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Social Development

GENDER

Natural resource management and the importance of gender

This briefing note is one of a series, produced by WWF-UK, to help develop understanding and awareness around the importance of gender analysis in natural resource management programmes.

The briefings, include summaries from case studies around the world, looking at lessons and experiences from integrating gender perspectives to a lesser or greater extent in programmes. The format is deliberately succinct and not too technical to enable the reader to access an initial understanding of natural resource-gender dynamics.

Other briefings in the series can be found here:
wwf.org.uk/what_we_do/making_the_links/women_and_conservation

Comments should be directed to Clare Crawford at CCrawford@wwf.org.uk

SUMMARY

In most regions of the world, the sustainable management of natural resources requires the involvement of many different stakeholders.

Taking into account the different roles and responsibilities of men and women is critical to the sustainable management of natural resources as well as the success of NRM policies and programmes. We need to be aware that NRM programmes may affect women and men differently due to their rights, roles and responsibilities. Awareness of this is essential if we're to promote sustainable development and effective conservation and to ensure that natural resources are managed appropriately. At the same time, the unique roles men and women play in their communities leads to different bodies of knowledge about the environments around them. Due to their roles gathering resources like wood, water and forest products, not to mention subsistence agriculture, women have a unique understanding of the natural resources around them. However, if women are not specifically included to input into the design of policies and programmes this knowledge can be lost. Increasing women's participation in decision-making will ensure greater success and sustainability of projects while properly safeguarding natural resources and enhancing the shared benefits of their careful use.

INTRODUCTION

Natural resource management (NRM) is about encouraging sustainable forests and fisheries. It recognises that people rely on these resources for their livelihoods – and also that people are critical in maintaining them.

Our research and our experiences in the field have shown that awareness of socio-economic realities is essential if we're to achieve sustainable natural resource management. They've also demonstrated that addressing gender issues is key to promoting sustainability.

It's now generally accepted that development policy and practice need to be gender-sensitive¹. This can help to ensure that projects and programmes recognise the different roles and needs of men and women as well as the importance of their equal roles in identifying relevant problems, solutions, management and decision-making. And it can increase the chances that women receive a share of the benefits of development. Otherwise, the development process may undermine their position, which could mean the project ends up having a negative environmental, social or economic impact.

WWF'S GENDER POLICY

In May 2011, WWF finalised its gender policy. It clearly outlines how conservation should facilitate a move towards a more sustainable use of natural resources. Given that our work focuses on influencing behaviour, policies and social institutions, it's essential that we always address the environmental situation at hand, and also consider the complex social, cultural and economic factors that will influence the outcome of our work.

The roles and responsibilities men and women have in society influence how decisions are made and resources are accessed, controlled and managed.

It's essential that we appreciate projects are more likely to be effective if they recognise that all people are important stakeholders in NRM; that communities are made up of men and women, young and old; and that programmes and policies will affect each one of these groups differently.

This paper highlights how important it is to consider gender in programmes that focus on management of natural resources such as water, forests or fisheries – as well as climate change programmes.



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NRM AND THE IMPORTANCE OF GENDER

At first glance, the relationship between society and the environment seems to affect both women and men in a similar way. However, the reality is different. The distinct roles and interactions men and women have with the environment mean that any programme intervention will impact on them in different ways.

¹ Gender-sensitive means recognising the differences, inequalities and specific needs of women and men within a specific context.



Men and women usually have different roles in the family and community. For example, men are responsible mainly for income-generating activities and decision-making, while women take on subsistence activities and looking after the family. When it comes to environmental protection and management, they're also likely to have different opinions, attitudes, priorities and power over resources. They also interact differently with the environment, which provides them with different opportunities to protect and manage it more sustainably.

If programmes and projects are to foster sustainable, effective and equitable management of natural resources, they must address the concerns and needs of both men and women – and the ways they, individually and collectively, relate to the resource base. Programmes that don't recognise gender differences can often have negative outcomes.

Below, we outline eight of the main gender issues that relate to NRM, and explain their possible impact on the environment.

- ***NRM programmes must consider and be aware of the different roles played by men and women***

Men and women have different roles and responsibilities within their communities that are influenced by cultural and social factors. A programme must recognise these different roles if it's to consider a community as a whole, and the needs of all the stakeholders.

Both women and men use natural resources and influence the condition of the environment. However, women's roles are often less visible than men's, and aren't formally recognised. For example: women frequently carry out labour on land over which they hold no formal tenure rights; women spend a great deal of time collecting water, fuel wood and fodder for family subsistence, which is not considered 'work'; women fishers are responsible for mending nets, and gutting and marketing fish, but they're often not considered 'fishers'.

If programmes consider the roles of women as well as men, they'll be more likely to consider the other half of the population and address the needs and concerns of all major users of natural resources. This would avoid negative repercussions on the community and the environment.

- ***NRM programmes need to consider the differences between men's and women's rights to access and control natural resources***

Rights and access to land, and control over it, are often different for men and women. For instance, women usually lack tenure rights. The same goes for resources, such as trees and forests. So, for example, there's little benefit to women being involved in environmental conservation and tree planting schemes when only a small percentage of women have control over land.

By understanding these different rights, we can ensure we don't diminish traditional and indigenous rights when implementing a new programme. In addition, a programme can aim to promote equal access to resources.

- ***NRM programmes must include both men and women in decision-making***

In many parts of the world, men are often considered the official decision-makers within the community and have power and control over the way natural resources are managed. As such, programme staff tend to speak to the men when assessing the needs of communities.

Social and cultural barriers may prevent women from decision-making, and they often lack the confidence to voice their opinions, too. So they're largely absent from decision-making in environmental management, despite being critical actors in NRM.

In addition, women lack the opportunities to hold managerial positions or decision-making posts within programmes or governing bodies. This can be because of cultural barriers, a lack of confidence and ability. Or because their existing responsibilities don't allow them time to engage in such roles.

However, despite these barriers, women's opinions and decisions are as important as those of any other member of the community.

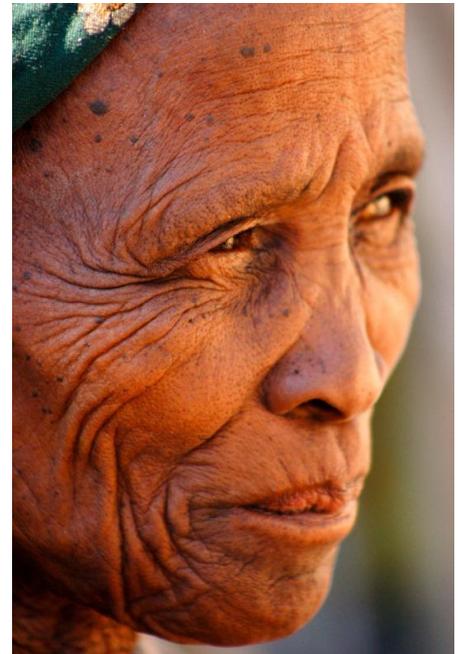
If women are working daily with natural resources, they need to have some influence over their use and management. They need to be involved in decision-making. Their voices should be heard. And they should be considered important actors in any programme. Environmental policies should then take into account the close links between their daily lives and the environment.

- ***Both men and women should participate in all stages of NRM programmes***

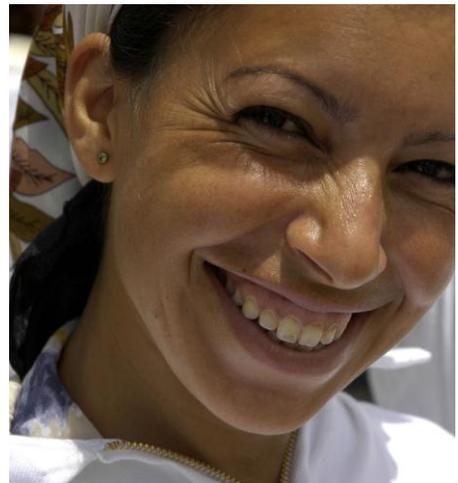
It's essential for a programme's success that all members of the community are involved at all stages – initial programme analysis, programme development, and implementation.

This is a challenge. Women are often excluded due to social and cultural barriers, as well as logistical barriers such as timing and length of meetings. Often, women's participation at meetings is limited as they lack confidence to speak in front of men. And there's often a bias towards male attitudes and opinions. Women-only meetings have, at times, proved useful in promoting their full participation.

In addition, women are often confined to less visible roles in NRM sectors. For example, although women have always been present in the fishing industry, in most instances their participation is neither socially acknowledged nor economically remunerated.



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NRM programmes must recognise the important role women play and promote their participation. That way, a programme will consider their needs and is more likely to be beneficial to all. This will also improve the likelihood that the programme will have a positive impact on natural resources.

- ***NRM programmes must be aware of cultural and social barriers***

NRM programmes can't expect to change cultural and social behaviours. But it's important to be aware that cultural and social barriers exist, and to create an environment where women can participate.

We should also recognise that such barriers increase the vulnerability of women. If they don't participate, then decisions made may be unfavourable to them. And cultural limitations on women can leave them more vulnerable to natural disasters than men. For example, in times of flooding women are at greater risk if they can't swim or climb trees; and many women will not or are not permitted to leave their homes without men.

NRM programmes, including climate change initiatives, need to be aware of cultural and social barriers and work with communities to promote ways of involving women despite these challenges.

- ***NRM programmes must consider indigenous knowledge***

As women's participation in meetings and decision-making can be limited, programmes will often neglect and be unaware of the vast indigenous knowledge that they have about the use and management of natural resources.

Women often have a greater awareness of indigenous knowledge about trees, shrubs and grasses than men, mainly because they devote more time than men to collecting forest produce to meet family needs.

By considering the indigenous knowledge of both men and women, NRM programmes can avoid negative impacts on the environment. Failure to do so could lead, for example, to protected areas being created where women previously collected food and fodder. This may force women to walk further to collect the products, or even begin the degradation of a new area. Or, if a new seed variety is introduced that's inappropriate for a family's subsistence needs, women will be reluctant to use it and could lose interest in the NRM programme.

- ***NRM programmes require appropriate technologies***

It's often assumed that innovations such as introducing new seeds, new techniques or new forestry projects will benefit everyone equally. The belief is often that by targeting technological projects at men, the benefits will 'trickle down' to women.



However, research has shown that technological innovations are far from benefiting all members of a community. Men may often favour cash crops, such as tobacco, for greater income, whereas women prefer crops such as staples that assist them in their daily needs. Technologies that are designed to improve productivity may fail to consider that it's the women who'll need to use the new tools – and that they'll be reluctant to use them if they're too heavy, or too time-consuming.

Paying attention to the consequences to both men and women of development processes will make it more likely that both will benefit. This can avoid limiting the impact on the environment.

- ***NRM programmes can increase work burdens if gender isn't considered***

Programmes need to recognise the different needs, roles and responsibilities of men and women to avoid increasing women's work burden. Limited understanding can overlook women's roles and their potential influence in any NRM process. But increasing women's involvement in programmes could avoid distancing them from NRM processes. For example, ensuring that women participate in meetings will enable them to provide feedback on how the programme has affected them or their workloads. Giving women the opportunity to voice their opinions will help to ensure NRM programmes don't alter the management of and access to natural resources in ways that increase women's burdens or reduce their interest in the programme.

If a programme results in a negative environmental impact, high numbers of men may migrate to other areas to search for alternative work. This increases the workload for the women. Conversely, where a programme goes well there may be an influx of male migrants, which can limit or negate any benefits for women.

NRM programmes need to consider all consequences of any intervention and how this may affect all members of the community.

HOW TO INCORPORATE GENDER EFFECTIVELY INTO NRM

There's strong evidence that sustainable NRM is improved when women take a more central role in resource management decisions. So it's essential to create conditions that facilitate effective involvement of both men and women. To achieve this, NRM programmes should:

- Routinely collect relevant information on how men and women interact differently with resources – for baseline, monitoring, and evaluation purposes.
- Ensure that both men and women are included in project activities, and in both the technical and institutional aspects of projects.
- Build in checks to make sure gender relations are considered specifically at the planning and implementation stages.



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Programmes should assess the implications for women and men of any planned action.

- Ensure the active participation of all stakeholders. This may mean it's desirable to work with men and women separately.
- Be aware of gender issues and the different needs of men and women during training.
- Ensure that new technologies and procedures are gender sensitive to ensure their full integration into NRM programme efforts.
- Put follow-up procedures in place to show how gender relations have changed once a programme has finished, and what the impact has been both on the environment and the community as a whole.

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Please feel free to contact:

Clare Crawford at CCrawford@wwf.org.uk

