

Notes on gender and stakeholder participation (in Ecosystem Management)

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WEDO report, "... Women use vegetation and forests - for medicinal plants, food and fuel, as well as for income generation - but these ecosystems rely on a healthy water supply. As the environment deteriorates, women's livelihoods become increasingly vulnerable."

Introduction

The increase of the global degradation of ecosystems, the excessive consumption of water, contamination and salinization of water-bearings, aquifers and dams, along with the impact of extreme poverty are contributing factors to an environmental catastrophe. This has had profound effects on the availability of drinking water and, consequently, has led to the violation of the right to life, safety, food, health and education of billions of human beings.

Gender inequalities, environmental deterioration, and deepening poverty mutually self-reinforcing; conversely, improvements in any one of the three can leverage improvements in the other two. In order to suppress further deterioration of the present natural resource base and to relieve human poverty and suffering, the competence and expertise within each society need to be optimally utilized. This requires the right for both men and women to participate on equal terms and equal extent in societal activities. In addition, it demands the acknowledgement of the assets of both men and women, and consideration of their unique interests and needs. In this way, not only is the life quality of women and their families improved, but also the prospects of sustainable utilization and management of the ecosystems.

However, despite growing gender awareness world-wide, the process of attaining gender equality within all areas of social life is only in its infancy. Wide-spread inequalities exist between women and men regarding their respective opportunities to influence and participate in activities within their society and to benefit from its resources.

One of the problematic aspects of combining poverty, gender, and environmental analysis is that "gender" often disappears or is subsumed into "the social". This is true in many instances in community or stakeholder participation too as a result of gender blind perspectives of "community/stakeholder".

Gender Sensitive Participatory Process

Experience suggests that participatory approaches and processes are not necessarily either gender or power sensitive; local participation may be dominated by elders, wealthy people, those of a particular caste or ethnicity, and men. Indeed women may feel

inhibited from participating because of their workload, cultural norms that may make it difficult for them to travel or speak in meetings and relations of respect and deference to elders and to men.

Taking a gender approach is a means to enhance the effectiveness of community and/or stakeholder participation. A gender sensitive approach helps to overcome some limitations of participatory approaches and processes (in development interventions). Many studies have shown/highlighted a positive impact by including gender sensitive stakeholder/community participation: facilities are more likely to be technically appropriate, conveniently situated and well used and maintained where both men and women have been consulted. Where gender sensitive approaches promote the meaningful involvement of and inclusion of all members of the community in resource development, management and use can lead to: (a) design of effective new solutions to problems; (b) help government avoid poor investments expensive mistakes; (c) make projects and programmes more sustainable; (d) ensure that infrastructure development yields the maximum social and economic returns; and (e) further development goals, like the MDGs on hunger, child mortality and gender equality. Consequently this will lead to great benefits for all.

The effectiveness of participation will get affected if both men and women are not represented in all levels of participation (planning to implementation and monitoring). Therefore, a gender sensitive approach is essential in stakeholder participation in order to involve both men and women. The importance of specific attention to gender and diversity issues is all the more critical given the generally low profile of these issues among many water professionals.

Thus, it is important to not only ensure participation of women in equal numbers but also facilitate a form of participation that enable women - as well as men - to influence the entire agenda and priorities. Therefore, it is crucial to create an enabling environment for women by various ways (setting, place, time, forms of articulation, etc.). The objective is to achieve a sustainable interaction between men, women and ecosystems whereby both men and women benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated. Thus, gender sensitive participatory process is crucial for efficiency and to achieve gender equality and social equity.

One very important point to be remembered while involving women in stakeholder and/or community participation is the danger of oversimplification and stereotyping of gender roles (especially in community-based water resource management). Preconceptions concerning women's "natural" role as water managers may actually increase women's workload and reinforce existing division of labor. Ignoring men in participatory processes can be counterproductive.

Gender difference considerations for gender sensitive stakeholder/community participation

- Men and women have very different social locations with respect to use and management of ecosystems and its resources (water, land, forests, etc.)
- Women and men have different interests and derive benefits from the availability, use and management of ecosystems and its resources.
- Women and men have different local knowledge about natural resources.
- Women and men have different concerns about the quality and quantity of the natural resources (water, land, forests, etc).
- Women and men have different priorities and perceptions regarding natural resources and these will shape their involvement in management.
- Women and men tend to approach, understand, organize and participate in different ways (in various programs and initiatives - projects, activities).
- Women often face specific obstacles to participating in a project, joining a water-users committee, or providing input into a consultation session.

These differences reflect not only gender differences of roles, labor and responsibilities but also inequalities such as women's lack of decision-making power and exclusion from community leadership positions. The differences and inequalities between women and men influence how individuals respond to changes in ecosystems and its resource management. Thus, understanding gender roles, relations, and inequalities can help explain the choices people make and their different options.

Additionally, and very importantly, differences of power and position apply among women as they do between men and women, and wealthier, more powerful women may "capture" participatory processes and ensure that their own interest are furthered within them.

References

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* References 1 and 4 have a long list of sources on gender

(i) <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/Feb05.pdf>

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