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THE GENDER APPROACH TO THE WATER SECTOR: COMMON PROBLEMS AND LEARNED LESSONS

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ABSTRACT – The purpose of this paper is to pull together the common problems most of the developing countries in the Mediterranean region are facing for the promotion of gender approach in the water sector as well as highlighting the most important lessons learned from the running activities focusing on what have been done and what needs to be done to achieve our desired goal towards gender equality in the water and irrigation sector.

INTRODUCTION

The cost effectiveness and positive impacts of a gender approach in the water sector have been amply demonstrated. Furthermore, the need for mainstreaming gender in Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) has been validated from around the world. This has been highlighted and stressed by several issued statements (Inter-Ministerial Conference on Freshwater, Bonn, Germany, 2001; The World Summit of Sustainable Development (WSSD), Johannesburg, 2002; The 2nd World Water Forum, The Hague, 2000) and recently, in the 3rd World Water Forum, Kyoto, Japan, 2003.

At the WSSD, world leaders committed themselves to a gender approach with international water management and practice. In Bonn government representatives responsible for water resources stated in their final declaration: “water resources management should be based on participatory approach. Both men and women should be involved and have an equal voice in managing the sustainable use of water resources and sharing of benefits. The role of women in water related areas needs to be strengthened and their participation broadened”.

Such international events, beside many other regional and national conferences dealing with the water sector recognized the following two facts:

- by the adoption of a gender approach, both efficiency and equity goals could be promoted;
- the human and social dimensions of water management are to be the cornerstone of new initiatives.

However, around this facts, several questions had been raised up including:

- How is such policy to be implemented?
- What follows at the operational level?
- What are “gender sensitive infrastructure and services”?
- How can we strengthen the role of women and how to ensure they have an equal voice and choice? and, as a priority question,
- What are the basic conceptual underpinnings of the gender approach?

COMMON GENDER PROBLEMS IN THE WATER SECTOR

- Traditional cultural norms
 - The centrality of traditional cultural norms as a rationale for gender inequity in the water sector is a common theme in most countries.
 - Cultural norms and customs of the community are often not congruent with the principles of gender equity as articulated in the water policy and thereby undermine good policy on the part of implementing agencies.

- Self esteem and public participation skills.

Low self-esteem displayed by women where public functions were concerned is one of the factors that severely impeded equitable water-management. In this regard, major efforts should be taken to improve not only the women's capacities and skills, but their appreciation for their capacities.

- Gender inequity in employment.

Such problem can be generalized not only at the community level, but it is also widely found in a range of institutions dealing with water sector.

- Gender differentiation in irrigation management

Systematic disadvantages are a general pattern characterizing the irrigation sector. Women's participation in the irrigation sector is always in increase without a corresponding increase in decision making power.

- Capacity building needed at various levels

- At project management level, many managers do not understand gender issues and do not really know how to mainstream them in their work.

- At community level, various kinds of skills need to be developed among women and men to enable them to effectively participate in public affairs.

Beside these common problems, the present situation indicates clearly that the effectiveness of efforts to integrate gender equality into development cooperation in general and water sector in particular as well as on how gender mainstreaming strategies might be pursued in the future, both did not succeed in providing more significant and visible results. The reasons behind could be attributed to the followings.

Understanding of Gender and Gender Mainstreaming

In most countries, due to lack of understanding and the will to change gender is often thought as side-streamed rather than mainstreamed. The term gender should not be used to refer predominately to women. It is related to how we are perceived and expected to think and act, as women and men, because of the way society is organized, not because of our biological differences. Equally, gender mainstreaming should be understood as a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres.

Gender Approach

The gender approach aims at the fullest possible participation of both women and men. This cannot be achieved unless attitudes, roles, and responsibilities of men and women are carefully taken into account. This cannot be easily done, hence, both sexes do not necessarily have the same access to, or control over, resources and that work, benefits and impacts may be different for both groups. To meet such situation successfully, the gender approach requires an open mind capable to lead and organize both men and women to work together in complete harmony.

Resources and Institutional Support

One of the most significant constraints on progress of gender equality, mainstreaming, is that the resources and institutional support are not yet commensurate with the policy commitments on gender equality, or the requirements of a gender mainstreaming strategy.

Drastic changes are needed in the working environment and in how dialogue is conducted. What is evident is the presence of a male dominated and masculine culture that has inevitable consequences for the values and priorities that are expressed, formally in policy and budget priorities and informally in the discourse and atmosphere of workplace.

Moreover, dialogue even between those involved in gender equality policies and active women's organizations – is not enabling women's voices and voices on gender equality, to come through.

Dialogue should be not only about discussing issues with partners but should also be about listening to their views including their interpretations of gender equality.

Managing Gender Mainstreaming Strategies

This is not any easy process, but a rather complex one. The failure and/or success is highly a matter of in-house capacity to manage gender mainstreaming strategies at both centralized and decentralized levels. The over use of external experts to manage and implement gender mainstreaming is not the appropriate approach to be followed. This could create significant difficulties in terms of relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability of followed strategies and taken measures.

It is needed to allocate sufficient resources in terms of skilled and knowledgeable staff as well as balancing the capacity at central levels with sufficient capacity at the decentralized ones.

Reassessing Strategy

So far, strategies for gender mainstreaming placed considerable emphasis on the development of tools and instruments (for analysis, planning, monitoring and evaluation) and on capacity building. What we have now is a multitude of tools and instruments, but in return, their impact is not widely overseen with only few examples of good practice on the ground.

Visibility and Clarity of Gender Equality

There is a continuing need in country strategies, country programmes and intervention for clarity, explicitness and visibility in the statement of gender equality as a goal and priority. Without the clarity called for, there is an evident lack of follow-through. On the other hand, there is a requirement for linkages and ensuring synergies with other goals and issues.

GENDER MAINSTREAMING: GAPS AND WEAKNESS

For most countries of the Mediterranean, gender mainstreaming are not well defined. There is an apparent need for a set of core requirements that represent the reasonable minimum for gender mainstreaming. An effective gender mainstreaming requires:

- clear objectives and targets on gender equality;
- gender analysis;
- monitoring and reporting;
- resources and capacity, tools and dialogue of gender equality (qualified personal, institutions and government, civil society, internal team work, donor community) and its implementation.

These requirements are needed to ensure, on one hand, that progress is made beyond a pro-forma or simplistic application of the mainstreaming gender strategy, and on the other hand, that the energy and commitment of staff and partners working on gender issues are used to the full.

Insuring that gender equality is fully addressed not easy. Rethinking about gender mainstreaming is needed to decide what can be done about the gaps and weakness. A new way forward is needed that links gender equality with other development goals and objectives, brings gender knowledge and expertise into the mainstream and makes much better use of local knowledge and resources.

PROGRAMMES AND PROJECTS: MAJOR FOCUSING

Many running projects and programmes related to gender focus on the practical rather than the strategic needs of women. An example of this difference in approach is a project that provides water by setting-up standpipes rather than that seeking water rights. The first can provide women with some immediate income through allowing short-term economic activities. Such project is non-threatening and does little to change the fundamental economic power relations between men and women.

By contrast, water rights would provide women with a permanent means of production – the basis of gender wealth creation, long-term prosperity and financial security.

In view of the aforementioned lessons learned including the major constraints most of the developing countries are already facing, the question to be raised is what are the actions to be taken

and what is needed to be done for the promotion of gender and its integration and mainstreaming gender equality in development cooperation in general, and the water sector in particular.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

Gender equity in water resources use and management needs a wide acceptance of a number of basic concepts among them the followings:

- Further efforts to improve the general status of women taking into account the status of both women and men, recognizing that their life courses will not necessarily produce equal outcomes.
- A better understanding that women and men have different needs, priorities and decision making capabilities and that institutional structures determine their roles, rights and responsibilities for access to and control over resource.
- The gender sensitivity of services provided by national water management institutions must integrate gender equality in their hiring procedures, capacity building efforts and institutional cultures.
- Women often have vital knowledge of local water management that should be enhanced.
- Ensuring the participation of women in designing, planning, and the implementation of irrigation and water resources development projects, crucial to the success of such efforts will be informing women about new water management proposals from the local level as well as including them in design of new institutions and devising strategies that assure their participation while recognizing cultural and social traditions.

ACHIEVING GENDER EQUITY IN WATER SECTOR: STEPS TO BE TAKEN

Such steps include affirmative action at various levels, budgeting and actions at the micro-level. However, meeting these goals requires gender mainstreaming that takes into account gender equity concerns in all policies, programmes, administrative and financial activities and organizational procedures (UNDP, 1997).

Affirmative Action

Such actions should be taken to assess strongly the followings:

- the adequate representation of women in all water management committees and decision-making bodies;
- the participation of sufficient number of females in international decision-making organizations, international consultations as well as regional and international networking activities;
- on the national level, water policies, institutions and management structures must reflect the needs priorities and representation rights of both women and men for all possible water uses.

Gender Budgeting

Through this action, proposed policies and projects are examined to ensure that the resources allocated deliver substantial benefits for women and thereby enhance their empowerment.

Micro-Level Actions

Such actions are addressing the following issues:

- Gender aspects of roles, rights and responsibilities in the water sector management and its use.
- Facilitating the women's participation in the water use associations and in community decision making.
- Developing a demand-responsive approach to user fees for water and sanitation services fundamentally based on the ability of male and female users.

Such actions are essentially needed to be in function, however, they are not sufficient; much remains to be done to meet the outstanding problems to achieve gender equity in water management.

The widening socio-economic disparities between men and women, the absence of women views in planning and implementation of water aspects, the non-systematic incorporation of women into

water resources management, the limited involvement of women in water decision making and maintenance, the deficiencies in gender among water organization in particular and society in general, all are problems seeking appropriate actions and reasonable solutions. That's why to achieve gender equity, much remain to be done.

WHAT REMAINS TO BE DONE?

To respond to all the concerns identified above and to answer to the previously raised questions, in this paper efforts should be made and action should be taken to:

- Integrate gender concerns into state policy. A gender analysis should be included in the process of designing implementing public policies on water. Lack of integration has been identified as one of the main causes of ineffective and unequal water supply.
- Enhance institutional will and develop comprehensive strategies for gender mainstreaming in national and regional institutions.
- Train local communities to know and master techniques that enable a change in role and focus for both women and men in water resources management and in the decision making process.
- Information should be widely disseminated through the water sector and used as basis for training and advocacy at all levels.
- Integrate efforts in gender and water with other themes such as poverty, pollution and health.
- Deep analysis of local cultural realities through the involvement of culture specific gender expertise in the country to assist and provide the advise to policy makers and programmes managers.
- Work towards establishing a mechanism for networking and sharing information and experiences, by involving all those with a stake in water resources such as trade union, private sector, NGO's and vulnerable groups.
- Promote participatory methodologies that use agreed indicators to measure the effectiveness of women participation.
- Strengthen targeted advocacy at the national and regional levels and provide additional resources (time, authority, incentives) for people responsible for gender mainstreaming.

Finally, the most important point is not to decide on the actions needed but to implement these actions on the ground. Time is running, water scarcity and related water problems are increasing in most developing countries, particularly those of the Mediterranean. We can no longer promise words in policy documents, or existing guidelines or speeches. We need to strive towards real impact on the ground.

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