages indicate that the proportion of women working for cash wages is 39% compared with 57% for men. Over one-fourth of women perform jobs for the family without wage, compared to 5% of men. The proportion of women working for their families for no wage is especially high in rural areas (40%), while only 7% of men share that experience. Besides, the proportion of women who own their business is lower than that of men, which tells us that women in general have lower access to economic resources than men, which impedes them from running their own business (Ragab et al. 2016, p. 124).

Empowerment of women must be made a priority in order to promote agriculture, increase productivity, rural development and food security, which in turn will help eradicate poverty, hunger and illiteracy and contribute to sustainable development. Egypt always affirms its strong commitment to the economic empowerment of women, especially in rural areas, to ensure the development of rural
women and thus to achieve equality and empowerment of women to ensure their enjoyment of their fundamental rights and freedoms. Decision-makers must be aware of the close relationship between sustainable development and the improvement of the living standards of the poor (Tallawy 2012, p. 3).

Special emphasis has been placed on rural women since the establishment of the National Council of Women in 2000, with the help of rural women to access government services, loans and credit facilities, with the establishment of training centers for the development of rural women's skills in setting up small businesses and providing them with new opportunities to market their products (Tallawy 2012, p. 2).

The most prominent projects that have had a positive impact on the lives of rural women are two projects, the first one is called Niqdar Nisharek (we can participate) and the other is called Ishraq (Dawn). Both projects are funded by the Population Council with assistance from USAID and many civil society groups (Ragab et al. 2016, p. 129).

The main aim of Niqdar Nisharek was to empower women, socially and economically, through providing them with work skills and helping them find jobs or start their own business, as well as giving them basic life skills that helps them understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens. The project also aimed to enhance societal acceptance of women’s work and the integration of women in public life and social activities in impoverished rural areas in Upper Egypt.

The program, which targeted 4,500 young women aged 16-29 in 30 villages in the governorates of Fayoum, Qena, and Suhag, lasted for three years, from September 2011 till December 2014. One of the most remarkable successes of Niqdar Nisharek is that nearly one-fourth of the targeted women were able to start their own projects in different fields. In addition, fathers, husbands, and brothers in the targeted villages were mobilized to give their support to women joining the labor market.

The Ishraq program aimed at social and cultural empowerment of girls aged 12-15 in rural areas in several south Egypt governorates. Many women in this demographic, especially in the rural areas in south Egypt, are exposed to the risk of missing out on school, by not enrolling in the first place or dropping out later. Many
are also prone to early marriage, early childbearing, and poor health, let alone a continued life of poverty.

Ishraq introduced traditional educational activities such as literacy classes and also trained women on life skills related to nutrition, sports, and financial prudence. The program, which lasted over ten years, from 2001 to 2013, was carried out by the Population Council in collaboration with Caritas Egypt, CEDPA, Save the Children, and local NGOs. Among the challenges that hinder these projects, despite their importance and achievements, these programs lack the capacity to support themselves through local efforts and capacities once foreign support and funding are over.

**Conclusion**

Rural development is a multidimensional process that aims to improve the economic, social, political, and institutional aspects of life in rural areas. Much attention was given to rural areas given their poor socio-economic conditions. Despite being centres for food production, rural areas have been regarded as locations of extreme poverty, especially in developing countries. Increased reliance on agriculture and on-farm activities has contributed to steady economic growth in such areas.

The central role of women in rural development is indisputable. Rural women undertake various productive and reproductive activities. This makes women a foundation for any successful rural development plan. The participation of women in rural development, nevertheless, is subject to a wide variety of global and local challenges. Among these challenges is globalisation, gender biases in employment, incomes, land and property rights, education, training, decision-making, and credit.

Despite the existence of an international that supports and calls for women empowerment and gender equality, customs and traditions in many developing countries have hindered an active participation of women in rural development by restricting their access to many social and economic rights.

In line with plan 2030, Egypt launched its sustainable development strategy “vision 2030” with the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. However, there are many challenges in rural areas that hinder
rural development; also, there are gaps between urban and rural areas in different fields which appear clearly in the indicators of poverty, illiteracy, resources distribution, empowerment of citizens and lack of access to different services. Consequently, to eradicate poverty and achieve rural sustainable development, Egypt has committed itself to reduce poverty through a combination of sustained economic growth, income distribution and social justice.

Empowerment of rural women must be made a priority in order to promote agriculture, increase productivity, rural development and food security, which in turn will help eradicate poverty, hunger and illiteracy and contribute to sustainable development. The most prominent projects that have had a positive impact on the lives of rural women are two projects, the first one is called Niqdar Nisharek (we can participate) and the other is called Ishraq (Dawn).

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