

Foreword

Women in developing countries are often directly dependant on their local environment and sustainable natural systems for the survival of their families. They spend the greater part of their time tending, gathering, conserving and using natural resources. As daily managers of the living environment they are experienced in the management of agriculture and food production, fisheries, forests, soil, energy and water resources.

Women have developed skills in conservation which are built into their traditional subsistence activities. At the local level, cooperative action taken by women demonstrates that by sharing their knowledge and experience they can promote environmental management and sustainable development. They can improve on their performance as managers of the environment if they are given access to education and training and the opportunity to participate in decision making. At the same time, environmental management and sustainable development can be enhanced if extension workers and decision-makers make more use of women's knowledge and experience in effective resource management.

The critical role played by women in environmental management and sustainable development has been highlighted at major Commonwealth and UN meetings in the 1990s. Meetings of Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs have urged governments to provide greater support to enable women to use and share their knowledge, experience and traditional skills on environmental issues, and to gain new ones as a result of appropriate training. The Expert Group on Environmental Concerns and the Commonwealth in their report '*Sustainable Development - An Imperative for Environmental Protection*', reiterated the vital importance of training women to support their work for sustainable development and recommended that special attention be given to providing women with education and training. In Agenda 21, the Earth Summit Programme of Action on Environment and Development, governments agreed that it was vital to mainstream women throughout sectoral and cross-sectoral sections. Commonwealth Heads of Government have urged governments to ensure that immediate action is taken towards implementation of Agenda 21, especially the Chapter focusing on 'Global Action for Women Towards Sustainable and Equitable Development'. The UN Fourth World Conference on Women also urged governments to involve women actively in environmental decision-making at all levels and facilitate and increase their access to information and education.

This manual which focuses on women in Asia is part of a Pan-Commonwealth Training Module on Women and the Environment which comprises four manuals for the Africa, Asia, South Pacific and Caribbean regions of the Commonwealth, an overview paper on issues and strategies for promoting women's role in environmental and natural resource management and a video "Women of the Rainforest" focusing on Macusi Amerindian women of Iwokrama rainforest. It is a practical contribution to enhancing the provision of training for women in conservation and natural resource management. The Asia manual provides trainers and extension workers with relevant skills and techniques for involving women effectively in conservation activities. It presents success stories of women promoting environmental management and sustainable development in Asia. It acknowledges the valuable indigenous knowledge which women in Asia possess and emphasises that women themselves must be involved in the identification of their needs. We hope that this manual will enable trainers and extension workers to address gender issues in natural resource management effectively and also increase women's participation in environmental decision making.

Sir Humphrey Maud

Deputy Secretary-General (Economic and Social Affairs)