



GENDER ROLES IN TRANSFORMATION



DRYLANDS, OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES



The drylands of the world cover approximately 40 percent of the earth's land surface and are a direct source of livelihood for about one billion people, especially in developing countries. Although drylands are mainly characterized by aridity and climate variability, they can sustain vegetation and human settlement. They usually support pastoralists and small farmers who attempt to wrest a livelihood from these fragile environments. In addition, dryland ecosystems play an important role by reflecting and absorbing solar radiation and balancing atmospheric conditions.

However, nearly all drylands are at risk of land degradation (desertification) as a result of climate change, increasing human population, land over-use and poverty. Worldwide, about 65 percent of all arable land has already lost some

of its biological and physical functions, and drylands are particularly susceptible. This represents a threat to the food security and survival of the people living in these areas. The preservation and sustainable development of drylands are essential to achieve food security and conserve the biomass and biodiversity.

The poverty and desertification spiral

Poverty, food insecurity and desertification are intrinsically linked to each other and need to be tackled jointly. It is often stated that poverty is the driving force and the consequence of desertification. Poverty induces poor women and men to increase the pressure on deteriorating drylands and to exploit the natural resource base in ways that are not sustainable. This speeds up the land degradation process, lowering productivity and incomes and increasing poverty. The result is often famine, malnutrition, epidemics, economic and social instability and migrations, which in turn exacerbate the pressure on natural resources and cause further desertification.



MEN'S AND WOMEN'S STRENGTHS



Drylands pose different challenges for rural men and women because of the gender-based roles, relations and responsibilities, uneven access and control of resources, and different opportunities and constraints. Agricultural, environmental and related policies and programmes often fail to recognise women's particular needs and crucial contribution in the use and management of dryland resources. Environmental change frequently has a differentiated impact on men and women and leads to changes in gender roles, with women assuming more work and responsibility. When land becomes scarce, women's situation deteriorates, together with household's food security.

By incorporating a gender perspective in policy, projects and programmes, innovative ways of combating dryland degradation and food insecurity can be discovered, notably through a better understanding of men's and women's roles, and of their respective concerns and needs. The result is a more sustainable, relevant and equitable development based on women's and men's full and equal participation, on their respective local knowledge, and on ecological and socio-cultural factors. A gender-sensitive dryland development represents a great opportunity for rural men and women to join their strengths to preserve food security and the natural resource base in ways that are sustainable.





GENDER and DRYLAND MANAGEMENT

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THE GENDER DIMENSION IN COMBATING DRYLAND DEGRADATION

A FEW KEY ISSUES

➤ **UNDERTAKING A GENDER ANALYSIS** helps to frame questions about women's and men's different roles, relations and activities in resource planning and management in order to avoid making assumptions about who does what, when and why. This is particularly critical in dryland areas where men and women may have to adopt new roles, survival strategies and techniques to achieve food security for their households, exploiting the dryland's potential while conserving and regenerating the natural resource base. With such an analysis, development interventions are better targeted to meet both women's and men's needs and constraints, giving them equal opportunities to participate and benefit from development.

➤ **INVOLVING RURAL COMMUNITIES**, especially the "voiceless", in resource management and in decisions regarding environmentally sound practices and techniques aimed at combating desertification (such as rainwater harvesting, insect control, post-harvest storage, dune control) is a powerful way to mitigate the conditions and the impact of land degradation. Special attention must be given to the quality of the participation of disadvantaged groups, including women, who need to gain time and confidence to fully participate in the decisions and actions.

➤ **MEN'S AND WOMEN'S INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE** as regards biodiversity conservation, farming techniques, etc. must be recognised and built upon. As indigenous knowledge differs along gender lines, special attention must be given to men's and women's knowledge, as innovators and end users.

➤ **FREEING UP** rural people from heavy workloads, such as the search for water and fuel wood, is crucial if they are to spend more time on the gardens, fields and conservation agriculture. Women living in drylands are particularly concerned as they usually pay a higher price having to walk longer distances to collect water and fuel wood and taking on more farming responsibilities in the absence of men.

➤ **ACCESS TO, AND CONTROL OF RESOURCES**, is particularly pressing to the issue of dryland management and should be addressed through a gender perspective to examine how and why men and women have different rights and benefits.

➤ **WOMEN-SPECIFIC PROJECTS** tend to focus on women's traditional roles and do not have a real gender approach that looks both at women and men, and the relations between them. It is important to transform mainstream development activities so that they take into account the wider socio-economic context, genuinely promote gender equality and address gender gaps.

Basic gender-sensitive questions

- ⦿ Who performs which tasks?
- ⦿ Who has access to, and who has control of, resources (e.g. land, water, seeds)?
- ⦿ Who has access to, and who has control of, income and benefits?
- ⦿ Who decides what?
- ⦿ What are the expectations and needs of each member of the household?

➤ **POLICY AND PLANNING** for agriculture and rural development, including in the areas of land conservation, protection and rehabilitation, often fail to address adequately men's and women's roles and needs through the life cycle. Gender mainstreaming is necessary to ensure that attention to gender equality is a central part of all phases of the interventions. This requires accurate and systematic sex- and age-disaggregated data on women and men farmers.

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Women's traditional roles such as collecting water, fuel and fodder, raising small livestock or growing food are particularly crucial in drylands in terms of natural resource management and food security. Men have usually been responsible for decision-making and planning of farming activities, but they increasingly leave the degraded areas to look for jobs in urban areas, leaving women to assume new roles and responsibilities on the farm.

In such a changing context, it is fundamental to be aware of the obstacles hindering full participation of disadvantaged groups, including women.



FAO/J. Isaac



PROMOTING ACCESS FOR ALL



- Insecure **LAND TENURE** reduces people's incentives to make long-term investments in land rehabilitation and maintain soil quality because they have no long-term or permanent rights to the land. Women usually have even less access to land (and control) than men. Customary practices and laws that limit women's right to land may prevail over legislation that guarantees their right to land.
- Providing **CREDIT** is one of the best ways of encouraging rural women and men to take an interest in environmentally sound activities. Smallholders, particularly women, often face difficulties in obtaining credit due to lack of collateral. There is a need to develop informal sector enterprises and alternative livelihood possibilities through making credit available to small farmers, especially to women.
- Women's access to **AGRICULTURAL SUPPORT SERVICES** (extension services, inputs, etc.) is often restricted despite their multiple roles in dryland management. Women's groups have, however, proven capable of tackling extreme livelihood conditions deriving from dryland degradation, including through reforestation and irrigation activities.
- AWARENESS RAISING AND EDUCATION** concerning desertification can lead to changes in attitudes and longer term social change. In fact, understanding the value of protecting one resource (tree species, water source, fodder crop or skill), encourages men and women to see the value of sustaining and protecting the environment in general. In the meantime, however, specifically targeted strategies to empower women are necessary.
- Smallholders in drylands face the difficulty of turning surplus products into cash income because of their lack of transport and access to **MARKETS**, access to market information such as consumption patterns and price fluctuations, and to marketing opportunities and techniques. Women face particular constraints as marketing infrastructure and organizations are rarely geared towards small-scale production or to crops grown by women farmers.
- Projects that provide women with management and organizational skills help them to participate in **DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES** and project activities.



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FROM WORDS TO ACTION



Governments, development agencies and civil society organizations are increasingly incorporating a gender perspective in their policies, programmes and projects aimed at sustainable management of drylands. Several international agreements such as the *Agenda 21* (1992), the *Beijing Platform of Action* (1995), the *Framework Convention on Climate Change* (1992) and its *Kyoto Protocol* (1997) and the *International Convention to Combat Desertification* (1999) have been adopted by the international community, all including commitments reflecting a broad-based consensus on the need to remove obstacles to women's and men's equal and active participation and benefit from development initiatives. It is be-

lieved that the full and equal participation of women and men will improve the effectiveness of strategies aimed at the sustainable development of drylands.

FAO's response to land degradation and desertification reflects its mandate; i.e. **TO INCREASE AND SUSTAIN FOOD SECURITY**, particularly for the populations in affected areas, and in line with the principle of gender equality. Through the establishment of an interdepartmental working group (IDWG) on Desertification in 1993, the Organization has been implementing numerous projects and programmes which combine the objectives of food security and combating land degradation and desertification.

FOUR PRIORITIES FOR GENDER-SENSITIVE ACTION

- **To improve** the understanding of gender and its translation into concrete actions (through capacity building, gender mainstreaming tools, research, etc.);
- **To collect** reliable socio-economic sex-disaggregated data on dryland management activities, making them available for decision-making processes;
- **To implement actions**, through integrated and participatory approaches, focusing on the socio-economic and gender-based blocking factors that prevent populations, particularly the disadvantaged, to invest in the rehabilitation of agricultural land;
- **To analyse** and exchange experiences, good practices and success stories to combat desertification and food security, considering drylands' agro-ecological and socio-economical conditions and areas, as well as gender issues (gender roles, activities, impact).

Further information on gender issues in dryland management

- *Women: Users, Preservers and Managers of Agro-Biodiversity*, Paper, FAO www.fao.org/sd/wpdirect/wpan0025.htm
- *Gender Relations and Biodiversity*. Issue Paper, GTZ, www.gtz.de/biodiv/pdf/gender_engl_klein.pdf
- *Biodiversity and Equality between Women and Men*, SIDA. www1.oecd.org/dac/gender/pdf/tipsheets/biodivers.pdf
- *Strengthening the Role of Women in the CCD*, article on UNSO Web site, www.undp.org/seed/unsowomen/
- *FAO Web site on desertification*, www.fao.org/desertification/
- *FAO Land Degradation Assessment in drylands* www.fao.org/ag/agl/agll/lada/

Gender and Population Division
Sustainable Development Department
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Viale delle Terme di Caracalla – 00100 Rome Italy
Tel: (+39) 06 5705 4550
Fax: (+39) 06 5705 2004

www.fao.org/sd
www.fao.org/gender

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