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PRACTICAL LESSONS LEARNED FROM GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN WATER MANAGEMENT PROJECTS

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I am an agricultural engineer from Wageningen University (the Netherlands) and started my professional career at FAO working on crop water requirements. Later on, in an additional Masters programme, I included also a course on gender and agricultural change. My present field of work is wide and includes rural development, including agricultural development and water management, as well as gender.

I am presently working with Femconsults, Consultants on Gender and Development, based in The Hague, the Netherlands. Femconsult consists of an independent multidisciplinary group of professionals, and has a special focus on gender perspectives, while offering a wide range of technical advisory services.

Content of the presentation:

1. Constraints met in gender mainstreaming
2. Lessons learned, in particular in overcoming the identified constraints
3. Based on the lessons learned: why should we involve men and women in water management projects?
4. 10 practical recommendations
5. But:.....

Before I continue, I would like to mention (or repeat) the definition of gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming focuses on gender roles and relationships rather than on women only; it is designed to ensure that women and men have access to project resources and services, in relation to their actual responsibilities.

The following constraints I experienced in many projects that aimed to mainstream gender in their activities:

1. Project staff tended to confuse gender mainstreaming with Women-in-Development (WID), and activities that are labelled "gender" often in fact are WID-activities. This can cause marginalisation of women, in particular when such women's activities are not linked to the core activities of a project (for example, when in a water management project sewing classes or other unrelated income generating activities are provided for women, instead of providing for women also access to the water management services of the project);
2. Assumed differences in roles and needs of men and women were often based on "myths" and stereotypes, rather than on a proper assessment (gender analysis; baseline survey);
3. Because of their unfamiliarity with gender concepts and practices, project staff saw gender mainstreaming (initially) as a threat rather than an opportunity. The use of gender jargon often contributed to this.

LESSONS LEARNED WITH GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN IRRIGATION AND WATER MANAGEMENT

Related projects have demonstrated that it is possible to overcome constraints:

- In Pakistan, project staff, counterparts and male farmers changed their view towards women's participation in the project. In schemes where also the women farmers were organised, in addition to male farmers, the participation of the men in the project was better than where only the men were organised. The women were obviously very interested in the proposed project activities, and ensured that their husbands did attend the concerned meetings.

- In Albania –like in many other countries- irrigation has traditionally been a male task. In practice, it is not uncommon that women do irrigate, especially when she is a widow or when her husband has off-farm employment, but also together with her husband. A reaction of an engineer, seeing a woman engaged in irrigation, once was: “Oh, she is just helping her husband”, not acknowledging the independent contribution the woman made. It was thus not surprising that the first water users associations in Albania had only men as board members. In the course of the Irrigation Rehabilitation Project, special attention was given to women as potential WUA board member candidates and indeed women were elected in several WUAs. Often these women had an educational background in agriculture and performed well. It was reported that WUAs with women board members were often among the best performing ones.

- In Macedonia, only men were found to participate in meetings of the newly established WUAs. When women were asked why they did not attend meetings, the most common answer was “we are not invited”. Although attending meetings is a man’s business according to tradition, there were women who were interested to do so, especially widows or women whose husband could not attend. A precondition, however, would be that such meetings would be held in appropriate places (e.g. schools) and times, and a special effort should be made to invite women next to the men.

An illustration of actual women’s participation was found in another village, where at the field level, farmers themselves organised the irrigation turns. One farmer, heading an extended family, explained that always “womenfolk” of his family would go to such (informal) meetings. This was on purpose, because with women present, the other men would argue less and decisions on irrigation turns would be taken more swiftly.

- In Egypt, several of the water management projects made extensive efforts to involve both men and women farmers in their activities, i.e. in establishing Water Boards. Both men and women are represented in Water Boards, with women representing Residential Base Units, addressing issues related to domestic use of irrigation water, water quality, environmental issues and safety. A precondition for this success was the inclusion of both male and female water management organisers in the field teams. The establishment of a Gender Taskforce within the project office played an important role in working out the project’s gender strategy, integrating it in its core activities, as well as to create better awareness and support among all project staff.

WHY SHOULD BOTH MEN AND WOMEN BECOME INVOLVED IN WATER MANAGEMENT PROJECTS?

The main reason is that men and women play a role in water management and/or are affected by changes in water management policies and practices. Therefore, (1) we want to ensure that both men and women benefit from water management improvements; and (2) involving both men and women will increase their productivity or effectiveness in irrigated agriculture / water management and thus will contribute to the achievement of the overall objectives of a project.

Additional practical reasons for the participation of men and women are:

- The actual role of men and women in water management is often different although never rigid, whether positive or negative. For example, in some irrigation schemes, women were found to use irrigation channels as a place for domestic waste disposal! Therefore, both need to be involved to make the project successful.

- Needs and priorities may differ among women and men, because of their different tasks, roles and concerns;

- Not all households do have an (able) male member who can irrigate or attend meetings. In other households the men have taken up off-farm employment, leaving agricultural production to women (feminization of agriculture);

- Women who do most of the agricultural work, do also have most knowledge and awareness about the farm and often take the regular day-to-day decisions; and

- In many farming households, husband and wife discuss together the major cropping and investment decisions for their farm. Better decisions are taken when both are well-informed.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO BE APPLIED IN WATER MANAGEMENT PROJECTS

1. Gender analysis: make sure that information is collected about labour division, needs and decision-making of men and women regarding water management. Either a separate gender analysis can be conducted or such an analysis can be integrated in a socio-economic (baseline) survey;
2. Gender strategy and project planning: As part of the project's strategy, its approach to gender issues should be explicitly established, including targets. In designing the individual project activities, the needs and priorities of men and women should be reflected. However, there should be room to make adjustments and improvements in the course of the project on the basis of experiences and first lessons learned;
3. Information: make sure it reaches men and women. For example, in order to reach women, information or announcements for meetings should also be put at places where women regularly come, for example at the school or near a water pump;
4. Facilitate that both men and women can participate in meetings and other project activities. This means that both the venue and timing should be suitable and appropriate for women too. Sometimes (depending on culture) separate meetings with only women may be desirable;
5. If the project includes the formation of WUAs or Water Boards, criteria for eligibility as WUA-member, Board member or to have water rights or voting rights, should be established in such a manner that men and women have a chance to participate. For example, if only those persons, who are land owners, can become WUA-member, many women are automatically excluded, as the family's land is often owned by the husband as "head of the household". Joint or dual membership should be considered.
6. Staff: ensure that project staff is gender balanced and are aware of gender issues. A gender specialist and/or a gender taskforce is often desirable to support the gender mainstreaming process. All relevant staff members should have gender mainstreaming included in their job description. Gender training is often desirable, but not only as a separate training: gender topics should also be integrated in other training programmes, whenever relevant;
7. Ensure that the means for improvement (skills, materials and/or credit) are accessible to both men and women.
8. Monitoring and Evaluation: Ensure that gender targets and indicators are formulated (e.g. within a logframe). All data collection regarding participation, etc. should be gender disaggregated.
9. Institutional memory: It is essential that the experiences related to gender mainstreaming are documented and disseminated, in order to allow that other projects and future staff members benefit.
10. Governmental and (semi-)autonomous water management institutions should adopt explicit gender mainstreaming goals into their policy and mandate, for example: "Provide equitable access and opportunities to women and men to water management resources".

But:

I have observed several times that within donor funded projects "successful" approaches and procedures had been developed for gender mainstreaming, which, however, were discontinued after project completion or hand-over to the counterpart organisation. Why is this?

- Is gender mainstreaming still seen as donor imposed?
- Is there lack of commitment?
- Or are the developed approaches and procedures not sustainable because these were too ambitious, too complex and/or requiring too many resources (e.g. in terms of extra (female) staff or budgets)?

I do not know the answer to this question, but I know we have to find a way to address this problem.