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in

Hamdy A. (ed.), Trisorio-Liuzzi G. (ed.).
Water management for drought mitigation in the Mediterranean

Bari : CIHEAM
Options Méditerranéennes : Série B. Etudes et Recherches; n. 47

2004
pages 323-327

Article available on line / Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

<http://om.ciheam.org/article.php?IDPDF=5002276>

To cite this article / Pour citer cet article

Quagliariello R. Drought mitigation and gender challenge: a social approach to a Mediterranean environmental problem. In : Hamdy A. (ed.), Trisorio-Liuzzi G. (ed.). Water management for drought mitigation in the Mediterranean. Bari : CIHEAM, 2004. p. 323-327 (Options Méditerranéennes : Série B. Etudes et Recherches; n. 47)



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Drought Mitigation and Gender Challenge: a Social Approach to a Mediterranean Environmental Problem

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In the arid and semi-arid areas, drought mitigation is something strictly related to a Country development. A right, open-minded approach to gender-related problems is, equally, tightly linked to the real development of a Nation or a population. The latter could give an important contribution to the solution of the former and quite positively influence the living and social conditions of women towards whom gender policy is addressed.

Women emancipation, in fact, means their direct involvement in all the matters related to the environment where they were born, where they grow-up and live together with their families and children. Drought is very often peculiar to this environment, especially of the South World Countries and in particular of the rural areas, where not emancipated women live.

Speaking of struggle against drought, we indirectly speak of water management and water saving, two fields where rural women could play a strategic role since they are extremely sensitive to all water scarcity related problems.

Easy access to water is, in fact, essential for a smoother everyday life, for sanitation security and a better use of women's time and physical energy.

Women and water: an indivisible equation for sustainable development.

Trained, educated and self-confident women are able to manage their limited resources of domestic and rural water better than any other member of the rural communities, the same as they use to do with their earnings, their amount of food and their supplies of sanitary stuff.

Accessible water becomes a good more precious than any other because it means, in many cases, less miles to walk every day and a

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healthier life to live and, that's why, it has to be preserved, saved and used in the most fruitful way without forgetting to leave it as cleanest as possible.

Drought is an age-old problem but, in these last decades, it has become increasingly important, strictly linked to the climatic changes our planet is facing and whose alleviation could depend also and above all on long-term actions and strategies.

Among these actions and strategies, women empowerment and a gender-balanced oriented progress should not be of minor importance.

This point is becoming clearer and clearer to all social and economic development experts and actions to be adopted and spread for the implementation of this policy are beginning to be part of all the latest and advanced approaches to this matter.

Considering the social dimension of a problem like drought means considering the role that women play in the societies where such a problem has to be faced; the role women play and the one they could play giving more attention and value to their potentialities still underestimated so far.

Education takes a place of primary importance in this kind of social approach to a problem which is mistakenly considered only a technical or scientific one.

Education is the key to escape indifference and underestimation. It makes women aware of their surrounding environment and of the limits and opportunities such environment is ready to offer. It could alleviate difficulties and improve the capacity to manage scarcity.

Education could have a long-lasting effect that is transmitted through generations, through mother to daughter giving them the power and self-reliance which only knowledge can guarantee. Women could so continue to carry their heavy burdens in the communities where they live, but conscious that these burdens don't make them inferior components of their society, but absolutely active stakeholders of its welfare and safety. And such awareness has to spread and extend to all members of the social order.

Lack of education and poverty are a combination which has to be fought not less than the combination of lack of water and poverty.

However, all development actions take with them modifications in the social structures where they occur, and probably this is the most lasting

result of the whole growing process. It is a result which has not only a generic collective dimension but which impacts directly on the family sphere, changing the traditional relationships and imposing a shift to a new, stronger and more visible female figure.

In such a way, women should no longer be considered as passive beneficiaries of a development strategy but as active protagonists of a progress design. They are no more simple recipients of welfare but they take part in its launch and establishment.

For this reason, they absolutely need to be helped in building up their capacities and skills, they need to be informed and trained.

Speaking of drought, training could include simple rules for a better and more conscious knowledge of water management, but also more technical information giving women the opportunity to have specific qualification for a problem affecting the reality where they live and giving them the possibility to take part in decision-making processes.

Drought mitigation strategy should include organisation of women into associations which can give them a stronger impact on their environment and a bigger awareness of their power as a social group.

Unity and problem-sharing will surely contribute to achieve the success and to regain the pride of being part of an organized group partaking the same difficulties and the same willingness to solve them.

Collective approach, much more than individual one, is the correct method to be sought and encouraged. Moreover, such approach could easily lead to demonstrate that excluding women as interest group bypasses half the population and limits the efficiency and effectiveness of all projects related to water management (Quagliariello, Trisorio Liuzzi, Hamdy 2002).

Women as economic actors are undoubtedly essential to the establishment of programmes for poverty reduction and to improve their effectiveness.

As women play an important role in the natural resources management, their active involvement in the environmental projects is a pre-condition for the success of the efforts devoted to a sustainable surroundings protection (Vitale, 2003).

Italy strongly believes and sustains such position and, starting from 1999, it has become the biggest financial supporter of the UNIFEM, the

programme of the United Nations for the improvement of the women condition in the world (Vitale, 2003)

Following this trend, which is gaining international consensus, the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Bari (IAMB-Italy) of CIHEAM is launching initiatives of research and training addressed to gender promotion in water resources management, above all at the Mediterranean Region level.

Considering gender equity in water resources management programmes will, indirectly, give benefit not only to the environment, but also to economy, nutrition, health and social life (Budak, Kantar, 2002). On the contrary, gender-blind interventions for water management will create problems not only for rural women but also for agriculture in general.

In such a scenario, drought plays a role since it can affect all water uses including the "domestic" one, where women are traditionally and most involved. This is the reason why the economic value of "domestic" water use has to be recognized, since women's uses of water are crucial for the survival of rural household (FAO, 2002).

This attention to the "domestic" use of water, which is surely important especially in rural areas, should not encourage forgetting the involvement of gender dimension in the use of water as "irrigation" resource.

Women are housekeepers, but they are also, or they could become, landowners or farm managers. Their competences could include knowledge of irrigated agriculture, of water scarcity management and drought mitigation strategies.

The consideration of their role, their training and empowerment could be part of a bigger, ambitious programme consisting of different preparedness actions aimed at tackling foreseeable problems, such as drought, preventing them and suggesting tactics to get through them positively.

Phenomena such as drought are, in fact, absolutely predictable and this is the reason why no action should be decided or taken on the basis of urgency or pressure of sudden, unexpected events.

Prevention should become a powerful tool to mitigate the consequences of ineluctable environmental occurrences, such as drought. And women should be active protagonists of this strategy in

order to fight whatever might affect the quality of human life and so, last but not least, of their own life.

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