



Forests and Gender Equality

Watershed management



Watershed management can be thought of as the management of all human activities that take place within a geographical area supported by a watercourse. Watershed management committees are community-based organizations that bring stakeholders together to identify, prioritize, implement and monitor watershed management activities.

The involvement of communities in watershed management is essential, because communities are affected by what happens in a watershed, and their actions influence the downstream availability and quality of water and affect other ecosystem services. The participation of women in watershed management is also crucial, and watershed management committees can be excellent vehicles for this. Ensuring gender balance in decision-making processes is a key element in the new generation of watershed management programmes and projects.

Case study

Project to assist the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (ERRA) and its partners in restoring livelihoods in the earthquake-affected areas of Pakistan (OSRO/PAK/701/SWE PROJECT)



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The challenge

A damage assessment carried out in the wake of a devastating earthquake in Pakistan in 2005 found that women bore the brunt of the impacts. After the earthquake, many men left the affected areas in search of work, leaving women behind with huge responsibilities for reconstruction, farming and the care of children, orphans and the disabled.

FAO's response

An important goal of the project was to restore the livelihoods of earthquake-affected people through a community-based development approach in a gender-sensitive and environmentally friendly manner, and it represented a major shift towards gender mainstreaming in the region. Among other things, the project: collected gender-disaggregated data; identified men's and women's priorities in the community livelihood rehabilitation planning process; addressed specific gender issues related to the vulnerability of women as widows or as carers of the disabled and orphans; and ensured that government agencies involved in rehabilitation took gender issues into account in their interventions.

Although the region is generally highly conservative, and women are mostly excluded from decision-making, people in the communities quickly recognized the benefits – both for women and for the community as a whole – of involving women in planning. Because many of the project activities were directed at women, it was hugely advantageous to have gender balance in watershed management committees.

Project activities included:

- The development of roof-water harvesting systems to serve small kitchen gardens and provide water for cooking and washing. With

less time taken up in the collection of water, women were able to establish vocational groups, for example to produce woven baskets to be sold in local markets, which generated income.

- Improvements to kitchen gardens to provide households with fresh vegetables at a lower cost than those available in the market and also to help diversify local diets, thereby improving nutrition.
- Reducing erosion by levelling land through terracing, and protecting the terraces with tree-planting and cost-effective bioengineering works such as check dams and wattling.
- Training on participatory and gender-sensitive planning and development for livelihood managers, coordinators and officers as part of capacity-building for local authorities.

The impact

Women were empowered by the project; they now constitute at least one-third of the membership of local watershed management committees, in which they have a clear role. The skills that women were able to acquire during the project have enabled them to earn income and to better manage their households. There is more awareness in communities and among authorities of the benefits of gender balance in decision-making.

Overall, the participatory landscape approach encouraged by the project has increased the resilience of local communities in the face of natural disasters. This became apparent during floods in 2010–2012, when communities were better prepared to deal with the disaster, and the impacts on communities were much lower than those in the aftermath of the earthquake. The floods caused relatively little physical damage in the project area because of the protection provided by the newly restored landscape.

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