



INTERNATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATION UNION TELECOMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT BUREAU

**WORLD TELECOMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT
CONFERENCE (WTDC-98)**

Valletta, Malta, 23 March - 1 April 1998

**Document 40-E
4 February 1998
Original: French**

For Information

Agenda item: 1.3

PLENARY MEETING

Niger (Republic of)

WOMEN AND TELECOMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT

What is the impact of telecommunication
development on women in the developing countries?

THE CASE OF NIGER

How can we ensure an adaptable and active understanding of women's situation in the telecommunication sector, gauge the extent of their contribution to the development of the sector and identify, in the process, the nature of the difficulties they may encounter in their wish to "highlight" the diversity of their roles and their workload?

To assess the impact of telecommunication development on women in the developing countries we feel it is essential, first, to reply to the various questions raised before advocating a number of "specific activities" likely to promote and strengthen women's role as a driving force in the development process.

In this respect, it must be stressed, the present Conference offers us a twofold opportunity.

The first will no doubt let us incorporate our activities in the direct line of the practical recommendations of the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in March 1995 and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September of the same year. These are two essential conferences whose action programmes emphasize equality and equity between the sexes in the pursuit of global development objectives.

The second opportunity, inseparable from the first, supports the assumption that is now admitted and shared regarding the empowerment of women, our empowerment, in choosing and defining development programmes which must be implemented through us.

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Although the indicators which argue for this assertion are known, they call for a reminder. According to the International Agricultural Development Fund (IFAD), women play an important role in the economy of many African countries where they provide:

- 33% of the labour force;
- 70% of agricultural workers;
- 60 to 70% of the labour force producing food for home consumption and sale;
- 100% of basic food product processing;
- 90% of household water and fuel collection;
- 80% of food storage and transport from farm to village;
- 90% of hoeing and weeding activities;
- 60% of harvesting and marketing.

However, despite this clear and specific evidence of their efforts, it has to be recognized that discrimination is still, today, the lot of women.

In Niger, for example, women do not enjoy fully all their prerogatives: the school attendance rate for girls is particularly low (19%) and the imbalance by level of education is just as uneven: 37% of girls are registered in primary school, 10% in secondary and 1.5% in upper secondary.

In addition, in 1992 only 8% of women in Niger were literate as against 20.9% of men. If we add to this early marriage and motherhood from the age of 14 and frequent, close-spaced pregnancies (over seven children per woman), the difficulty of these women in finding self fulfilment, especially in a strongly Islamic society, can be better appreciated.

Today, educated women occupy only 17% of posts in the civil service, generally at a subordinate level.

In the face of this situation, the authorities in Niger have decided to intervene at institutional, legal and political levels to promote the economic status of women in accordance with the action plan of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing action platform.

Hence, in addition to the only woman member of the National Assembly and the Ministers of Social Development and Tourism, several women have been appointed to plenipotentiary posts, particularly in France and Canada. Since 1991, non-governmental organizations and women's associations have also emerged, working for the promotion of women, but in a context of continuing economic deterioration.

In fact, Niger is a poor country of the Sudan-Sahelian fringe, whose predominantly rural economy still keeps women submissively in the background.

This means that considerable efforts are still needed in the area of telecommunications: the telephone network serves only the large urban centres and radio-relay systems cover only 36% of the country, which is twice the size of France. Digitized telephony is not yet in use and the Internet set up in 1997 after the 17th World Telecommunication Day is in its infancy, despite the explosion in and liberalization of the informatics market.

With a single radio-television station, three peripheral radio stations which broadcast chiefly in the capital and an average of one receiver per 60 000 people, Niger is undoubtedly poorly equipped even though some development partners such as Germany and Luxembourg have carried out support programmes for rural women's access to information, for example by distributing radio receivers.

Until very recently, the telecommunication service consisted of two separate administrative units: the *Office des postes et télécommunications* (OPT - Office of Posts and Telecommunications), established in 1970 which, in 1995, employed some 2 063 staff of whom about 25% were women, working essentially in postal sorting, philately, the giro service, telephone exchange and/or administration, etc., and the *Société des télécommunications internationales du Niger* (STIN - Niger international telecommunication company), which was established in 1981 and works in parallel with OPT, managing telecommunication equipment and infrastructure, particularly:

- the Novotel earth station;
- the Karma earth station and its start-up;
- the international telephone transit centre;
- radio-relay routes providing international links.

STIN employs 109 staff and its capital is divided between the State of Niger (87.5%) and the *Compagnie française des câbles sous-marins* (French submarine cable company) (12.43%).

Since 1997 the two companies have been restructured and reforms have resulted in the establishment of a semi-public company, the *Société nigérienne de télécommunications* (SONITEL - Niger telecommunication company) created by merging the telecommunication branches of OPT and STIN, and a public industrial and commercial firm, the *Office national de poste et d'épargne* (ONPE - National post and savings office) by merging of the postal and savings branches.

At present, SONITEL plans to promote a mobile telephone system for which it would be necessary to digitize the entire network in Niger and to choose a standard which would allow continuity of service over a very wide geographical area.

Such innovations obviously require large financial resources since all equipment and infrastructure which are now 15 to 20 years old will have to be modernized; yet progress is already slow in the rural telephone system, initiated in 1994-1995.

The framework programme for telecommunication development provides investment of nearly 265 billion CFA francs between now and the year 2000 to improve service capacity.

For all that, the disparities between urban and rural areas will not be resolved in terms of access to telecommunication services. In fact, in Niger, the chief characteristic of the services offered in the sectors of health, education, companies and enterprises is the inadequacy of the range: the sum total is three national hospitals, five departmental hospitals and 375 health centres in a country where, according to the World Bank, poverty is more acute in rural areas than in the urban environment and has worsened the situation of women by causing difficulty of access to land and credit, excessive workloads, the disintegration of families, illiteracy and low school attendance for girls.

In these circumstances, it is clear that the development of telecommunications can benefit only the minority of educated women in and near urban centres, most of whom find a way through microinformatics and the training courses which are booming of finding vocational emancipation, particularly through electronic office, program analysis, accounting and even desktop publishing (DTP) modules.

This move, which has developed in parallel with the computerization of certain private companies (billing and payment services, stock management, etc.), has encouraged the emergence of a potential labour force in a market currently in complete stagnation: supply is very high and, despite the situation, private training centres are attracting more and more women students.

Even in the field of radio and television journalism, women are paying registration fees to train for the communication professions although they know full well that the State is no longer engaging anyone.

In fact, the only sector of activity where the impact of telecommunication development on women can be measured, in particular for rural women, is undoubtedly the agrometeorology sphere because of forecasts needed for agricultural campaign plans.

With a population estimated at 9.1 million in 1996 of which, according to the Ministry of Finance and Planning of Niger, 63% live below the poverty line and 34% below the extreme poverty line, a rural economy heavily dependent on climatic variations, and a strong imbalance between food production and demographic growth (3.2%), the forecasts of the regional agrometeorology and hydrology centre (AGRHYMET) of the Permanent Inter-State Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (ICDCS) are extremely important to rural communities who, in recent years, have lived in a continuing cycle of chronic food shortages.

AGRHYMET has a reliable satellite information system which enables it to inform the nine ICDCS member countries (Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Senegal, Mauritania, Cape Verde, Gambia and Guinea Bissau) of developing rainfall trends and to alert them, in good time, to any threat of locusts in the region.

An early warning system (EWS) exists in each of the member countries. In Niger, the EWS, headed by the Prime Minister and directed until recently by a woman, serves as an information relay between the United Nations system and the financial backers. It would undoubtedly be more effective if it were linked to GIEWS, the Global Information and Early Warning System on food and agriculture.

GIEWS was created in 1975, at the request of the 1973 FAO Conference and the 1974 World Food Conference, and is at present the only international facility which provides data and exhaustive analyses on the situation and prospects of food supply and demand in all countries of the world.

In fact it is a decision-making support system with the main objective of identifying countries or regions where there is an imminent danger of food shortages and of assessing emergency food needs.

Niger does not yet have access to the World Wide Web due to lack of computer equipment and high-speed telephone connections. Meanwhile, it gets information from AGRHYMET and the ORSTOM RIO network which relays GIEWS messages to requesting services.

Another level of impact, but to a lesser degree, is the installation of echography equipment in certain treatment units. The system is still embryonic but it has already made it possible in certain difficult pregnancies to save the mother and child.

There is still much to do. It is obvious that the State of Niger must modernize its telecommunications if it wishes to acquire an efficient means of improving development prospects, in particular by promoting telemedicine, tele-assistance and remote monitoring.

In this regard, we feel that this Conference can help us greatly in seeking, through collective debate and consistent action, the way to bring us into step with new telecommunication technologies. The experiments conducted in Cameroon and the current feasibility studies on telemedicine in Gabon can certainly help us to encourage innovative ideas: to allow women to affirm their capacity to assume the whole gamut of their responsibilities in making technological choices suitable for their personality, their skills and, quite simply, their will to exist, and to allow our countries to open up, finally, to the modernizing currents of the third millennium.

REPUBLIC OF NIGER
Telecommunications network

(Automatic exchange, main manual exchanges, radio-relay systems)

KEY

National transit centre

Regional transit centre

Automatic exchange with autonomous routing

Automatic exchange without autonomous routing

Manual switch

Terrestrial station

Radio relay, 120+ channels

Radio relay < 120 channels

County town

District town

Vers = To

Niamey optical fibre network

Lake Chad
