

More Than a Title

by Adriane Seibert

In the village of Chirwa, Niger, Ruga Ibrahim is called *Kungiya Mata*, which in the Hausa language means —“the leader of women.” No one calls her Ruga, not even her children, for no one else bears her title. She alone is Kungiya.



Photo by Frank de Ruiter for CRS

Her title carries stature: Kungiya speaks to the village chief on a daily basis. Her title carries responsibility: When the village receives important guests, Kungiya organizes their reception. Her title carries weight: If a crime is committed in Chirwa, Kungiya is consulted about the punishment. Her title carries influence: When CRS came to the village to introduce a gardening project, Kungiya prompted the women to participate.

In most Nigerien villages, men dominate the economy, including growing garden vegetables for sale. But in the village of Chirwa, more than half of the gardens are owned and operated by women. Many of these women are new to gardening. They only started in 2005, after CRS Niger expanded the community's water resources from 20 wells to 33 and distributed seed and tools to 100 households through the Emergency Response program.

The women credit their representative and leader, Kungiya. Fellow female gardeners say of Ruga: "She influenced the village chief to delegate considerable space to the women interested in obtaining garden plots." "She raised her voice in the village meetings and insisted that we be included in the project." "She is a true Kungiya." Their reports confirm that Ruga meets, and even exceeds, the expectations of a women's leader.

Through the Emergency Response program, CRS Niger supports gardening projects throughout the country in an effort to stem food insecurity and boost economic opportunities. In 2006, CRS Niger provided over 3,000 gardening households with direct assistance by constructing 170 garden wells and providing 3,000 households with garden seeds and tools through seed vouchers and seed fair programs.

Women of Influence

As a complement to these activities, in January and February 2007, CRS Niger trained 900 gardeners across Niger in agro-enterprise development. The goal is to improve the gardeners' existing knowledge of market opportunities. On average, 25 percent of participants in CRS-supported gardening projects are women. In the village of Chirwa, however, the women make up 57 percent of participants. CRS Niger is working to increase women's participation in its projects by engaging influential women like Kungiya Ruga Ibrahim.

With a genuine smile, Kungiya says, "I had to get them on top of the garden project. After all *'In ba mace, maza basu iyawa'* ('If no women, men would not be able')." Kungiya knows that, as continued food production shortfalls and reduced access to arable land make it increasingly difficult to support a family in Niger, women have to get involved in the economic sector.

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